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What’s It All About? A Qualitative Study of Meaning in Life for Counseling Psychology Doctoral Students

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Abstract
The interviews of 10 female counseling psychology doctoral students regarding their views about meaning in life (MIL) were analyzed using consensual qualitative research. The participants defined MIL as goals or purposes, were actively involved in searching for meaning, and believed that MIL had been stimulated by life-changing experiences and culture. On a personal level, they gained meaning from relationships, personal growth, and religion/spirituality. On a professional level, they gained meaning from providing therapy, conducting research, and teaching. As therapists, participants approached MIL indirectly by asking about client goals/motivations or by focusing on other clinical problems that if resolved would enhance MIL. Implications for doctoral training and for psychotherapy are offered.

Keywords
qualitative research, development of meaning, psychotherapy, psychotherapy training, meaning in life

Introduction
Most people struggle with, search for, and hope to find meaning in life (MIL). They need to find some way to make sense out of existence and figure out what will give them a sense of purpose. Yalom ([23]) suggested that the impetus for searching for MIL has evolved over time: In the pre-industrial era, people focused more on survival than on MIL. Now, however, with survival needs mostly met, people have more opportunity to think about MIL.

Yalom ([23]) defined MIL as purpose, goals, or sense of coherence. MIL is personal and is typically chosen or constructed. It can be contrasted with meaning of life (MOL), which refers to the overall coherent pattern of life or the meaning that life holds for all people.

Theories about MIL in psychotherapy
The theories by Frankl ([4]) and Yalom ([23]) are seminal and form the foundation for the current study. Frankl and Yalom wrote extensively about existential theory and how therapists can help clients focus on MIL in psychotherapy.
Frankl ([4]), the developer of logotherapy (therapy aimed at searching for meaning), considered lack of meaning to be the paramount existential crisis, and noted that the goal of life is not to seek pleasure or power, but meaning. He asserted that people could discover meaning in doing something creative or doing a deed (achievement and accomplishment), experiencing something (goodness, truth, and beauty), encountering someone (love), or in their attitude toward suffering. In terms of techniques for working with MIL in psychotherapy, Frankl used dereflections, or shifting the focus from self-absorption to a search for meaning outside of self (e.g. developing empathy). He also recommended the use of paradoxical intention, or prescribing the symptom (e.g. assigning an insomniac to stay up and mop the floor), which he suggested helps one detach from the symptom (although as Yalom, [23], commented, it is not clear how this latter technique specifically relates to MIL).

Yalom ([23]) proposed several ideas for how therapists could work with MIL in psychotherapy. First, he suggested that therapists need to challenge clients' belief/hope that there is a meaning outside oneself that clients are simply unable to locate. He further noted that therapists need to challenge those clients for whom achievement is the basis of MIL, and instead encourage them to just be (i.e. assume that life is a mystery to be lived rather than that life is a mystery to be solved). He also suggested that therapists become attuned to the importance clients give to MIL, and then begin to question clients about MIL and listen with the goal of facilitating meaning. Therapists can, for instance, wonder about clients' belief systems, inquire about loving another, ask about long-range hopes and goals, and explore clients' creative interests and pursuits to help clients explore what gives them meaning. In addition, Yalom focused on engagement, suggesting that clients find something that matters at the moment, something to which they could become actively committed via meaningful engagement. Similarly, he noted that people cannot just search for meaning; rather, once engaged, people will experience a sense of meaning given that meaning is often a by-product of engagement. He also maintained that the desire to engage in life is always there, and that the therapist's task is to remove obstacles by asking questions such as "What prevents you from loving another person?" "Why is there so little job satisfaction?" "Why are you neglecting creativity or religion?" Finally, Yalom noted that therapists must relate deeply and authentically to clients. By serving as a model of someone who values MIL and cares deeply about helping others, therapists offer themselves as objects with whom clients can identify.

More recently, psychologists are again getting interested in MIL in psychotherapy. Some new approaches are being developed to address meaning in psychotherapy (e.g. Ameli & Dattilio, [1]; van der Spek et al., [21]; Wong, [22]). Unfortunately, however, with the exception of van der Spek et al.'s ([21]) research, we found little in relation to how therapists actually work with MIL in psychotherapy.

Empirical research about MIL

In Yalom's ([23]) review of the research, he noted that most researchers used the Purpose in Life Test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, [3]). High scores on the PIL are associated with a lack of psychopathology, deeply held religious beliefs, self-transcendent values, membership in groups, dedication to some cause, and adoption of clear life goals. Yalom criticized the PIL; however, in that only eight items focused on purpose/meaning, whereas six focused on life satisfaction, three on freedom, one on fear of death, one on suicidality, and one on worthwhileness of life. Furthermore, Yalom noted that the PIL correlated highly with a measure of social desirability, suggesting that participants might answer in a way to make themselves look good.

Recent research has primarily used the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, [19]). The MLQ has two subscales: Presence (MLQ-P, which assesses the degree to which one perceives life as meaningful and comprehensible and has a sense of purpose or mission transcending everyday life) and Search (MLQ-S, which assesses the degree to which one is engaged in a search for meaning). MLQ-P has been
associated with well-being, whereas MLQ-S has been associated with less presence of meaning and less overall well-being.

Although the aforementioned literature provides interesting preliminary information about MIL, the reliance on self-report measures limits the depth of the data obtained because participants do not spend a lot of time thinking about their answers. We argue that a qualitative approach would be a more effective means of investigating MIL since participants would have a greater opportunity to reflect upon their thinking. A few qualitative studies have been conducted on MIL with non-doctoral student populations (e.g. Bhattacharya, [2]; Hill et al., [10], Krause, [12]; MacKinlay & Trevitt, [13]; O'Connor & Chamberlain, [14]), with a common finding of the importance of relationships as a source of meaning.

We focus in depth on the qualitative study on MOL that Hill et al. ([10]) conducted with undergraduate (9 female and 1 male) students in introductory psychology classes because this study served as the foundation for the present study. In the Hill et al. study, participants found MOL to be an engaging and important topic, although they often had a hard time defining and articulating their ideas. They believed that meaning is individually and uniquely constructed, and changes over time depending on life stages and circumstances. They also believed that people need to have passion for what they do and be happy; and need to have morals, values, balance, and moderation in their lives. A major source of meaning, consistent with the aforementioned qualitative studies, was relationships. In addition, helping others was a major source of meaning, although these participants were unsure about the feasibility of supporting themselves and families in a helping profession given their perceptions that helping professions do not pay well. Other sources of meaning included career, personal growth, pursuing happiness, and religion. With regard to the development of MIL, participants believed that they were triggered to think about MIL during and after life-changing events such as travel, loss, death of significant others, illness, and discrimination. Parents played a primarily positive, but occasionally a negative, role in helping participants integrate these life-changing experiences. Participants also noted that over time, they had shifted from superficial to more meaningful pursuits. They noted that they currently thought for themselves about what they believed rather than relying on others to tell them what to think.

