

Applying Logotherapy in Teaching Meaning in Life in Professional Training and Social Work Education

Wallace Chi Ho Chan  *

Department of Social Work, Education, Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

*Correspondence to Wallace Chi Ho Chan, Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK.
E-mail: wallace.chan@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

Meaning in life is an important topic for professional training and social work education. This article aims to illustrate how Viktor Frankl's logotherapy could be applied as the framework in teaching meaning in life to social work students and helping professionals. It critically examines the experience of teaching meaning in life and integrating it with various training and education components, such as human behaviours, end-of-life and bereavement care, and self-care of helping professionals. Reflections on these teaching experiences suggest that the significance of teaching meaning in life is recognised by helping professionals and students, especially its dual influence on both personal and professional aspects. Lack of systematic and continuous training and education of meaning in life may be a hindrance for more in-depth understanding and learning. More case examples and discussion may help advance helping professionals' practice to facilitate service users' meaning searching. Reflecting on meaning in life may also facilitate helping professionals' coping with existential challenges in work, but such self-care training should be offered regularly to provide continuous support. This article suggests that teaching meaning in life may have great implications for the psychological health of helping professionals and the service users who receive their professional services.

Keywords: end-of-life and bereavement care, logotherapy, meaning in life, professional training and education, self-care

© The Author(s) 2023. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Accepted: July 2023

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, I have often asked my social work students and helping professionals a question when delivering professional training and education: Do you think meaning in life is crucial? Almost all of them agreed that meaning in life is crucial and concurred with what was suggested in the literature: meaning in life is essential for our psychological well-being (Zika and Chamberlain, 1992; Fischer *et al.*, 2021; Yoon *et al.*, 2021). Different life contexts may demand our search for meaning, and meaning in life may refer to meaning in different life contexts. Some examples are meaning in family caregiving, meaning in coping with a terminal illness and meaning in work. For helping professionals like social workers, meaning in life may have dual meanings—for their service users but also for themselves (Itzick *et al.*, 2018). Meaning in life could be the motivation for their service users to keep going despite all the sufferings but also their motivation to sustain them in the highly stressful social work roles. Previous studies have also highlighted the importance of meaning for people in various difficult life situations. For example, meaning in dementia caregiving is associated with caregivers' better mental health, quality of life, satisfaction with life and self-efficacy (Quinn and Toms, 2019). But meaning in life may also be important for helping professionals to maintain their compassion satisfaction as well as avoid burnout and compassion fatigue (Stamm, 2009).

It seems that meaning in life has not received adequate attention in social work (Chan *et al.*, 2017b). Meaning in life is often briefly discussed under the broader topic of spirituality and social work (Holloway, 2010; Canda *et al.*, 2019) and existential social work (Krill, 2014; Nilsson, 2018). Also, limited social work research studies have focused on meaning in life (Chan, 2016; Elsherbiny and Al Maamari, 2018; Lin and Shek, 2019). In social work practice, again focus has been given to integrating spirituality into social work practice (Oxhandler and Pargament, 2014; George and Ellison, 2015) instead of assessing the meaning in life specifically (Chan, 2016). But even spirituality may have received limited attention in social work education. For example, a recent study found that only 8 per cent (43 out of 531) of accredited social work programmes at the bachelor level in the USA offered an elective course on Religion and Spirituality, and thus not surprisingly meaning in life was not one of the major themes found in the content across these courses (Cole, 2023). Though more concern for spirituality in social work has been noted when compared with that in previous decades, social work education may fail to equip social workers adequately for addressing various

contents of spirituality and meeting the expanding discussions of spirituality beyond direct practice (Crisp, 2020), not to mention the more specific contents of meaning in life and its importance for service users and social workers.

One reason for the above-mentioned lack of attention on meaning in life in social work may be the ambiguous definition (White, 2004; King and Hicks, 2021), which makes researching and teaching this topic difficult. King and Hicks (2021, p. 562) pinpointed this problem: 'In short, meaning in life is an ineffable mystery, at once nothing and everything'. Unlike other social work concepts and values, such as social support and social justice, meaning in life may become something which is too broad to be considered a social work focus. Instead, meaning in life may often be considered a topic better addressed by philosophy and religion, especially when the scientific basis is considered not yet established (King and Hicks, 2021). Therefore, meaning in life may often not be included in the social work curriculum which has already been fully occupied by content aiming to fulfil the requirement of professional core competencies (Burton, 2020).

