The Manifestation of Meaning:

How 'Generic-You' Emerges in Military Personnels' Writing

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Abstract

In the present study, we sought to examine how military personnel make meaning out of their military vs. civilian life experiences, and the degree to which meaning violation impacts their efforts. Veterans anonymously engaged in writing reflective essays, one about a military-related negative life experience, and one relating to a civilian-related negative life experience, and completed the Global Meaning Violation Scale (Park, 2016) for each experience. We also coded for generic you (i.e. 'you' used generally, instead of regarding a specific individual) as this is an indication of meaning-making. Although our results revealed no significant difference in generic you usage depending on the condition, and no significant correlations were found between meaning violation and generic you, active duty military personnel were much less likely to use generic-you than inactive, a category comprised of reservists/national guard, those who served in both active duty and the reserves/national guard, and other, suggesting an impact on meaning making from military status.

Keywords: meaning making, global meaning violation, military personnel, generic-you

The Manifestation of Meaning: How 'Generic-You' Emerges in Military Personnels'

Writing

The lives of military personnel and veterans often contain atypical events rarely experienced by their civilian counterparts, including extreme training conditions, combat, and extended periods of time away from family. There are also differences in culture between the military and civilian worlds. Tradition and regular reminders of one's mortality are salient in a world where one's profession requires adherence to historically founded virtues in the face of potential combat. As a result of the differences in culture and condition, these two periods of an individual's life, their time in the military and their time outside it, may be processed differently.

The differences in challenges between the periods of a veteran's life and how those challenges are processed, are embedded in a broader psychological context. Some have theorized that the most profound obstacles interact with one's goals and beliefs, thus leading to violations of global meaning. Meaning is the global positioning system for the mind, displaying a map of the world and indicating a path to move through it. The literature surrounding meaning is remarkably rich. Some of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century have commented on meaning and its nature. Viktor Frankl, Albert Camus, and Ernest Becker, just to name a few, provided fascinating and remarkable insight into the topic. Below I review several major themes from classic philosophical and psychological approaches, as well as more recent empirical research.

The Formation and Necessity of Global Meaning

The French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul-Sartre believed that "existence precedes essence". What this means can best be understood in contrast to many philosophers who preceded Sartre. For them, humanity's essence was held in the mind of God, like an architect's

blueprints, before we were ever created, such that we were defined before we came into being. But for Sartre, there is no God or architect who drew up our blueprints with every detail in mind prescribed to our being before we came to be. We are not constrained to patterns of behavior, or values, that we must adhere to. Instead, we are *tabula rasa*, blank slates with no values that we *ought* to pursue as a result of an essential human nature. We are not defined by a pre-existing essence but by how we act after coming into existence; "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards" (Sartre, 2007, p. 20). Because of this we are afforded the opportunity to determine our actions without an obligation to an external, predetermined blueprint. We are free to choose, and in choosing we define ourselves. However, which actions we may choose are infinite in potential. Just as one experiences difficulty choosing what to watch on Netflix, paralyzed by one's options, so too is one daunted by all the actions one may take in life. And the action one chooses, one is wholly responsible for. For this reason Sartre considered us, "condemned to be free" (2007, p. 29). We are given the opportunity to act any way we please, but we are inescapably responsible for whatever choices we make, with no external justification to appeal to or rely on.

Though we have infinite potential actions, but limited amounts of time and energy, what actions we may take often compete. We must choose one action over another - and what we choose, according to Sartre, indicates what we value. To illustrate this point, in *Existentialism is a Humanism* Sartre tells a story about a young man whose brother was killed by the Germans in World War II, and whose mother was living with him, and emotionally and physically dependent on him. He had to choose between two conflicting values, one of personal moral sympathy for his mother, who had already lost one son, and one of existential moral scope in the form of

avenging his brother and fighting with the French Free Forces against the Nazis. The young man reflected, "If I feel that I love my mother enough to sacrifice everything else for her - my will to be avenged, all my longings for action and adventure then I stay with her. If, on the contrary, I feel that my love for her is not enough, I go" (Sartre, 2007, p. 32). What the young man chooses *is* what he values. By staying with his mother, he indicates that she, to him, is more valuable than his involvement in the war. Then his essence, what he is, is defined by that action. And so, one value becomes superordinate to another, ordering the beliefs one maintains.

A brief detour must be taken here to illuminate a shortcoming of Sartre's, a shortcoming that many evolutionary psychologists will take issue with. It is unclear if Sartre takes evolution into account. Evolution and existentialism, especially of Sartre's variety which denies human nature, seem incommensurate, though there may still be reconciliation available (Barash, 2013). This contention, while normally besides the point in a purely philosophical discussion, needs to be addressed given the psychological context of this paper. To leave it unmentioned would be, at best, half of the story.

The tension can be summarized as follows: Human beings are not *tabula rosa*, but the product of their own continuums. Human beings are biological machines and those machines were the product of billions of years of evolution. What survived to reproduce, were procedural, biological, strategies for survival - ways of behaving that increased the likelihood of survival. This suggests that we value things implicitly (e.g. food, water, sex), after they were choosen time and time again throughout our evolutionary history, leading to their substantiation in our biology. So when one has a biology, one is born with a set of values with survival as their aim. However

that is not to say that those values do not collide and compete (Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2014), and through competition create a hierarchical arrangement.

Moving forward, values and goals may be used interchangeably; defined as that which one pursues at the expense of another potential objective. Sartre said what we pursue is what we value, while the meaning literature generally calls what we pursue a goal. Setting a goal, contains functional significance. Simply choosing a goal allows for the simplification of the world, the focusing of it from potentially infinite down to a constrained avenue of pursuit. Duckworth and Gross (2014) noted that superordinate goals limit potential actions down to feasible, goal orientated actions and subordinate goals. In other words, asserting a value allows us to discriminate between potential actions that will enable the realization of that goal, and those actions which will not and therefore can be disregarded. For example, if your goal is to watch an action movie, then you value watching an action movie over a romance, and will eliminate romances from your potential choices - simplifying the landscape and relaxing the burden of choice.