It seems logical to extend this research to doctoral students in counseling psychology, as they have typically established a deeper level of commitment to the field of psychology than have undergraduate students. The doctoral students might therefore have a clearer path for their future, and a better sense of MIL. We thus wanted to examine how MIL might differ in this crucial developmental period. It is particularly interesting to study doctoral students because of the possibilities of intervening with and improving their training.

Purpose of present study

Given that MIL is related to problems in living and being human rather than to psychopathology, it seems like a particularly appropriate topic for counseling psychology (Gelso, Nutt Williams, & Fretz, [5]). The purpose of the present study was to investigate how doctoral students in counseling psychology think about MIL. We wondered how similar they are to undergraduate students in psychology classes in their beliefs about meaning and their sources of meaning. Because doctoral students are involved in more professional activities (e.g. delivering psychotherapy, conducting research, and teaching), it is interesting to examine more about how they get meaning from each of these activities. Finally, given the paucity of evidence about how therapists actually work with MIL issues in psychotherapy, we wanted to learn more about how these doctoral student therapists approach their work with clients related to MIL. More specifically, we explored how doctoral students defined MIL, their beliefs about MIL, what stimulated their thinking about MIL, the influence of culture on MIL, their personal sources of MIL, the meaning they derived from different aspects of their professional roles (practice, research, and teaching), and how they worked with clients regarding MIL.
Given the small samples typically used in qualitative research, Hill and Williams ([7]) argued that researchers should carefully delimit their sample so that readers would know to whom the results might apply. Hence, because we thought that gender, social class, ethnic background, and doctoral program might have an effect on the results, we decided a priori to limit our sample to female counseling psychology students from one doctoral program, with all of the participants from middle- to upper-middle socioeconomic classes. We also tried to get a balance between European American and Asian students, since these were the two most predominant ethnicities in the doctoral program. In addition, because we wanted to determine how similar our sample was to other samples, given that it was a small and highly selected sample, we compared our sample to other samples on a standardized measure.

We used consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, [6]; Hill et al., [9]; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, [8]) to analyze interviews. This qualitative method allowed us to ask about a topic that is generally very difficult to discuss. Because Hill et al. ([10]) found that undergraduate student participants had difficulty articulating their thoughts about MIL given that it is not a topic typically discussed, we provided the interview protocol to participants ahead of time. Because Hill et al. ([10]) found that undergraduate students had a hard time articulating their thoughts about MIL, we asked participants to complete three different MIL measures right before the interview to prompt this thinking about different aspects of MIL.

Methods
Participants
Interviewees
Ten female (5 European American, 2 Korean international, 2 Indian international, and 1 Korean American) students in a counseling psychology doctoral program at a large mid-Atlantic US public university were interviewed. Ages ranged from 26 to 42 (M = 29.60, SD = 4.59), and they were in their second to fifth year of doctoral training and thus had at least one year of experience working with clients. Regarding social class, eight identified as middle class and two as upper class. In terms of religious affiliation, five indicated none, and five indicated Christian; three indicated being very spiritual/religious, six indicated being somewhat spiritual or religious, and one indicated being not at all spiritual or religious. Although only six participants were currently in counseling or psychotherapy, all 10 had been in counseling or psychotherapy at some point in their lives. Participants received no compensation, and participation was voluntary.

Research team
Ten (9 female, 1 male; 6 European American, 2 Hispanic, 1 African-American, and 1 Asian American) undergraduate senior psychology students, ranging in age from 19 to 23 years (M = 21.00, SD = 1.33), comprised the primary research team. They were voluntarily enrolled in a class on CQR led by the first author at the mid-Atlantic US public university. The first author presented the idea of studying MIL prior to enrollment, and all students agreed. The 10 students were both the interviewers and the judges for the data analyses.

To put the results into context, research team members provided information prior to conducting interviews about their biases (i.e. "personal issues that make it difficult for researchers to respond objectively to the data," Hill et al., [8], p. 539) and expectations (i.e. "beliefs that researchers have formed based on reading the literature and thinking about and developing the research questions," Hill et al., [8], p. 538). Team members placed a high value on family relationships, and assumed that the interviewees would also share this value. Given that the interviewees were doctoral students, the undergraduate team members had high expectations, and thought that the interviewees would be exceptionally mature adults who would have well-articulated answers to the questions regarding MIL. Team members also expected interviewees to be knowledgeable about MIL, not very religious, and more oriented to careers than relationships. Finally, the research team members
expected that "helping others" would be a common theme found throughout the interviews due to the interviewees' enrollment in the counseling psychology doctoral program. Team members did not have any particular biases or expectations regarding culture, except for the possible influence of collectivism and duty. After reflecting about, and discussing, these biases/expectations, team members tried to bracket (i.e. set aside) them as best as they could to focus on what was actually said by the interviewees.

Auditors
The three female auditors were all experienced in conducting CQR. The first two (a 22-year-old post-baccalaureate student hoping to attend graduate school in counseling psychology and a 65-year-old counseling psychology professor) co-instructed the CQR class and audited all cases. The third was a 52-year-old counseling psychology professor, who served as an external auditor for the cross-analyses. In terms of biases/expectations, auditors placed a high value on developing and maintaining meaningful relationships and helping others, and expected that interviewees would also derive meaning from these activities. Auditors expected participants’ MIL to be influenced by traumatic events or difficult times in life. Finally, given that interviewees probably interacted with clients who struggled with MIL, the auditors expected that working with such clients would prompt the interviewees to question their own MIL.

Measures
Three standardized measures of MIL were used in this study, primarily to prime interviewees about the topic before the interview (although the MLQ was also used to compare the sample with previous samples). Because of the small sample size, internal consistency is not reported. In addition, we used a demographic form and an interview protocol.

*Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (MLQ; Steger et al., [19]) is a 10-item face-valid self-report measure assessing a person's MIL. Steger et al. developed two subscales through factor analyses: Presence of Meaning (MLQ-P; e.g. "I have discovered a satisfying life purpose") and Search for Meaning (MLQ-S, e.g.; "I am seeking a purpose or mission in life"). The MLQ items are rated on a 7-point scale (1 = Absolutely Untrue; 7 = Absolutely True). Steger et al. reported positive correlations between MLQ-P and measures of well-being and religiosity, as well as positive correlations between MLQ-S and measures of negative affect, depression, and neuroticism, supporting the validity of the scales. They also reported adequate internal consistency (.84 and .81, respectively) and test–retest reliability coefficients over one month (.73 and .70, respectively).

*The Purpose in Life Test* (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, [3]) is a 21-item measure that prompts individuals to think about their attitudes regarding situations in which they have experienced "purpose in life." Each item is answered using a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from non-existing (1) to neutral (4) to meaningful (7), although the anchors differ for each item. For example, item 3 is "In life I have...": No goals or aims at all (1), Neutral (4), Very clear goals and aims (7). The summary score of all 21 items is used, with higher scores indicating higher levels of purpose. Steger et al. ([19]) reported excellent test–retest reliability (.86) and internal consistency (.88) for this measure; the PIL correlated .61 with the MLQ-P and −.18 with the MLQ-S, indicating that it is a measure of purpose more than search.

*Sources of Personal Meaning Profile* (SOMP; Prager, [15]; Reker & Wong, [18]) is a self-report measure with 16 items involving various sources of meaning (e.g. "Preserving human values and ideals"). Each item is rated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all meaningful for me; 7 = extremely meaningful for me). Prager ([15], [16]) found that the SOMP was an internally consistent measure with test–retest reliability of greater than .70.

*A Demographic form* included questions such as age, sex, and race/ethnicity, whether the person was currently in counseling or psychotherapy, and whether the person had ever consulted a mental health professional. Participants were also asked to identify their religious affiliation, rate how much they considered themselves to
be a spiritual/religious person (not at all, somewhat, and very much), and to identify the social class in which
they were raised (lower class, middle class, or upper class).

An Interview protocol is developed by the research team (see Appendix 1) using the protocol from the Hill et al.
([10]) study as a starting point. Team members proposed questions, and an initial protocol was then created.
Each member of the research team used the initial protocol to conduct a pilot interview with a friend or family
member. The pilot interviews were not recorded, but team members met as a group to discuss the interviews
and revise the protocol. The final protocol comprised 17 questions covering a wide range of topics: career
(therapy, research, and teaching), friendships, romantic relationships, family, culture, religion/spirituality, and
working with MIL in psychotherapy. The interview was semi-structured, such that there was a standard set of
questions, but interviewers were encouraged to use probes (e.g. "Tell me more about that" and "What do you
mean by that?") to elicit further individualized responses.

Procedures

Ethical considerations
The University Institutional Review Board approved the study. Researchers, auditors, and participants all signed
consent forms prior to participation in the study. Before data analysis, participants were assigned code numbers
to protect confidentiality.

Interviewer training
Interviewers read three CQR articles, as well as Hill's ([6]) CQR book. They also wrote about and discussed their
personal beliefs, biases, and expectations about MIL, and the importance of bracketing biases and expectations
throughout the research process. Each interviewer used an early draft of the protocol to practice the interview
with a friend. Then, the first author invited a first-year graduate student to be interviewed collectively by the
team. The 10 interviewers took turns asking the questions and practicing using appropriate probes. The co-
instructors provided feedback and tips on the best ways to elicit responses from interviewees. Finally, the
interviewers practiced interviewing each other using the final protocol. All of the interviewers were judged as
competent to conduct the interviews.

Completion of the measures by team members
Interviewers completed the SOMP, MLQ, and PIL measures, and then wrote a paper for the class in which they
discussed their biases and expectations for each of the interview questions. The auditors also completed the
three measures and wrote briefly about their biases and expectations. Results from the measures were not used
in the analyses, but rather were completed so that interviewers/judges and auditors had a chance to think about
MIL and their biases/expectations.

Recruiting interviewees
The first author, a faculty member in the program, invited 10 female doctoral students in the second to fifth
years of their doctoral program in counseling psychology to participate; all agreed. Interviewees were assured
that their grades or program standing would not be affected in any way by their decision whether or not to
participate. Prior to the interview, participants were sent a copy of the interview protocol to give them the
opportunity to think about the questions.

Data collection
Each interviewer conducted one interview with someone they did not know. Participants first signed a consent
form and completed the demographic form, MLQ, SOMP, and PIL. The interviews lasted from 85 to 126 min
(M = 108.5 min, SD = 12.4 min). Two weeks later, interviewers emailed the follow-up to interviewees and asked
if they had any additional thoughts about MIL.
Data analyses
Interviewers transcribed their own interviews, noting nonverbal behaviors such as pauses and laughter, but excluding minimal verbal behaviors (e.g. "um," and "mm-hmm"). Interviewers removed any identifying information from the transcript, and recordings of interviews were erased after they had been transcribed. Transcripts were identified using code numbers, and were not linked to the interviewees in any way.

The research team and co-instructors consensually drafted a list of domains (i.e. topics discussed during the interviews and reflection papers) by reading several transcripts aloud and suggesting and discussing possible domains until a stable list emerged. The team, as a whole, examined two transcripts and assigned each thought unit to one or more domains. Once team members understood how to assign data to domains, pairs of judges met and consensually assigned thought units in transcripts to one or more domains, with the co-instructors monitoring their work.

The research team and co-instructors then constructed, with considerable discussion, core ideas (summaries or abstracts in fewer and more concise terms) from the domained data for two interviews. When all of the team members felt comfortable with the coring process, pairs of judges constructed core ideas for the remaining transcripts. Each finalized consensus version (core ideas within domains for an individual case) was audited for accuracy by both of the co-instructors and consensually revised by the primary team.

For the cross-analysis, a slight modification of the typical cross-analysis procedure (where all members of the team work together in every step) was used because of the large number of team members. The co-instructors met with subgroups of team members to construct categories and subcategories representing the themes in the data. Subgroups then looked at the remainder of the cases for domains and expanded the list of categories and subcategories to reflect all of the data. Everyone then reviewed the resulting overall list of categories and subcategories and provided suggestions.