When I started to work at a department of social work at a university in Hong Kong in 2011, I found that limited content in the social work curriculum addressed the topic of meaning in life specifically. As a social work scholar who has been deeply influenced and inspired by Viktor Frankl's logotherapy (Frankl, 2008, 2010)—I aspired to introduce this topic into professional training and education, especially in the social work context. This article was written with an aim to illustrate how the topic of meaning in life was introduced and integrated with the professional training and education, especially in the social work context. It is hoped that this article may provide a critical review of what has been done, which may provide insights into the future development of social work education and training for other helping professionals.

Framework for teaching meaning in life

Viktor Frankl's logotherapy is the backbone for all my teaching of meaning in life for professional training and education. Some key content is as follows.

Definition of meaning in life

Frankl did not provide a clear statement to define meaning in life, but intentionally limited the discussion of logotherapy in the context of personal meaning, in contrast to the ultimate meaning, which he thought should be better addressed by religion (Frankl, 2000). Logotherapy

emphasises meaning in life (Frankl used the term, meaning of life) as a subjective experience, but the meanings exist and wait to be found by us. Frankl perceived meaning in life as a unique responsibility of human beings for responding to the calling from life—finding the meaning of the moment (Frankl, 1988)—and it is these meanings that motivate us to live our everyday life.

Three tenets of logotherapy

The three tenets of logotherapy, (i) will to meaning, (ii) meaning of life and (iii) freedom of will, guide us in understanding meaning in life and the search for meaning. Will to meaning is considered the basic motivational force for human beings, and it is often the meanings we find in various life contexts that help us to keep going despite all the sufferings (Frankl, 1988). Meaning of life here refers to our ontological understanding of life and, in other words, the belief that life has meaning in all circumstances, including in sufferings. Freedom of will refers to our anthropological view of humans—the fact that we are not free from the conditions but are free to take a stand to respond to life and make decisions for ourselves (Frankl, 1983, 2008).

Frankl's dimensional ontology suggests that human beings should be understood in unity with the consideration of physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions (Frankl, 2000). Logotherapy especially highlights the importance of the spiritual dimension (Frankl called it the noetic dimension) and illustrates how people may transcend limitations and experience the meaning in life via various spiritual resources, such as love, creativity and a sense of humour. The spiritual dimension is considered a unique human dimension which provides us with the possibilities to find meaning in life. Two unique human capacities from the spiritual dimension are highlighted: self-distancing and self-transcendence (Frankl, 2008; Schulenberg *et al.*, 2008). Self-distancing suggests that we are able to maintain a distance from our current problem-saturated situation and in turn allows us to re-experience our freedom to respond to the situations. Self-transcendence is considered a unique human aspect, which suggests that we are not a closed system but are open to this world to allow us to find meaning in relation to other things and people out of ourselves.

Examples of teaching meaning in life in professional training and education

- (a) University education for undergraduate and postgraduate students.
 - (i) Human behaviours and the social environment.

For over ten years, I taught a social work course both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, Human Behaviour and the Social Environment. In order to enhance students' understanding of how theoretical perspectives may help us understand humans, I introduced different psychological theories in the first few lectures, such as psychoanalysis, behaviourism and social cognitive theory. But I intentionally added the contents of Frankl's logotherapy to this course, which helps students to understand human beings from a spiritual perspective which acknowledges sufferings but also recognises the resilience and human freedom in choosing an attitude to respond to the sufferings and in turn search for meaning in sufferings and life. It is an essential balance that understanding human behaviours may be affected by unconsciousness and influenced by early childhood experiences as taught in psychoanalysis, as well as conditioned by classical and operant conditioning as taught in behaviourism. Logotherapy shares the social work values that emphasise human strengths and possibilities to change and adjust to the social environment (Rapp *et al.*, 2005).

Use of reflective questions and case sharing

Reflective questions were often included in the lecture for students' reflections. For example, I may ask students, 'To what extent are we free?'. This question was further elaborated in connection with their previous learnings: 'May we change and still experience a meaningful life despite all the sufferings in early childhood?'. In addition, a case was shared, from my own experience of working with the first terminally ill patient as a student social worker in the fieldwork placement. I disclosed my ambivalence in working with this patient and my learning and reflection, with an aim to encourage students to feel and experience in context and stimulate their further reflections on facing sufferings and meaning in life. For details, please see [Table 1](#).

Consolidating the learning: personal and professional growth

At the end of this course, students were invited to reflect again on what meaning in life is, especially after understanding the life span of human beings in different development stages from birth to death. As a closing exercise, I invited them to write and/or draw their learning and reflections on a colour article. This could be a gift for them to keep a record, or they could send these papers to me for sharing their learning and reflections.