The choice between conflicting goals need not be ultimate or entirely exclusionary. By acting, one may realize that some goals enable the realization of others, and the conflict between goals can be mitigated by self-control (Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2014; Duckworth & Gross, 2014). So long as two goals are maintained, a hierarchy of goals emerges - one above another. In Ewell, Hamilton, and Guadagno's 2018 study, they found that a hierarchical arrangement of goals emerged in video game players, and that there was a method to its organization that illuminates how one can maintain multiple goals.

According to AIT (Action Identification Theory), this hierarchy is operationalized through a simple rule: Any action A is a higher level of abstraction than a second action B, if it makes sense to say that A is an action that can be achieved by doing action B. In this example, saving a friend (A) can be achieved by killing an enemy (B), but it would make no sense to say killing an enemy (B) can be achieved by saving a friend (A) (p. 190).

Gamers abstracted out superordinate goals while playing video games, allowing them to achieve one goal in pursuit of another, and those who thought this way, more abstractly, performed better. The performance increase is because two goals can be achieved, if properly abstracted, as opposed to one. It is a one way street to greater productivity. In this context, it shows that by acting, hierarchically arranged goals emerge, and have functional significance. Returning to the Netflix metaphor, if your superordinate goal is to watch an action movie, then your subordinate goal may be to download Netflix; Netflix allows you to watch an action movie, but watching an action movie does not download Netflix. Through action, we discover which goals serve which other goals, creating a hierarchy of values that determine and enable future action.

In summary, we are limited and cannot pursue all possible goals. Any choice we make is at the cost of another. The choice we act upon indicates what we value relative to other potentials. Some goals can be achieved through the pursuit of other goals, hierarchically arranging them, and hierarchical arrangement of goals has functional significance. Ultimately, the loop closes with superordinate goals determining which further actions to take.

Religious Frameworks

What actions we *ought* to take are those inservice of our subordinate goals, which are commensurate with our superordinate goals, and, in an evolutionary context, the ultimate superordinate goal is the survival of our genes, ourselves, the communities we are a part of, and the species. By positing a way one ought to act, beliefs are formed. Stating, "X is the best way to achieve Y" is a belief by definition. These beliefs and goals are features of global meaning, defined as "individuals' general orienting systems, consisting of beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings" (Park, 2010, p. 258). Which begs the question, how does a series of mythologies, with gods and demons and heroes, constitute a set of values? How can it be that a fictional story contains a hierarchy of goals?

To answer these questions, I will rely on a series of theorists. However a disclaimer must be issued to avoid confusion or to imply a conclusion outside of my ability or desire to justify. This analysis looks at religion psychologically, and the great books of religious systems as literature or distilled means of living in the world. This says nothing about their metaphysical truth value, and should not be taken as such. Instead, this work highlights their psychological function.

Fictional literature, according to Mar and Oatley (2008), acts as a simulation of the social world by distilling normal life into a story that inherently represents the potential actions one may take to realizing social goals presented in the story. Effectively, fiction represents goals, and the actions necessary to achieving those goals, by representing them in metaphor. This point has also been made in regards to religious mythology. According to the theorist and clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson, religious systems are symbolic or metaphorical representations of

values. Some values are instincts (biologically instantiated, procedural goals), represented by

characters in a religious story (Peterson, 1999). In Peterson's own words:

> A god…constitutes the manner in which a group or family of stimuli of isomorphic
>
> motivational significance reveals itself to or grips the collective (communicated)
>
> imagination of a given culture. Such a representation is a peculiar mix (from the later,
>
> empirical viewpoint) of psychological and sociological phenomena and objective "fact" -
>
> an undifferentiated mix of subject and object (of emotion and sensory experience),
>
> transpersonal in nature (as it is historically elaborated "construction" and a shared
>
> imaginative experience). The primitive deity nonetheless serves as accurate
>
> representation of the ground of being, however, because it is affect and subjectivity as
>
> well as pure object (before the two are properly distilled or separated) - because it is
>
> primordial *experience*, rather than mere primordial *thing*" (Peterson, 1999, p. 113).

Put simply, gods are representations of ways of acting in the world, the world itself, and the

emotional experience of both. That representation of acting in the world, is determined by a goal,

as all action is. A "god" is that which one worships, aligns themselves to, or attempts to embody

- a simulated, distillation, of a goal and its concomitant, subservient, behaviors or actions.

For example, the phenomenological experience of desire, for example, is represented as a

feature of *being*, undifferentiated from the objective world, as Eros, the Greek god of love or,

perhaps more accurately, sexual desire. When one is struck by physical attraction, they are said

to have been struck by Eros's arrow. This is an empirical (one can experience this for oneself)

but phenomenological description of what it feels like to fall in love. It is *as if* an external force

has struck one with an arrow, and others can confirm this same experience.

In Peterson's (1999) framework, Eros is a goal or value. One may value desire or love and act towards its realization, thus *worshiping* Eros. Eros was also placed in a hierarchy, a pantheon where the gods held rank assigned by storied, abstracted, conflict informed by subjective experience of the individuals who wrote the stories and constituted the culture. These stories are then passed down and updated across time. Thus, religious belief systems contain a representation of hierarchical arrangements of goals, and beliefs about pursuing those goals in the world, and the emotional experience associated with both, officially reaching our definition of global meaning. To provide a more concrete example, Christianity explicitly and without the reliance of metaphorical character representation (though not exclusively), states a hierarchy of values. One example comes from Corinthians 13:13, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (New International Version). Several values are posited and one is made explicitly superordinate: love. Effectively, religious systems act as culturally prepackaged global meaning systems inherited across generations, derived from undifferentiated objective reality and subjective experience.