Pairs of judges (not the same ones who had conducted the previous step) then assigned the core ideas to categories and subcategories for domains. In the next step, the co-instructors met with team members and reviewed all of the cross-analyses to ensure consistency across teams. The external auditor then reviewed the cross-analyses, and the co-instructors and team members consensually made the necessary revisions. Finally, each team member returned to the raw data for her/his interview and made sure that all of the raw data were accurately captured in the cross-analyses. The co-instructors and external auditor then again reviewed the findings and made final revisions until all were satisfied that the final cross-analyses adequately represented the data.

Finally, a draft of the manuscript was sent to all interviewees so that they could confirm that their anonymity was adequately maintained and so that they could comment on the results. Editorial changes were made based on the minimal feedback. One substantial change is included in the Discussion section.

Results
Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the scores on the MLQ-S and MLQ-P for the Steger et al. ([20]) study on American and Japanese young adults, data from a study conducted on a large sample of first-year undergraduate students on the same campus, data from the Hill et al. ([10]) study, and data for the current interviewees. Effect size analyses (differences between means divided by the pooled standard deviations) were used to compare samples, where $d > .20$ is a small effect, $d > .50$ is a medium effect, and $d > .80$ is a large effect. The current sample was higher by large effect sizes (ranging from .55 to 1.81) than all the other samples in terms of MLQ-P, but were similar to the other samples in terms of MLQ-S (effect sizes ranged from .03 to .23).
Table 1. Means and standard deviations for MLQ-Presence, MLQ-Search for Steger, Kawabata, Shimai, and Otake's (2008) samples of American and Japanese young adults, campus norms, 10 interviewees from Hill et al. (2013), and 10 Interviewees from current study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MLQ-P M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>MLQ-S M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steger et al. Japanese sample, N = 982</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steger et al. American sample, N = 1183</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus norms, N = 2799</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill et al. (2013) undergraduates, N = 10</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current sample of doctoral students, N = 10</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Steger et al. ([20]) samples were of young adults. Campus norms come from census data gathered in 2011 of 2799 entering first-year students (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, personal communication, March 7, [17]). High scores on the MLQ-P indicate high levels of presence of MIL; high scores on MLQ-S indicate high levels of search for MIL.

In this section, we report the data from the interviews. For each domain, we provide quotes from the interviews, noting the interviewer's initials to protect the confidentiality of the participants but to allow readers to link quotes across domains. Ellipses (...) are shown when interview data were deleted for efficiency and clarity in presenting the findings. Similarly, we deleted phrases such as "like," "you know," and "I mean" for ease of reading. For each domain, results that applied to at least nine participants were considered general, those that were endorsed by six to eight were considered typical, and those that were endorsed by two to five were considered variant. Table 2 presents all of the qualitative results, but we present only those results that were at least typical in the text.

Table 2. Categories and subcategories within domains for beliefs about meaning in life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain/Category/Subcategories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition of MIL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals or purposes</td>
<td>Typical (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to define</td>
<td>Variant (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General reflections about MIL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively searches for MIL</td>
<td>General (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about MIL fluctuates</td>
<td>Typical (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to thinking about MIL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too busy</td>
<td>Variant (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIL: Constructed or Given</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructed by self</td>
<td>Variant (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given by an external force</td>
<td>Variant (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of MIL: What stimulates thinking about MIL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping experiences</td>
<td>General (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous positive experiences</td>
<td>Typical (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>Typical (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal therapy</td>
<td>Variant (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis/trauma/stress</td>
<td>Typical (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>Typical (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Difficult childhood</strong></td>
<td>Variant (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitions or choices</strong></td>
<td>Typical (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural discrepancies challenge beliefs</td>
<td>General (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivism influences beliefs</td>
<td>Typical (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs about helping others</td>
<td>Typical (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal sources of MIL</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual acceptance and caring</td>
<td>General (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth and insight</td>
<td>Typical (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurture values</td>
<td>Typical (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging aspects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress when separated or break-up</td>
<td>Variant (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has difficulty connecting with others</td>
<td>Variant (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Personal growth</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional well-being</td>
<td>Typical (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel and fun</td>
<td>Variant (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical fitness</td>
<td>Variant (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Religion/Spirituality (R/S)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive benefits of spirituality</td>
<td>Typical (7)</td>
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<td>Searches for MIL in R/S</td>
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<td><strong>Professional sources of MIL</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Being a therapist</strong></td>
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<td>Self-oriented meanings</td>
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<td>Feels fulfilled or efficacious</td>
<td>General (9)</td>
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<td>Personal growth or insight</td>
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<td>Allows for connection and intimacy</td>
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<td>Fulfills a talent</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Make a better world</td>
<td>Typical (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional toll impedes MIL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gets more MIL from doing therapy than research</td>
<td>Variant (3)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Fosters creativity and intellectual curiosity</td>
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<td>Contribute to knowledge/Improve world</td>
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<td>Emotional toll</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of impact</td>
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Lack of connection

Obtains less MIL from doing research than other activities

Being a teacher

Self-oriented meanings

Feels good, fulfilling, or gratifying

Allows for connections

Other-oriented meanings

Inspire and help others grow

Make a better world

Approaches to working with MIL in psychotherapy

Explore components of MIL

Focus on other clinical problems that involve MIL

Experience of interview

Positive reactions

Enjoyed opportunity to explore

Gained insight or learned new things

Negative reactions

Difficult to articulate thoughts about MIL

Note. N = 10. General (9–10 of sample), Typical (6–8 of sample), Variant (2–5 of sample).

Definition of MIL

Participants typically defined MIL as having goals or a sense of purpose in one's life, a reason for living. For example, DG defined MIL as "purpose ... there’s a reason why you are here, like you made an imprint in whatever shape or form ... you just had some kind of impact in life whatever it is," and TB referred to MIL as, "fulfilling some sort of purpose."

General reflections about MIL

MIL was typically cited as being very important and central, with participants indicating that they actively searched for it. VB illustrated this frequent search:

I've always thought a lot about meaning in life, and in fact, I always thought that I was an over-sensitive child in many ways because I had all these questions about why are we alive, why do these things happen to some people, why do good things happen to some, why do bad things happen to some.

Similarly, MC said, "It has been always really important for me, especially when I considered my career goals ... I just spend a lot of time to think about my meaning in life."

The amount of time spent thinking MIL typically fluctuated; NR said that "it comes and goes" depending on what else was going on in participants' lives. For CC,

That kind of thinking doesn't happen too often for me, really deep thinking. But, I think it crosses my mind when certain things happen, like if I’m struggling. Or if I’m having a really positive experience, I'll start to feel, "Things are going really well and this must mean something." Or if something is going really bad, I'll start questioning things more.