Using meaning in life to review and consolidate the learning of this course may help students to integrate the knowledge with real-life experience, including their own personal growth. In this sense, the knowledge

Table 1. A case sharing about working with a terminally ill patient

Case background	Points for students' reflections
Introduction: A patient, Jenny (pseudonym), aged forty years, suffered from terminal uterus cancer. She was referred to the student social worker for emotional support.	My ambivalence in approaching this patient: 1. My sharing in avoiding touching the emotional experience of this patient. 2. How may we start the conversation? How may we be a companion in walking with people in sufferings?
Starting the conversation: Jenny started her sharing of sufferings, including her physical and emotional pain, as well as her husband's leaving home after her illness.	Staying with the emotions and sufferings of a patient: 1. My reflections on the importance of being genuine in the helping relationship: not pretending to be an expert but be an inexperienced student social worker who really cares 2. The cost of caring: challenges in staying with heavy emotions and sufferings 3. How may we sustain in this kind of work?
Jenny's sharing of her greatest worries: her limited family support and how her teenage son can live after her death.	Reflections on the belief in 'meaning in life' in facing unavoidable sufferings: 1. Do we really believe life is meaningful despite all the sufferings? 2. Could our service users feel whether we are genuine in seeing the meaning in sufferings? 3. Integration of personal and professional self, including how our values and beliefs may affect our professional practice.

they acquired in this course may not just enrich their professional learning but also facilitate their self-understanding and search for meaning in university learning. In fact, I told my students that I was not just teaching human behaviours, and I aimed to enhance their understanding and reflections on human life.

(ii) Living with grief: Understanding death, dying and bereavement

This is an undergraduate social work elective course that I developed in Hong Kong. My goals were to enhance students' understanding of death, dying and bereavement and facilitate their search for meaning in the midst of grief and sufferings. In the first part of the course, students are introduced to basic death concepts, the dying process, dying roles, palliative and end-of-life care. In the second part, grief and bereavement are taught, such as grief reactions, various grief theories and models, including Worden's tasks of grief (Worden, 2018), Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (Stroebe and Schut, 2010) and Rando's 6Rs process of mourning (Rando, 2000). At this point, students may have acquired a better understanding of death and bereavement, particularly the needs of end-of-life patients and bereaved families. But a key question arises which addresses the key theme of this course: After realising the sufferings in death and bereavement, how may we really be living with

grief? Living with grief entails the meaning of grieving yet living with a sense of meaning at the same time. Therefore, the final part of this course introduced logotherapy, which facilitates students' reflections and search for meaning in life despite all the sufferings. Logotherapy with the content mentioned above was shared with students, which encourages them to reflect on how we may embrace the sufferings and grief yet continue to live a meaningful life. Logotherapy provides a framework for openly discussing the topic of meaning in life and reflecting on how we may search for meaning in sufferings.

Use of experiential materials and field visits

Throughout the course, different experiential materials and field visits were used to enhance students' learning and reflections on death and also life. For example, clips from the movie *The Bucket List* were used to illustrate the life priorities and unfinished business that one wished to deal with in facing a terminal illness. At the end of each lecture, a song was dedicated to students, which helps reflect on life and death. One example is the song 'Chase' (追), presented by the late famous Hong Kong singer, Leslie Cheung. The lyrics invited us to think about what we really would like to chase in our busy lives and who the most important and beloved person is. Other experiential activities were conducted which aimed to help them explore and reflect on life and death, for example, visiting the mortuary of a public hospital with the sharing of a pathologist, or visiting the body donation programme of the medical school with the sharing of bereaved persons whose family members donated their bodies after death (Chan *et al.*, 2020).

Use of case sharing and real-life experience

Different stories coming from my social work practice and my personal and teaching experience were shared with students to facilitate their reflections on the meaning in life. For example, when sharing the tenet of logotherapy, which suggests that life has meaning in all circumstances, including in sufferings, I shared with them my experience in working with a quadriplegic patient and how I deepened my understanding of life meaningfulness. Details are shown in Table 2.