To provide one more point of contact for this complex topic, the religious meme of "divine involvement" (i.e. "God's plan"; a feature of god's behavior) has been positively correlated with a sense of meaning in life amongst evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics (Jung, 2015). This shows that a specific story about the nature of god, or the world as made by god, may provide for an individual a sense of meaning.

The anthropologist and Terror Management theorist, Ernest Becker also explored the nature of religious systems and provided insight into the benefits of religious systems. In his 1971 revision of *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, Becker considered cultures to be

"hero-systems," quests for the ideal heroism , or systems of thought that provided beliefs and goals for how to act heroically in the world; that is to say, provided prepackaged, potential patterns of behavior and belief that asserted a superordinate goal and actions inservice of that goal. While this is similar to Peterson's conception, it differs in a fundamental way. For Becker, these systems act primarily as a buffer against anxiety, the ultimate anxiety being death. Thus, religious systems manage the terror of death.

Meaning as a Buffer

Becker's conception of religious systems as buffers against anxiety connects directly and concretely to the meaning literature. If religious systems are forms of global meaning, and religious systems provide a buffer against anxiety, then global meaning may do the same. For example, spirituality has been found to buffer against hard drug use, and religiosity against alcohol use (Hodge et al., 2001). Religious coping and church-based emotional support significantly moderated the potential for violations of beliefs and goals, following resource loss in a Louisiana flood (Dispenza et al., 2008). Survivors of Hurricane Katrina, who reported experiencing higher spiritual meaning following the disaster, reported significantly less severe posttraumatic stress in response to resource loss, than those with low spiritual meaning (Haynes et al., 2017), and positive religious/spiritual coping was observed to buffer the influence of disaster-related resource loss on trauma symptoms in victims of a multi-year drought in Botswana (Shannonhouse et al., 2019). Also, the strength of religious views were negatively correlated with fears of death (Bassett & Bussard, 2018). These studies all reinforce Becker's view that religion buffers against anxiety, and anxiety about death.

There has also been neurological evidence supporting Becker's conception of religious systems. According to Inzlicht, Tullet, and Good, religion was successfully associated with the anterior cingulate cortex, which produces a distress signal and is associated with the defensive response to error, and was found to decrease the activation of that region (2011). This suggests that on a neurological level, religious belief systems decreases distress signals in the brain. It has also been shown that error-related negativity signals from the anterior cingulate cortex, decreased when believers were presented conscious and unconscious religious primes in the Stroop task (Inzlicht & Tullet, 2010). Again, this suggests that religious belief systems mitigate distress responses in the brain.

However, religion is contained within global meaning; it is a facet of it. This means reflections of religion's effects are witnessed in meaning at large. For example, meaning in life has been found to buffer against clinical anxiety (Marco & Alonso, 2019). In one study of 451 Taiwanese adults, the authors found that meaning in life was significantly negatively correlated with anxiety and positively correlated with religiosity. It also mediated the relationship between anxiety and mental health (Shiah et al., 2015). Meaning in life was also found to be a strong predictor of positive affect in acculturation, the movement from one culture to another (Pan et al., 2008). In National Guard personnel, meaning in life was inversely correlated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptom severity (Bryan et al., 2019), showing that meaning itself acts as a buffer against anxiety.

In summary, Religious belief systems incorporate abstracted representations of goals or values, both as subjective experience and object. Those belief systems provide orientation, per

the definition of global meaning, which, in turn, acts as a buffer against anxiety and death anxiety.

Situational Meaning

Meaning is the individual's map of the world. However, human beings are limited, and as a result, their conceptions are limited as well. In fact, they are necessarily limited, as a map the size of the world, though a perfect reflection of its constituent elements, would be unruly and not useful. It is the simplification, *imperfection*, of the map that makes it useful. This means that the map used will inevitably, given enough time, be found wanting. Such an event, the encounter with novel information, sets the stage for situational meaning - the meaning attributed to an event (Park, 2010). An encounter with new information contains multiple potential interpretations. Therefore, the event must be appraised. Meaning appraisal is the "extent to which the event is threatening and controllable, initial attributions about why the event occurred, and implications for one's future" (Park, 2010, p. 259). These different potentials, serious or safe, minor or magnificent, controllable or chaotic, need to be weighed by the individual against their global meaning. The encounter may be non-discrepant, and immediately adjusted to, or discrepant.

The appraisal process for novel, discrepant, events is analogous to Piagetian learning. One begins with a schema of the world, their global meaning, and is confronted with novel information. This information may be assimilated, should it be new but not requiring an adjustment of the schema, or accommodated, should the information demand an adjustment to the global meaning framework. Park (2010) noted this explicitly by referencing the work of Joseph, Linley and Parkes, "meaning making that involves changing situational appraised

meaning to be more consistent with global meaning has been termed assimilation, and that which involves global beliefs or goals has been termed accommodation" (p. 260).

The Violation of Meaning

It is in the appraisal stage that the external world, and the internal conceptions and expectations of the world, collide. Inevitably we encounter information that was unaccounted for by our conception of reality. However, it may be the case that the discrepant information encountered is antithetical to our global meaning, or conception of the world. Should that occur, one is immediately confronted with concrete evidence of the falsity, or inadequacy, of one's beliefs. At this point, one is reminded of the Austrian psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, when he said, "when we are no longer able to change a situation... we are challenged to change ourselves" (1946/2006, p. 112). For those encountering novel situations, a gauntlet is thrown down, demanding one compensates for novel information. And, at least, that gauntlet can be distressing. It has been thought that the extent to which global meaning is violated determines the amount of distress one experiences (Park, 2010).