Development of MIL

MIL developed from positive and negative experiences, transitions/choices, and culture.
Positive experiences
The first typical positive experience involved helping others. For DG,

I've always felt like I was approachable, so people who were never talking to anyone opened up to me ... I always had loner friends ... they would just open up ... they would share their stuff with me. I [thought], "Oh my gosh, I think I have a gift, I think I should do this.

Miscellaneous positive experiences were also typically mentioned, including family ties and hobbies. TB explained how music had positively impacted her MIL:

Prior to coming and starting the program, we did a lot of music. I'm a violinist and that was sort of my way of finding meaning ... that made life feel very meaningful for me because I felt like that creative outlet was really important.

In addition, traveling and being independent typically exposed participants to new ideas and ways of doing things, which in turn stimulated thinking about MIL. One student (CB) stated,

Travel makes me reflect a lot on life, so I guess when I think about something like meaning of life, I think about times when I've travelled and stood on top of a mountain and thought about those kind of things, what's it all for, what's it all about. So I think that travel helps me reflect on what's really important and what I really care about in the context that I'm used to, because I think that when I get outside of my normal context, it makes me reflect on what my usual context is like. I learn about where I'm from by going other places, so I think that's why it gives me meaning.

Negative experiences
Negative experiences led all participants to stop and reevaluate MIL. These negative experiences, which involved crisis, trauma, stress, and relationships ending, changed the normal routine and forced participants to think about what was important to them. TB told her interviewer,

I was in a natural disaster that has left me very scared of certain weather conditions ... I did volunteer at a couple of places and a few non-profits or whatever, but it just made me very aware that I didn't really have the skill set to do anything there to really help. I think that was one of my incentives for coming back to grad school, so that I would have a degree of expertise and I could then share with other people. I think a lot of trauma happens in countries that aren't really equipped with mental or medical care, so to be able to go in and kind of help in those situations feels really important to me.

Furthermore, experiences related to death forced participants to think about their mortality and how they wanted to live the rest of their lives. According to CB,

Any experience I've had with death has really impacted my reflection on meaning of life ... I got mugged at gunpoint and then I got in a car accident where somebody else died and that makes you think ... I will occasionally think about daily meaning when I'm thinking about death. And my dad had [crises] that made him reflect a lot on the meaning of his life. He ended up quitting his job and retiring earlier because he was like, "What am I doing, I would like to be enjoying my life, while I still can." And so he's been really conscious of telling us that, because I think he really wants us to like get that message too ... when you think about dying, those thoughts get more salient. And you kind of get out of the daily grind.

Transitions and choices
Similarly, transitions and choices stimulated thoughts about MIL. TH noted,
I studied abroad ... I think having experienced that and being away from home, for the first time, really [being] away from home, not just at college, but I can't even call you on a payphone because I can't figure it out (laughs), away from home. I think that gave me a sense of independence and that to me, my life kind of means that because I have the resources I can choose so many different things to do, or so many different places to be ... I've always kind of felt that my meaning in life was really based on the risks that I took.

Similarly, MC noted,

After I came to the States it was a really big challenge, and it was a really great transition to me, so those times I was really, I really struggled to think about "why am I here?" ... Studying abroad is a big challenge because I need to leave my family and friends, and something really familiar with me. So I wanted to challenge myself, I wanted to have a chance to self-grow, that was time when I thought of my meaning of life a lot.

Relatedly, being in a meaningless job provoked thought and choices for SG:

I had a job, the job was good, I did it well, but I didn't feel I was making a difference in the world, and I didn't really feel like the work I was doing mattered in any way that was important to me.

Thus, being in meaningless jobs forced some participants to make choices so that they would gain MIL.

Culture
Participants generally talked about how their culture shaped the way they think about MIL. More specifically, they indicated that observing discrepancies between cultures challenged them to think more deeply about MIL. One Asian student (NR) said,

[Moving back and forth between Asian country and the US] has driven a lot of me also thinking about what's important to me, who I am. Am I more American? Am I more [Asian]? Am I both? How do these things both play out? When? It doesn't fit in the norm sometimes. So that has driven a lot of finding what's important to me.

Participants also typically indicated that collectivism (i.e. the group or community is more important than the individual) influenced their beliefs about MIL. For one student (DG),

That's why I wavered in doing counseling psychology for so long. It's just because it's like, "Do I really care what my parents think?" They didn't force me, but it's just important to me that I feel like I'm still connected to them even if I make a certain choice. So, I don't know, I guess it's really coupled with this idea that the group is important, it's not just me and my own meaning in life.

Finally, students typically revealed that their culture influenced their beliefs about helping others. CB said,

I grew up in a relatively well off, upper-middle-class area, it was a lot about being thankful and grateful for what you have ... I think that also kind of made me want to go into a helping profession or made me think that's a way I can do something for the world.

Personal sources of meaning
Participants obtained personal meaning in their personal lives from relationships, personal growth, and religion/spirituality.
Relationships
On the positive side, participants indicated that relationships with family-of-origin, friends, and romantic partners provided them with mutual caring and acceptance, which gave them a sense of meaning. CC said, "I think that so much of what makes life worth living is feeling connected to others and having other people in your life challenge you and support you." Relationships also provided personal growth and insight. TB noted,

The best romantic relationships that I've had have been the ones that really help push me and propel me forward to become a stronger and better person individually. I also think that I gain a lot from being in a partnership and being able to provide that sort of support for someone else.

Furthermore, relationships (particularly with the family of origin) instilled values. TH, whose father was a minister, indicated that the value of helping people was deeply instilled in her during childhood:

Not only did I only get the message from my dad, but I got the message from other people, "Your dad's great, he helped me through this and that." So the value was totally there, instilled that helping other people ... was so important.

On the negative or challenging side, participants (particularly the international students) felt distressed when they were separated from loved ones (i.e. because they had moved far away) or when they ended relationships or broke up with significant others. After describing the contribution of romantic relationships to her MIL, one student (VB) said, "Breakups are so hard for me because I feel a lack for the other person, but maybe the other person doesn't feel a lack for me, so I feel I'm not special."