During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020, I also shared my real-life experience in understanding the meaning in life. At that time, I had to teach this course online due to the social distancing measures. When I complained in my heart about how much I disliked teaching online, something happened. I discovered that more than the registered number of students had attended the online lecture, and I

Table 2. A case sharing about working with a quadriplegic patient

Case background	Points for students' reflections
Introduction: A patient, Raymond (pseudonym), in his early thirties, suffered from tuberculosis meningitis, which resulted in his being a quadriplegic. He was referred to the medical social worker for psychosocial support.	Meeting this patient: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My frustration and sense of powerlessness in seeing Raymond: He told me that everything is meaningless for him in his situation. 2. My avoidance in seeing this patient: Unconsciously avoid seeing him again by placing his case at the lowest priority. 3. Why am I avoiding? How may I face my sense of powerlessness and incompetence?
Exploring his meaning in life: He shared that family members are of great importance in his life, especially his two little children—a daughter aged seven and a son aged five years. He also felt that he owed his wife much, as she needs to take care of him and children.	Reconnecting with this patient: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do I really believe: life is meaningful despite all the sufferings? Do I really believe my patient's life could still be meaningful? 2. Actualising my beliefs and values in practice: reconnecting with the patient again 3. What is important for him? What are the 'meanings' which could motivate him to sustain himself in the sufferings?
Search for meaning in life despite all the sufferings: Raymond was confronted by the medical social worker to do something meaningful for his children and wife despite his limited mobility. Finally, he decided to write Christmas cards to wife and children to express his love to them.	Facilitating Raymond's search for meaning: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflections on our uniqueness and responsibility to search for meaning: Only Raymond is the father of two children and husband of his wife. Only he could do something meaningful for his family members in that position. 2. Reflections on 'will to meaning' and 'freedom of will': Raymond realised his source of meaning in life (his children and wife), and he showed actualising his freedom in expressing the preferences of children in choosing a Christmas card.
Adding meaning to life though sufferings persist: Raymond thought of the words he would like to share with children and wife. The medical social worker helped write them down on the Christmas cards. He died a few months after Christmas.	Reflections on 'meaning in life' following Raymond's death: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reflections on the coexistence of meaning in life and sufferings: Raymond still suffered from the illness, but he was glad to have such a meaningful experience. 2. Reflections on the mutuality of 'meaning in life': Not only did Raymond have a meaningful experience, but also his wife and children experienced the meanings—the love Raymond conveyed despite his sufferings. 3. Though we may not remove sufferings, are we willing to add meanings to life?

was aware that these may be sit-in students who got the Zoom link of my lecture from their peers. I invited them to inform me via email privately after the lecture, so that I may also share my lecture notes with them. A student then sent me an email and shared with me that she was a sit-in student who was able to attend my lecture, as the practicum in her major programme was cancelled due to the pandemic. But she told

me one more thing—not only did she attend my online lecture but also her father did. Her father was a cancer patient who was currently facing sufferings in his life, but he shared with his daughter that he received some support from my sharing in that lecture—my lecture about logotherapy and meaning in life. If it had not been for the pandemic, I would not have met this sit-in student, not to mention her father. If the pandemic may happen anyway, I told my students that perhaps life would like to remind me that my life (my teaching) has meaning even in the sufferings (my complaints about being forced to teach online) and I was really thankful for that.

Consolidating the learning

I invited students to share with me their learning and reflections on a colour paper in the last lecture. Students' integration was further consolidated by the assignment in which they were asked to make use of what they had learnt in the course to reflect on one of their life experiences in relation to death and bereavement as well as meaning in life. Students may often reflect on their bereavement experience or experience of their own illness or accompanying a family member in a life-threatening illness.

(b) Training for helping professionals.

(i) Applying logotherapy in clinical practice.

Due to my primary interests in death and bereavement, I mostly introduce logotherapy in the context of end-of-life and bereavement care. The call for meaning is particularly prominent when people are confronted by death and bereavement. Using the above-mentioned framework, helping professionals, like social workers, nurses, doctors and spiritual care workers may understand how logotherapy can be applied to help patients and families in end-of-life and bereavement care to search for meaning in sufferings. Yet, the training I provide often starts from inviting helping professionals to reflect on their own values and beliefs in facing sufferings. For example, when the three tenets of logotherapy are introduced, a question will be proposed to the helping professionals: Do we really believe in the unconditional meaningfulness in life, especially in sufferings? The discussion is then on how the beliefs of helping professionals may affect their practice with people suffering. Use of self-distancing is discussed in relation to our inner resources coming from the spiritual dimension, such as sense of humour. Humour is considered a unique and valuable spiritual resource in logotherapy which may help us to distance ourselves from the problems and may even help look at them with a sense of humour (Southwick *et al.*, 2016). Frankl once said that, 'It is well known that humour, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above

any situation, even if only for a few seconds' (Frank, 2008, p. 54). In some occasions, the skills of other approaches may be discussed to illustrate how they may achieve the goal of self-distancing from problems and symptoms, such as the use of externalization skills in narrative therapy (Ryan *et al.*, 2015). Over the years, the training in logotherapy has been extended to other service areas, including mental health and youth services.