This distress, as a result of the violation of beliefs, intrinsic goals, and extrinsic goals, those facets that comprise global meaning, has manifested in literature and philosophy across history, which provide illuminating examples and insightful recountings of the subjective experience of global meaning violation. Throughout Leo Tolstoy's (1987) *A Confession*, his autobiography detailing his years-long depression and suicidality, Tolstoy outlines the effect of his religious beliefs failing in the face of a new, modernizing, post-Enlightenment Russia. Tolstoy had conceptualized reality as being created for a purpose, by an all powerful God. Upon questioning the existence of God, in light of new information, he questioned *his* purpose, or what

meaning could be found in his life, if at all. While contemplating the consequences of God not existing, Tolstoy said, "I did not even wish to know the truth because I had guessed what it was. The truth was that life is meaningless" (1987, p. 30). For Tolstoy, if there was no God, there was no purpose, and if there was no purpose, then why live when some amount of suffering is inherent in life? Effectively, he asked, "if there's no point to my suffering, why endure it?" Following this, he said,

> I did not want to rush [suicide], simply because I wanted to make every effort to unravel the matter. I told myself that if I could not unravel the matter now, I still had time to do so. And it was at this time that I, a fortunate man, removed a rope from my room where I undressed every night alone, lest I hang myself from the bean between the cupboards; and I gave up taking a rifle with me on hunting trips so as not to be tempted to end my life in such an all too easy fashion (1987, p.30)

The violation and subsequent loss of meaning, can have seismic effects on the human psyche that are excruciating to the individual. While Tolstoy provided an intense example of his loss of meaning when that loss left him suicidal, he was and is not alone in having such an experience.

A clear overarching example of all the stages of global meaning violation and reconstitution comes from the life of the philosopher John Stuart Mill. To paraphrase Elizabeth Anderson (1991), Mill was raised by his father to follow the principles of Jeremy Bentham, a prominent utilitarian hedonist during the time. Mill's father instilled in him a philosophy that considered pleasure to be the means of achieving a good life. By experiencing pleasurable things, one *is* happy. With this as an axiom of his beliefs, Mill found himself dumbstruck when he fell into a deep depression. Despite his continued pursuit of pleasure, that which he believed made

for a good and happy life, he found himself forsaken by happiness. Then, not only did Mill find himself depressed, he found the resistance of that depression to pleasure to be incommensurate with his beliefs. Effectively he became depressed while pursuing pleasuring, showing that pleasure may not make one happy. This led Mill to create a hedonistic philosophy of his own which could account for his depression. Mill seemingly had to appraise this event, and "make sense," a common phrase in the meaning literature, out of it. By adjusting to this novel information and incorporating it into his global meaning, Mill accommodated the novel information.

Interesting enough, and worth touching on in the discussion section, is the place of the arts - poetry, in Mill's case - in the reassertion of meaning. According to Anderson (1991) Mill finally escaped his depressive state after having read poetry. This led him to believe that there were higher and lower pleasures that contained greater or lesser degrees of pleasure within them, poetry belonging to the former. At that point, John Stuart Mill apparently encountered, appraised, and successfully accommodated novel information, reforming his worldview to include his personal experience.

Both Tolstoy's and Mill's lives demonstrate both the severity of meaning violation, or how severe it *can* be, and the dynamics associated with it. For Tolstoy, meaning in life, in the form of religious belief, had seemingly buffered against suicidal ideation - a phenomenon that is present in the literature (Marco et al., 2016; Heisel & Flett, 2004). Paradoxically, this reinforces Ernest Becker's (1971) point that religion, or global meaning by extension, acts as a buffer against anxiety - since when removed, distress emerges - but undercuts his point that religion is ultimately a means of managing the terror of death. In Becker's framework, one would suspect

that the removal of the death anxiety buffer would produce a greater aversion to death - not the desire for it. This suggests that Peterson's conception, of religious systems providing abstracted values to live for, accounts for this discrepancy. In other words, religious values produce a meaning for living, and the removal of such values leaves one without a reason to continue living in the face of anxiety and suffering.

      Substance abuse, PTSD, and other consequences of meaning violation. There are several effects that have been witnessed that are not present in the examples aforementioned. Though one could argue that the use of controlled substances, or drugs, is a form of pleasure that John Stuart Mill would have considered good, drug use was not explicitly mentioned. Decreased meaning in life as a result of traumatic and stressful life events, has been linked to adolescent substance abuse (Newcomb & Harlow, 1986; Kinnier, 1994). It has also been shown that inpatients, who were being treated for drug abuse, were found to have less meaning in life compared to inpatients who had not abused drugs (Nicholson et al., 1994). In one study, the relationship between financial strain and multiple drug use was mitigated by the religious sense of meaning in life (Krause et al., 2017). Also, among adolescent males, meaning in life was negatively correlated with illicit drug and sedative use, and in adolescent females, meaning in life was negatively correlated with binge drinking, among several other risky behaviors (Brassai et al., 2011). In undergraduates, reduced incentive salience for alcohol was found in those that performed a meaning making task - specifically, thinking about and committing to intrinsically valued goals (Ostafin & Feyel, 2019). An inverse relationship was found between alcohol use and perceived meaning in life in college students by Schnetzer, Schulenber, and Buchanan (2013). Meaning in life was negatively correlated with weekly alcohol consumption and alcohol

cravings (Nakash et al., 2016). All of these studies indicate that meaning provides a buffer against more than just anxiety, but those substances that may temporarily quell it.

Viktor Frankl (1967) offered some insight into this phenomenon. In *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, Frankl mentioned a time when he spoke with a dean at a major American university. The dean noted that when counseling students, many stated that their life felt meaningless, that the work they conducted did little to fill an inner void or call to purpose (i.e. "call to meaning" in Frankl's words). Frankl dubbed this phenomenon the "existential vacuum", which emerged at the intersection of two causes: the loss of unconscious, animal, instinctual security, which would otherwise have determined the action of the individual, and the traditions that once provided cultural direction - like Tolstoy's religious tradition. Csabonyi and Phillips (2020) investigated Frankl's concept, noting that Frankl believed that the existential vacuum could result in apathy and boredom, leading one to substance abuse as a means of masking one's internal void, while simultaneously behaving as a search for the means of establishing meaning. They found that the higher the presence of meaning in one's life, the less likely one was to use alcohol and other drugs, which was mediated by boredom. However, the results differed from Frankl's conception when they noted that the search for meaning wasn't associated with alcohol, drugs, or cigarette use. In other words, the loss of meaning creates a void, purposelessness, or a lack of direction in one's life, leaving one with no defined goal, which would otherwise define which actions to take. Being directionless, one becomes bored and apathetic, leading to alcohol and drug abuse. Again, when meaning buffers are abolished, less sophisticated buffers are employed.