Personal growth
Participants talked about several sources of personal growth for MIL. The first typical source they mentioned was emotional well-being, which involved self-care. NR said that she got meaning from

learning something, doing something productive ... even if it's taking care of my health more, or taking care of chores, or getting things done is meaningful, even the daily tasks to make that into a healthy lifestyle is meaningful because I think for me when I do that for myself I can do that for others.

A second typical source was travel and fun. This source is illustrated by the enthusiasm of TH who said,

I have this map at my house ... You can put pins in it of where you've been, and where you want to go ... I would like to have as many pins as possible, of different places ... It's really important to me to experience other cultures, and to see how other people live.

Religion/spirituality (R/S)
Participants typically believed that they gained MIL through spirituality rather than through religion. VB said,

I consider myself to be quite spiritual, but I don't consider myself to be religious, and I guess how I see the difference is in terms of following an organized institution or by birth I'm [religion] but I don't, I follow some of the rituals but I'm not rigid about it.

Another student (MC) shared similar sentiments saying,

I am identifying myself as a really spiritual person, so to attend a religious ceremony or to pray, or to read about some religious, to read a Bible, or to read religious books gave me space to step aside from my daily life, to look around myself in a bigger lens. Then I can think of who I am, and what I want, and what I can do for now.
The participants also typically searched for meaning in R/S, hoping that they would find it. VB expressed it thusly,

Spirituality is one of the first things I think of when I think of meaning of life because that's the only space when I'm allowed to ask these questions. I love going to any kind of spiritual community because suddenly I'm surrounded by people who ask these questions ... "Why are we alive, what can we give, why does suffering occur?"

Professional sources of meaning
Participants also gained considerable meaning from their involvement as students in the profession of counseling psychology, specifically from being a therapist, researcher, and teacher. Results for all three domains clustered into self-oriented (i.e. for their own needs or gratification) and other-oriented (for helping others, and altruism) meaning.

Being a therapist: self-oriented meaning
Generally, being a therapist and helping others made participants feel fulfilled and efficacious. Participants spoke of how meaningful it feels to be a participant in the process of therapy. PK said, "It makes me feel, if I can just be with that person, if I can help in any way, it gives me a lot of meaning." For TB, "To be able to kind of just sit with someone and share in that moment I think is very powerful, and I think that it gives me personally a lot of meaning." According to CB, "The most powerful is when clients tell you directly, 'You really helped me.' To me, that's one of the most meaningful things that can happen in my life." Or, as DG explained, "When you're in a space where you go somewhere with somebody that they've never gone before with anyone and help them through their pain ... is so gratifying."

Doing therapy also generally provided participants with personal growth and insight. NR said,

It definitely helps me learn about who I am, but it also helps me learn about other people that I think is essential to me too. I feel more open-minded, I feel like, "oh those things exist, and that's fine." Or more of what people go through inside is something you don't normally see. So when I get to experience that, it's very meaningful.

Finally, being a therapist typically allowed participants a sense of connection and intimacy. PK spoke of the energy she gained from connecting with another person in therapy:

I'm realizing how much, how important it is for me to just feel connected to people, to feel I can share a bond with people, to feel like I can hear them, and to feel heard and to feel listened to. So I think with therapy that connection gives me some energy.

Being a therapist: other-oriented meaning
Participants also found meaning based on other-oriented reasons. Specifically, they generally wanted to help others at an individual level, in what can be considered an altruistic motivation. CC said,

There is just something meaningful about sitting down with somebody and helping them to understand themselves a little bit better, open up things that feel a little bit painful or scary and making connections and having a better understanding of why things are the way they are and what might be holding them back.

Providing therapy typically provided meaning because it allowed participants to change the world and make it a better place. As SG put it,
That's kind of how I see part of my role in life, and the meaning I get from life is hopefully spreading seeds of kindness and knowledge and hoping that that they grow and that they bloom and they regenerate, kind of paying it forward. That hopefully other people will do the same for other people, and so it's kind of, I don't know, a movement or something.

Being a researcher: self-oriented meaning
Participants typically indicated that conducting research fosters MIL because it requires creativity and intellectual curiosity. NR explained,

I can do whatever research I want to do. I mean therapy is too, but therapy is in relation to someone else, and it's for them. Teaching too, I can do whatever I want, but it's still for other people, it's wanting to meet the students' needs, or what the department wants me to teach ... [via research] I can create something new, I can contribute.

For MC,

I find excitement in finding and developing new ideas. I strongly identify with my research interests. I feel like I have a place in this world and also in counseling psychology, and these places make me feel important. Even though I have difficulty with writing or seeing clients in English, it gives me a sense of enjoyment.

Being a researcher: other-oriented meaning
Being a researcher also generally fostered other-oriented meaning, particularly in that through research participants could contribute to knowledge and change the world. For DG,

I like how research can translate to making a broader impact, like if you think that one type of therapy or certain technique is offensive to a certain population, and you find that out, you research, and you stop using it. It's just like the impact that it could have on people and communities is so great.

For TB,

You could impact a lot more people if you were able to do psychotherapy research that helped us understand the process better or helped to understand how change happens or what people need or how different people react in different ways to different interventions ... It can sort of help people on a larger scale which seems meaningful.

Being a teacher: self-oriented meaning
Participants generally indicated that teaching feels good, is fulfilling, and is gratifying, all of which contribute to MIL. According to TH,

Being a teacher gives me a sense that I can impart knowledge or skills and be able to really encourage people and foster their curiosity and creativity. I really like trying to have a classroom where people feel like learning can be fun, and learning can be a place to ask a lot of questions and to challenge, things like that. I think that gives me great sense of purpose and meaning.

Being a teacher: other-oriented meaning
Teaching was experienced typically as meaningful because it allowed participants to inspire and help others grow. For VB, "You expose students to ideas, to thoughts, to different ways of looking at the world, I think that gives meaning to my life." In addition, teaching typically allowed participants to contribute to society and social justice and change the world. According to MC,
It's kind of efficient way to influence others because I can teach 10 counselors, then they will see 10 clients, then I can influence 100 people at once ... So those communicating feelings, something shared, it also gave me a feeling that I am a part of society and I am belonging to this large network. So those things also gave me meaning.

**Approaches to working with MIL in Psychotherapy**

These participants, as therapists-in-training, all considered MIL to be an important focus in their work with clients, although it was not typically a primary focus of treatment. Participants approached the topic of MIL with their clients in two ways: (a) through focusing on components of MIL, and (b) through the exploration of clinical topics that fundamentally involve MIL.