Until this point in the section, I have discussed the external manifestations of meaning violation. Now, meaning violation is also linked to internal consequences. At its extreme, meaning violation can manifest as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Park et al., 2012). It may be that encountered novel information, which is antithetical to or a violation of global meaning, can be traumatic to the individual. In 130 Vietnam veterans, goal violation indirectly affected the severity of PTSD symptoms (Steger et al., 2015). Interestingly, in this same study, positive and negative responses to meaning violation were recorded. The presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life were correlated to post traumatic growth, and the violation of goals was related to PTSD. Should John Stewart Mill's development of a new, more robust, philosophy be considered growth, then again his life acts as an example.

However, explaining why violations of goals are more strongly related to PTSD than beliefs, is another matter. Peterson (1999), defines a phenomenon he calls "cascade", which may be helpful in understanding this issue. Peterson states,

> Cascade means that threat to the perceived validity of any presupposition, at any level (procedural, imagistic or episodic, explicit or semantic) threatens all levels simultaneously. This means that the casual criticism of a given explicit presupposition can come, over time, to undermine the unconscious imagistic and procedural personality and the emotional stability that accompanies it. (p. 251)

In other words, beliefs are informed by goals and the actions that accompany them. When those actions are disrupted, one's ability to pursue a goal is simultaneously disrupted. When something occurs to disrupt the achievement of those goals, then the beliefs about the world that those goals were predicated on are also disrupted. For Peterson, one's instinctive actions, beliefs, and

explicit thoughts are all commingled, and the disruption of one strata, affects them all. For example, imagine a world class mixed martial artist who believes that she is the best fighter in the world and that she will win her next match as a result. She is confident in herself, her coach, and her friends' ability to support her. When the day comes, and the match begins, she is knocked out in the second round and the match is called. Her goals have been disrupted. She did not win, but the effects cascade downward into her beliefs. Is she really the best fighter in the world? She truly believed in her coach and her friends, but she still lost. Can she trust them? She was confident in herself, but failed. Can she trust herself? Her beliefs were wrong. Can she trust belief itself? Her beliefs about the world are subsequently violated by the disruption of her goal. Following this reasoning, the violation of goals, being more obviously violated than beliefs, may then be undeniable to the individual. Then the effects cascade, leaving the individual traumatized and stressed.

This example is not entirely original. Ultimate Fighting Champion Ronda Rousey, who had held a record for most title defenses by a woman and was previously undefeated, lost to Holly Holm by knockout at UFC 193. Following her loss, she was interviewed by talk show host Ellen Degeneres. In the interview she asked rhetorically, "what am I any more if I'm not this"? Then went on to say that she had considered suicide. While one cannot be sure that Rousey's case was certainly meaning violation without consulting her directly, it does align with the literature and, potentially, highlights a real-world example of how a goal disruption can disrupt the entire belief structure.

Meaning-Making Process

One's global meaning can be violated by discrepant-novel information that is of sufficient magnitude to require accommodation and produce distress (Park 2010). The loss of meaning and subsequent "existential vacuum" are commingled with suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and post traumatic stress disorder (Heisel & Flett, 2004; Nicholson et al., 1994). And the violation of a facet of global meaning may "cascade" down the entire global meaning structure (Peterson 1999; Steger et al., 2015).

It is from this point, the point at which an existential vacuum exists, that Albert Camus, the French novelist and philosopher, considered it necessary for humanity to assert or discover meaning. Camus (1942/1991) claimed the collision of two truths, humanity and rationality's striking limitations on one hand, and the colossal complexity of the universe on the other hand, to make the search for meaning, inherently, absurd. That is to say, that while humanity has a desire to make meaning, to make senses, or to understand the world, and that desire is met with a complexity that renders our efforts laughable in comparison to the magnitude of the task - like a pail being used to move the ocean - the attempt is absurd. To Camus, acting towards a goal is viewed as preposterous in comparison to its impact on the whole of reality, in all its complexity. One may ask, "What do my actions matter in the grand scheme of things?"

When faced with the circumstances of an absurd life, Camus (1942/1991) believed that one had several options, one of which was considered seriously by Tolstoy: Suicide. However, killing oneself is not the only form of suicide Camus recognized. Philosophical suicide, the return to religion or an inadequate or ideological philosophical system which denies living in the absurd in favor of comfort and totalitarian understanding where none may truly be found, is a form of death; "Suicide, like the leap [of faith], is acceptance at its extreme" (p. 54). Camus saw

both suicide and philosophical suicide as a form of nostalgia. Nostalgia for a time when one was

not aware of the absurdity of reality. When ignorance was bliss. The infantile desire to return to

the comforting arms of one's mother, before awareness of the difficulties of life tainted

childhood's edenic position, by means of religious or inadequate philosophical systems *in loco*

parentis.

Despite this call, and despite the absurdity and seeming meaninglessness of human life,

Camus (1942/1991) believed that through actions that one experienced as meaningful or

worthwhile, one may live a meaningful life *in spite* of the absurd. This is the Absurd Hero. Like

Sisyphus, who was forced by the gods to push a rock uphill only to watch it roll back down

again, for eternity, we are asked to perform actions - and find them meaningful - by revolting

against meaninglessness and despair. As Camus said, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (p.

123).

Camus's (1942/1991) emphasis on revolting against meaninglessness, acts as a clear and

insightful description of one avenue available in a meaningless, existential vacuum; the search

for meaning, despite one's views being found inadequate. As Camus recognized and Park (2010)

formalized, the reassertion of meaning, the assimilation or accommodation of novel information,

not the reversion to one's initial state, is necessary in the wake of meaning violation. And

perhaps, neccessary to stave of suicide, philosophical suicide, and nihilism.

While it may be necessary to understand one's life and assert meaning into it, this does

not suggest *how* the assertion of meaning is actually accomplished. John Stuart Mill may have

used poetry as a means of making sense of his condition. It was the arts that provided a meaning

making methodology, and reconstituted his beliefs (Anderson, 1991). For Tolstoy (1987), a more

bizarre method cured him from his decades long depression: Dreaming. Tolstoy saw himself suspended over a deep expanse, which terrified him when he gazed into it. But when he looked up towards higher ground, he felt at peace (p. 78). While the dream was cryptic, its impact on Tolstoy's life is worth noting and considering for future inquiry.

More explicitly, one may expressively write in order to reassert meaning. Expressive writing has been shown to produce psychological distancing, which in turn decreased emotional reactivity (Park et al, 2016). It has also been shown to produce greater meaning in life and is associated with post traumatic growth (Zheng et al., 2019). It appears that expressive writing allows one to step back and make sense of their experience, producing meaning and growth, and may then be considered a method for the reassertion of meaning. Mill's and Tolstoy's experiences may suggest further avenues of research and expressive writing is a promising means of reasserting meaning. It is here, at the reassertion of meaning, that my research began.

The Psychological Measures of Meaning

As noted by Park (2010), the empirical measures and operational definitions of meaning vary. Some measures rely on coding written language and others, like the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), rely on the answers from a series of self reported questions. In this study, the Global Meaning Violation Scale, a measure created by Park et al., (2017) was used to determine the degree to which a participant's meaning was violated. This scale includes three subscales; beliefs, broad views of the world and oneself, intrinsic goals, goals generally centered around well being (e.g. interpersonal relationships, health, etc.), and extrinsic goals, goals generally related to career, education, etc., predicted several things. Each subscale was linked to different factors. For example, those who had experienced the death of someone, had

greater belief violation than those who experienced an accident or the failure of an intimate relationship. However, those who had experienced intimate relationship stressors had greater intrinsic goal violation than those who experienced a loss or academic stressor. Furthermore, the stressfulness of an event was a predictor of belief and intrinsic goal violation (Park et al., 2016). As a result, the GMVS is considered a valid means of measuring the violation of the different facets of global meaning.

In Orvell, Kross, and Gelman's 2017 paper "How 'you' makes meaning", the authors discovered a link between generic-you, the use of 'you' to refer to a broad group (e.g. "I've learned that *you* have to be strong and *you* have to realize not everything will go *your* way") and meaning making (see Table 1 for examples). Generic-you is a means of generalizing a situation by placing an action or situation in a broader context. That is to say, using generic-you suggest how anyone might act in a given situation. Canonical you refers to a single person, instead of the broader context. The authors note a series of conditions that produced generic-you in expressive writing exercises about negative life experience (i.e. experiences that, when recalled, produce an emotional reaction or discomfort) the first being that it was more likely to be used when prompted to express norms. Individuals used generic-you as a means of psychological distancing from a negative experience, or a tool to understand something personal in a normative context. The authors reasoned that using generic-you to normalize one's situation would allow for meaning making. When they prompted participants to make sense or meaning out of their experiences when writing, this elicited more generic-you, compared to when participants were asked to relive the situation. Therefore, the manifestation of generic-you in expressive writing exercises indicates the attempt to make meaning out of the event.

While both of these measures have been explored separately, and the GMVS has been employed on Vietnam veterans as previously mentioned, these two measures have not been employed simultaneously to assess how meaning violation interacts with the use of generic-you - let alone on a sample of military personnel and veterans.

The Present Study

In the wake of America's longest war, many military veterans have had negative life experiences, and while some of them may have had their meaning violated by those experiences, research tying that violation, the conditions in which that experience was had, and generic-you has yet to be done. The goal of this research was to see if (1) there was a difference in the degree to which military personnel used generic-you between their civilian experiences and their military experiences, and (2) the degree to which a participant's global meaning was violated correlated with the use of generic-you.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 52 military veterans from across the United States, with ages ranging from 25 to 74 years old ($M = 41$ years). There were 12 female participants and 40 male participants, the majority of which were caucasian/white. Of the participants, 33 had served as active duty military and 19 were classified as "inactive" (i.e. reserves/national guard, active and reserves, and other). See Table 2 for demographics.

Measures

Generic You. Generic you, as defined above and in Orvell, Kross, and Gelman (2017), was coded for by the standards of that same study.

Global Meaning Violation Scale. The Global Meaning Violation Scale (GMVS), a scale designed to measure the degree to which an event has violated one's meaning, was used and coded per Park et al., (2017). The GMVS consists of three subscales measuring beliefs, intrinsic goals, and extrinsic goals.

Procedure

This preregistered study consisted of an anonymous survey that was distributed via Turk Prime. The survey contained, first, a consent form and confirmation of military service. Participants were then given one of two counterbalanced conditions, varying whether a military experience or a civilian experience was presented first. The military-related condition began with a prompt to recall a negative life experience that the participant considered to be related or associated with their time in the military. They were then asked to write one or two sentences describing the event (e.g. one participant wrote, "having a stillborn child in another country"). Following this, participants were asked to fill out the Global Meaning Violation Scale (GMVS; Park, 2016). Then, participants were prompted to write about the event for 10 minutes while making meaning out of the event they had experienced; "Please try to think about what can be learned from the military-related experience you just recalled. What have you learned? What lessons can you take with you moving forward? Although it may be difficult, most people can usually do this".

The civilian-related condition followed the same order: Recall, short description, GMVS, and expressive writing. However, in this condition, participants were asked to recall and consider a negative life experience that they considered connected to their life outside of the military (i.e. after retirement, before their time in service, not relating to their military career, etc.).