In terms of exploring components of MIL, these participants typically asked clients questions about what was meaningful or important, what shaped who they are, and what shaped who they wanted to be. DG said,

I probe them or try to push them to try to think beyond what other people think cause that's what they always focus on and just kind of live a little ... tell me what your dreams are, why don't you tell me what would be meaningful for you.

NR sought to "help them find what's important to them, who they are, what shapes who they are, who they want to be." For CB,

It comes out in the form of motivation, so we'll talk about what motivates them, and a lot of times part of students' problems are that they feel unmotivated, so I think when we're talking about what matters to them, what motivates them, what their goals are, that's kind of a meaning-in-life conversation.

CC said,

I tend to go for their passion ... I want to know what path feels right to them and why, and what path is going to make you happiest or give you the meaning in life and that kind of thing.

In terms of working with clinical concerns that include MIL as an underlying component, participants suggested that by tackling other problems directly, MIL would improve as a by-product. VB explained,

So someone might have very low self-esteem, so they can't think their life has any meaning, then I'd work on the self-esteem part of it. Say someone has anger issues, so they constantly hurt other people and don't feel like their life has meaning, so I'd work on the anger.

For CC,

When someone comes in and they're feeling really depressed, that might mean that their life doesn't have much meaning, and so why is that? And if it looks like they're moving in that direction of having purpose or a calling or something to get out of bed for in the morning, that's I think a good marker of healing.

For SG,

In the groups that I work in, we do talk about meaning in life because they are people that struggle with eating disorders and also people who struggle with obesity. So there is a fundamental question that is always in the room: What is it going to take to make you stop doing these harmful behaviors that ultimately will probably lead to your death? So that's a meaning-in-life kind of a question.
Experience of interview
Participants generally reported positive reactions to the research interview, generally indicating that they enjoyed the opportunity to explore the topic. According to PK,

I enjoyed it. I have no time to think about any of this, so it was a good way to get my thoughts together ... With all the transitions I've been going through, it was really useful to sort of have a space and think about things in life that are important to me.

Participants typically mentioned that they gained insight and learned new things from the interview. For example, NR learned that "You don't have to achieve full on happiness, but even trying with that in itself already is happiness."

Although participants enjoyed the interview overall, some noted negative aspects of the interview, typically about the difficulty of accessing and articulating their thoughts about MIL. SG explained,

It's hard. Yeah, it sort of makes one feel not very articulate because it is such a hard question to get your mind around, and to explain what makes something meaningful is really difficult, but it's good. It's a good exercise.

Similarly, CB said, "Sometimes I felt like I have no idea if I'm giving the right type of answer. It was hard to articulate what I meant."

Discussion
These participants had a great deal to say about MIL. They found it an exciting and meaningful topic both personally and professionally and gained insight from exploring the topic, although they often had difficulty articulating their thoughts. The findings related to the development of MIL and personal sources of meaning were similar to those for undergraduates in the previous study (Hill et al., [10]). The findings related to the professional contributions to MIL (i.e. teaching, research, and psychotherapy) provide additional understanding about vocational aspects of MIL.

Before we discuss these findings, though, it is important to situate the sample relative to other samples. These participants were all female (half were European American and half were Asian) students in at least their second year of a US-based doctoral program in counseling psychology that espoused a scientist–practitioner philosophy. All of the participants came from a middle- or upper-middle socioeconomic class. These participants had higher scores than undergraduate students on the MIL-P, perhaps because they were currently pursuing an advanced degree in their field of interest. Interestingly, they scored about the same as the undergraduate students on the MIL-S.

Comparison of current graduate sample with previous undergraduate sample
We first compare the findings with the undergraduate sample from Hill et al. ([10]), given that there was overlap in the questions about personal sources of MIL. Participants in both samples defined MIL as being related to having goals and purpose and a sense of what they wanted out of life, which clearly fits with the way that MIL is usually defined. In both samples, participants thought that MIL is internally constructed and that the time spent thinking about MIL varies depending on the situation. They all had spent considerable time thinking about MIL and valued the search as an important part of life. There was also strong agreement that MIL develops from life-changing positive and negative experiences. In terms of sources of MIL, there was strong agreement on the role of relationships, helping others, work or career, and personal growth, with consistent ambivalence about the role of religion/spirituality. Thus, there seemed to be some consistency in findings yielded by these questions, which is perhaps not surprising given that participants across both studies were primarily young female adults in
psychology classes. These findings suggest that there is some stability in these domains for female psychology students.

MIL related to being a researcher, teacher, or therapist

Students described both self-oriented and other-oriented meanings that they obtained from being a researcher, teacher, and therapist, the three most common roles for which students train in counseling psychology doctoral programs in the United States. Self-oriented meanings included feeling good about what they were doing (e.g. feeling efficacious, enjoying the process); other-oriented meanings referred to the altruistic sense of helping others and making a better world (i.e. bettering society).

Although all three roles provided self-oriented meaning, the meanings varied somewhat across roles. Being a therapist and teacher allowed participants to feel fulfilled and efficacious, enabling them to express their natural abilities. In addition, being a therapist allowed for personal growth and insight, and a sense of connection and intimacy, all of which relate to the intensely personal involvement and gratification that comes from being with and helping others in a deep way. In contrast, being a researcher fostered creativity and curiosity, allowing participants to use their intellect in novel and interesting ways. In a sense, then, being therapists or teachers satisfied more of their relational or interpersonal needs, whereas being researchers satisfied more of their intellectual needs. Choosing among these roles is often difficult for doctoral students, for each offers opportunities for different MIL-related pursuits. It would be interesting to examine whether those with stronger relational or interpersonal needs pursue careers as clinicians or teachers, and those with stronger intellectual needs pursue careers as researchers, as is suggested in Holland's (11) person–environment vocational theory.

Similarly, all three roles provided other-oriented meaning, although the meanings again varied somewhat across roles. Meaning was derived at both the level of helping individuals and at the larger level of changing the world and bettering society. At the individual level, participants indicated that they could help others through being a therapist because they could help on an emotional level, and through being a teacher because they could help others grow intellectually. In contrast, participants did not perceive much impact of research for helping individuals (although one participant, when reviewing the paper, noted that she forgot to mention during the interview that she did believe that her research in psychotherapy process and outcome can help individuals, and that she specifically chose this area of research because it was important to her to continue to improve the body of knowledge about how to most effectively help people through therapy). At the level of changing the world, participants suggested that they could have an impact through all three roles. Through therapy and teaching, they could have a trickle-down or ripple effect, such that if they helped or inspired one person, that person could go out and help or teach others. With research, in contrast, they could contribute knowledge to the field of psychology and thereby have a larger impact on society as a whole.