Following these tasks, participants filled out a demographics questionnaire that consisted of 9 questions: age, sex, race/ethnicity, education level, employment status, relationship status, military status (active duty, reserves/national guard, both, or other), discharge status, and military branch (see Table 2).

Two independent coders, one who was blind to the order, and one who was blind to the condition, order, and participant, coded the responses for generic-you. The reliability for this coding was high. Agreement was 91.7% and Cohen's Kappa was .821.

Results

I first focused on how often participants produced generic-you when writing about their negative life experiences. Of the 52 participants, 35 included generic-you at least once in their essays. In the military-related condition, the average use of generic-you was 1.17%, and in the civilian-related condition the average was 1.44%. The average use of generic-you across both conditions was 1.3%. The average mean score on the beliefs section of the GMVS, which was a scale of 1 - 4, in the military related-condition was 2.8. On the intrinsic goals section the average was 2.51, and on the extrinsic goals section it was 2.11. In the civilian-related condition GMVS, the average score was 2.8, for intrinsic goals it was 2.6, and on the extrinsic goals portion it was 1.94. Overall, the average mean score on beliefs was 2.8, 2.55 for intrinsic goals, and 2.03 for extrinsic goals.

I was interested in determining whether generic-you differed as a function of event type (military vs. civilian; within-subjects), block order (military event first vs. second; between subjects), and military status (active vs. inactive; between subjects). An ANOVA with the total number of generic-you divided by the total number of words was used as the dependent variable

was conducted with these three factors. The mean use of generic-you out of the total word count

for the military condition was 1.335, and 1.784 for the civilian condition. The means for military

status were .0607 for active military, and 2.513 for inactive. For those that were active and

writing in the military condition, the mean was .708, and for those that were active and writing in

the civilian condition, the mean was .505. For those who were inactive, the mean in the military

condition was 1.963, and the mean in the civilian condition was 3.062. There was a significant

interaction between eventtype and order, $F(1,48) = .75$, $p = .034$, eta-squared = .090. There was

also a significant effect of military status, $F(1,48) = 10.287$, $p = .002$, eta-squared = .176.

Additionally there was a non-significant trend towards a three-way interaction involving event

type, order, and military status, $F(1,48) = 3.955$, $p = .052$, eta-squared = .076. All other effects

were non-significant.

Next, I examined whether responses on the GMVS varied as a function of event type,

block order, and military status. Scores (ranging from 1 to 4) were entered into an ANOVA with

these three factors, separately for each of the three different subscales. No significant effects

were found.

Next, I conducted a set of correlations to determine how responses on all the dependent

variables correlated, including generic-you scores and each of the three factors of the GMVS,

separately for military and civilian events. These responses are provided in Table 3.

Discussion

The data revealed that there was a significant difference between active and inactive

personnel. Active duty, defined in the study as "active", is when an individual who has enlisted

or been commissioned works full time in the military. They may live on base. They participate in

regular training exercises and, generally, deploy more often. Inactive personnel, those in the reserves or national guard, can be conceived of as part-time military personnel. They do not live on base. Generally, they travel from home to a base to train and work one weekend per month and participate in a two week exercise during the summer. While they do deploy, when they return, they can return home for longer periods of time compared to their active counterparts who are given the opportunity to return home for a brief time before returning to base. "Inactive" in this study included those in the reserves/national guard, those who served as both active duty and the reserves, and "other". It may then be the case that the more ensconced in military culture and life one is, the less likely one is to make meaning out of one's negative life experiences. The stressors and conditions of military life (e.g. living with coworkers and superiors who have striking control over one's life, being distanced from family, more regular training exercises, etc.) may make it more difficult to process such experiences. Essentially, any attempts to order one's life may be met with disorder at a rate matching or faster than the rate at which one can process.

Furthermore, I have found that the conditions to which one refers when writing, either military-related or civilian-related, did not play an impact on the amount of generic-you used. This could be the result of several things and aspects of the study design may play a role. Firstly, the definitions of military-related and civilian-related were subjectively defined. Each participant chose for themselves what events qualified as being civilian-related or military-related. This was, in part, because which associations are made with these contexts are conceivably, deeply variable from individual to individual. However, this may have resulted in serious overlaps between the two conditions and, ultimately, may have allowed for no difference to manifest in the results. For

example, an individual may have had a divorce during their time in the military. Certainly

military life impacted the marriage but was this event a part of the individual's military life or

civilian life? Future studies may consider defining these conditions by timing. For example, if

one was in the military when the event occured, then it was a military-related experience. If not,

then it was a civilian-related experience. Secondly, timing may matter. The amount of time since

one has experienced the event, and thus had more time to process the event, may play a role in

the manifestation of generic-you. Future studies could track this information by requesting the

amount of time since the event occured.

   I also found that the degree to which one's global meaning is violated did not correlate

with psychological distancing or the degree to which generic-you manifests in one's writing

about a negative life experience. Timing may play a role in how meaning violation is perceived

and how it affects generic-you usage. In other words, even if an experience violated one's global

meaning, having had time to process such an event may decrease the use of generic-you,

resulting in insignificant effects. Put simply, the more time between the event and the expressive

writing, the less of an effect meaning violation may have on generic-you. Furthermore, it may

also be the case that generic-you is a single tool in a spacious tool box. Other generic language

tools, or other tools altogether, may be employed in the meaning making process. However,

meaning violation on one condition correlated with meaning violation on the other (see Table 3).

The experience of meaning violation may impact one's interpretation of other events. In other

words, meaning violation may color the lens of one's life, tinting one's perception regardless of

its orientation, affecting one's reading of subsequent life events. It may also be that those whose

meaning has been violated may be vulnerable to their meaning being violated by subsequent events. However, further studies would need to be conducted to confirm either of these positions.