It is interesting to note that these students were in a scientist–practitioner doctoral program that strongly emphasized research and selected students based on their potential to be both scientists and therapists. Yet these students expressed more self-efficacy and obtained more meaning from doing therapy and teaching than from doing research. Most of these students considered themselves to be natural helpers and had been engaged in helping roles all their lives, whereas the research role was more recent and more anxiety-provoking. Some students became more interested in research throughout their graduate training, whereas others became more convinced that providing psychotherapy was more congruent with their personality than was conducting research. Given the importance of each person determining her/his MIL, we suggest that students need to consider what gives them MIL when they think about which direction to take in their careers.

It is important to note that these doctoral student therapists had thought deeply about MIL. They were able to articulate what gave them meaning from therapy, research, and teaching, and were actively making decisions about their futures based on what activities provided them with meaning. We cannot make a direct statistical
connection between how much they had struggled with finding meaning for themselves and their ability to help clients think about meaning, but we suspect that therapists are able to help clients delve deeply into MIL if they themselves have grappled with MIL.

Working with MIL in psychotherapy
Unlike Frankl ([4]) and Yalom ([23]), these participants rarely worked directly with MIL as therapists. The difference is undoubtedly influenced by the former theorists’ specific passion for working with MIL, whereas these doctoral student therapists were interested in the topic but none identified it as a major passion. Nor had these therapists been explicitly trained in working with MIL, so they may not have been adept at recognizing when clients were talking about MIL.

Rather than working directly with MIL in therapy, these therapists worked more indirectly with MIL with their clients. First, they explored areas that can be considered components of MIL, such as asking about goals and motivations, rather than asking directly about MIL. Second, they explored problems (e.g. depression, lack of self-esteem, and eating disorders) that, if resolved, might increase MIL. Similarly, Yalom ([23]) indicated that MIL is seldom a clinical entity all on its own, but rather is implicated in many other clinical entities, such as depression and low self-esteem.

We were nevertheless struck at how little MIL was actually a focus of psychotherapy. We resonate with Yalom's ([23]) statement that one can find hints about MIL in many things people discuss, such as aging, transitions, and death. We suggest that therapists would benefit from more training in how they might take advantage of such opportunities to bring MIL appropriately into their work with clients. Therapists also may need encouragement to explore their own issues related to MIL so that they can be more comfortable addressing such issues with clients.

Limitations
All of the participants were young female adults in the second to fifth year of their counseling psychology doctoral program, and thus their responses may not be generalizable to other populations (e.g. adult male psychologists). In addition, given that the sample was from one graduate program, the results may not be generalizable to students in other programs and universities. The construct of MIL is very abstract and, as such, it was difficult for participants to articulate their thoughts, even though they were given the interview protocol ahead of time and completed MIL measures prior to the interview.

Another limitation is that doctoral student participants were recruited by the first author, who was a faculty member in their program. Students were selected at random from the program to fit a priori criteria (all female, second year and above, middle socioeconomic class and above, a mix of European and Asian), so sampling bias was hopefully not a problem. All students who were approached consented to participate; although the professor tried to be sensitive, they may have felt some pressure to participate (although all expressed eagerness because of the topic). Furthermore, there is a culture within the program of students being willing to participate in research. We were careful to follow ethical principles of confidentiality and ensured anonymity in all transcripts. In retrospect, it would have been better for someone else to recruit the interviewees to reduce any possible perceptions of coercion.

Yet another limitation is that although the interviewers learned interviewing skills during the class, they were inexperienced. Although all were judged as having conducted competent interviews, some student interviewers probed more than others. We felt that the study benefitted from the use of multiple interviewers so that no one interviewer's biases/expectations influenced all of the data, but the actual influence of interviewers is not known, and has not been studied in the qualitative literature.
Finally, we note that the research team was divided into pairs for most of the domain and core idea coding. This procedure made effective use of the large research team, but meant that not all team members were intimately familiar with all of the cases when we did the cross-analyses. This lack of familiarity could have restricted the ability of team members to be aware of all the data when thinking about cross-analyses, but it also forced those not on the primary team to ask for clarification when core ideas were unclear which helped make the data better. Furthermore, we note that the auditors were familiar with all the cases and could balance each other and the rest of the research team.

Implications for training and research

Given that these doctoral student trainees did not directly focus much on MIL with their clients, more specific training might help therapists become more aware of MIL and feel more comfortable facilitating such work in therapy. In terms of research, given that one of the current study's major contributions is an understanding of therapist trainees' sources of MIL and how these trainees focus or do not focus on MIL while conducting psychotherapy, it would be interesting to ask experienced psychotherapists from different theoretical orientations and different cultures about how they work with MIL in psychotherapy. It would also be interesting to compare therapists who directly discuss MIL with therapists who only indirectly address MIL or who do not discuss MIL to examine the influence on process and outcome (particularly, existential outcomes such as MIL). In addition, it would be useful to examine changes in clients' MIL across the course of long-term psychodynamic or existential psychotherapy when the focus is on MIL. Future researchers could also interview male and female doctoral students from different cultures and different professions to examine whether gender roles, culture, and profession influence MIL.

Appendix 1. Interview protocol

Background questions

- What items or questions grabbed you most when completing the measures? Why?
- How much do you think about meaning in life (MIL)? If so, what prompts you to do so? If not, why not?
- Generally, what comes to mind when you think of MIL?
- What gives you a sense of purpose or MIL?

MIL related to professional goals

- What are your professional goals?
- How does being a therapist provide MIL for you?
- How does conducting research provide MIL for you?
- How does being a teacher provide MIL for you?
- How do you work with clients regarding MIL?

MIL related to personal goals

- What are your personal (non-professional) goals?
- How have your past experiences contributed to your MIL?
- What role does family play?
• How does your MIL differ from your parents? Why?
• How do non-family relationships contribute to your meaning of life?
• What role do romantic relationships play?
• What role do friendships play?
• How has your cultural background influenced your MIL?
• What role does spirituality/religion play in MIL? Has this changed over time? How do you expect it will change in the future?
• Tell me about a specific incident or event that caused you to question your MIL.

Final questions
• What additional thoughts do you have about meaning in life?
• What was it like to participate in this interview?

References