Considering the general limitations of this study, larger sample sizes may be necessary and a measure of chronological distance from the event should be considered.

Directions for Future Research

Regarding veterans and meaning in life, the effects witnessed between generic-you, active, and inactive personnel, beg the question: To what degree, and why, does military status affect the use of generic-you? Future research into this may demand larger sample sizes, and time scales that note when the date the event occured, when it occurred relative to being in the military, and how long it has been since the individual left the military. If one's proximity to military life has an effect on meaning making, all of these points are worth considering.

Drawing on the lives of Leo Tolstoy and John Stuart Mill, research into meaning making, the arts, dreaming, and mystical experiences, seem a rich environment for inquiry. Croom (2014) explored the relationship between poetry and meaning making. McAdams (2019) considered narrative to be a form of making sense of one's life, and writing about personal experiences promotes positive mental and physical health (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). It may then be the case that writing fiction and poetry play a similar role. To what degree do poetry, narrative, and philosophy affect meaning making? Future researchers may seek a relationship between authorship and meaning making, by measuring meaning in life before and after extensive writing projects, either artistic or philosophical.

Graveline and Wamsley (2015), explored dreaming as an extended function of waking cognition, suggesting that it is not a random proliferation of images in the mind, but its own form

of thought, deliberate and goal oriented, whose goal is to, potentially, simulate and practice waking life. This opens the door for dreams to be a form of making sense of life - for understanding of how one might, or has, acted. It may also be worth mentioning, considering the mystic nature of Tolstoy's dream and its positive effects on his life, the effects of psilocybin on personal meaning and spirituality. Griffiths, Richards, Johnson, McCann, and Jesse (2008), found that those who were administered psilocybin, and registered on a scale for mystical experiences, considered their experience to be among the most significant events of their lives, 14 months later. The degree to which psilocybin, and substances like it, affect meaning in life, and those whose meaning have been violated, is a thread worth pulling on. However, given the limited research on these topics, nearly any statement is conjecture. To know definitely the thread will have to be tugged a good deal harder. Researchers may wish to measure the effects between meaning in life, meaning violation, dreaming, and/or the use of psilocybin.

In conclusion, the effects of life and limitation, novel events, the subsequent meaning violation, and their processing, that is to say, the process within global meaning, are lush avenues of research, whose cultivation may yet yield remarkable fruits. While the differences between military-related conditions and civilian-related conditions did not yield the expected crop, a new, potentially fertile soil was uncovered: the differences between active and inactive military personnel and their ability to make meaning. Should this soil be sown with studies on meaning and its reconstitution, we can hope to harvest new insights into meaning, the employment of generic language, and the often overlooked military community.

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Table 1

Generic You Examples

Generic You	Specific You
"Irrational as it was, when a weapon fires at your face, the logic of what it's loaded with kinda vanishes and you just exist in the moment."	"You know, surprisingly this one is easier to nail down with words."
"Do not let others stop you from accomplishing your dreams even if you are in the military and there is hierarchy!"	"I got a call and was told... that I better be prepared because we are spending more funds on you to attend this school than usual due to being deployed."
"If you dig a little bit, you quickly figure out that everyone is a liar in their own way and it is... depressing to say the very least."	"I miss my father but everyday I am reminded of this experience and tell myself I still have a piece of you and that I know he is always with me [physically] or not."

Table 2

Demographics

Characteristic	n
Sex	
Male	40
Female	12
Race/Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	39
African American/Black	6
Hispanic/Latino	5
Asian American/Asian/Pacific Islander	2
Education	
High School Grad/GED	9
Associate/Trade/Technical Degree	14
Bachelor's Degree	21
Master's Degree	7
Ph.D./M.D./J.D.	1
Employment	
Employed	39
Unemployed	4
Student	1
Other	8
Relationship	
Single	16
Married	31
Other	5
Military Status	
Active Duty	33
Reserves/National Guard	11
Both	3

	Other	5
Discharge		
	Honorable	40
	General	1
	Other than Honorable	0
	Bad Conduct	1
	Dishonorable	0
	Currently Serving	10
Branch		
	Army	26
	Airforce	10
	Marines	4
	Navy	11
	Coast Guard	1
Age in years		
	Mean	41.75
	18-29	8
	30-49	31
	50-69	11
	70+	2

Note. Military Status was broken into two parts. Active contained those who were active duty, and inactive contained the remainder of the participants.

Table 3

Correlations

		Mpercent	Mgmvs Beliefs	Mgmvs Intrinsic	Mgmvs Extrinsic	Cpercent	Cgmvs Beliefs	Cgmvs Intrinsic	Cgmvs Extrinsic
Mpercent	Correlation	1							
	Significance								
Mgmvs Beliefs	Pearson Correlation	0.024	1						
	Significance	0.866							
Mgmvs Intrinsic	Pearson Correlation	0.018	.793**	1					
	Significance	0.899	0						
Mgmvs Extrinsic	Pearson Correlation	0.105	.595**	.739**	1				
	Significance	0.461	0	0					
Cpercent	Pearson Correlation	.352*	-0.032	0.026	-0.005	1			
	Significance	0.01	0.82	0.854	0.972				
Cgmvs Beliefs	Pearson Correlation	0.063	.479**	.496**	.377**	-0.098	1		
	Significance	0.659	0	0	0.006	0.491			
Cgmvs Intrinsic	Pearson Correlation	0.196	.419**	.437**	.284*	-0.052	.522**	1	
	Significance	0.165	0.002	0.001	0.041	0.714	0		

Cgmvs	Pearson								
Extrinsic	Correlation	0.02	0.26	.409**	.273*	0.032	0.242	.545**	1
	Significance	0.887	0.063	0.003	0.05	0.821	0.084	0	

Note. Elements marked with an M represent the military-related condition, while C represents

the civilian-related condition. Mpercent is a representation of the percentage of words used that

are generic-you within the military condition and Cpercent is the same within the civilian

condition.

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).