(ii) Self-care for helping professionals.

Another contribution logotherapy may make is to the self-care of helping professionals. Work is an important part of life for helping professionals, and meaning in work becomes an important source of meaning in life. Previous studies suggest that meaning in work is crucial for the self-care and well-being of professionals (Baker and Stern, 1993; Moreno-Milan *et al.*, 2019), and a higher level meaning in life is associated with a better professional quality of life, including a higher level of compassion satisfaction and lower levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress (Chan *et al.*, 2022). In addition, helping professionals are continuously confronted by the sufferings of clients, and their life meaningfulness may be at risk of being shattered by these sufferings. In recent years, my good friend, Agnes Tin and I have aimed to promote a construct of self-competence in death work, which is about the helping professionals' capacity to cope with the emotional and existential challenges when working in the field of death and bereavement (Chan and Tin, 2012; Chan *et al.*, 2015, 2016). Emotional challenges may include a sense of helplessness and arousal of personal grief, whereas existential challenges may include queries on life meaningfulness and the meaning of work. An experiential workshop was also developed which was found to be effective for enhancing self-competence in death work (Chan *et al.*, 2017a). Logotherapy is the backbone for developing the content, which aimed to enhance the existential component in self-competence in death work. For example, an experiential exercise called 'meaning walk' was developed in which helping professionals will receive a letter from 'god/a higher order/fate' and are asked to respond to the existential questions in this letter, including their meaning in work and in life (Chan *et al.*, 2017a). This exercise was inspired by a famous quote from Viktor Frankl in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*:

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible. (Frankl, 2008, pp.113–114)

Self-competence in death work has been found to be associated with the professional quality of life of helping professionals (Chan *et al.*,

2022). It considers the intersectionality of personal and professional issues—how helping professionals’ personal self may be affected by their professional work. Enhancing self-competence in death work could be a self-care strategy which addresses both personal and professional components.

Another self-care training exercise provided to helping professionals is in the format of book sharing. In recent years, I have developed a book-sharing series in which I aim to share the contents of one logotherapy book written by Viktor Frankl. Two books were chosen, Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Frankl, 2008) and *The Will to Meaning* (Frankl, 1988). This book-sharing series emphasises that this training exercise does not aim to teach participants knowledge and skills. Instead, participants are encouraged to join the session with a simple heart of appreciating a good book and acknowledging the importance of meaning in life for oneself. Introducing the book’s contents means that helping professionals may have the time and space for reflecting on their own struggles and their search for meaning in life. For example, songs may be shared with the participants in the training exercise to reflect on some key existential topics like ‘time’, ‘death’ and ‘love’. In the last training before I left my hometown, Hong Kong, and moved to the UK, I shared a Cantonese song, ‘Remember’ (記得) presented by the singer Terence Lam, which attempted to conclude and consolidate the learning on the book *Man’s Search for Meaning* for me at that moment—the struggles and grief on leaving my hometown but also the meaningful memories I will always have, including the love I experienced in this place.

Discussion

This manuscript has attempted to review and consolidate the experience of teaching meaning in life in social work education and professional training. It illustrates how meaning in life could be taught via logotherapy and integrated with social work education and helping professionals’ training in various aspects, including human behaviour and the social environment, death and bereavement, as well as personal/professional self-care.

Feedback from social work students and helping professionals

Social work students and helping professionals greatly appreciated the way meaning in life is essential in both their personal life and professional practice. Studying social work is challenging for students, and not a few of them may get lost and be ambivalent about committing to the social work profession (Tham and Lynch, 2019). It is especially true

when students become more aware of the emotional and existential challenges in their work via fieldwork placement (Harr and Moore, 2011). During this critical emotional and existential crisis, understanding and reflecting on meaning in life in social work education may be timely and can respond to their unique developmental needs in choosing their career. In fact, students also shared that learning and reflecting on meaning in life may help them to cope with their personal challenges in academic studies and daily life, as well as the professional challenges in fieldwork placement and future social work careers. Students often treasure the chance of understanding and reflecting more about this important yet 'seldom discussed' topic—meaning in life. They often recall my case and real-life experience sharing as well as my teaching mottos which I shared with them: 'Life is meaningful despite all the sufferings' and 'Time is limited but limited enough to make our life meaningful'. Also, reflections of meaning in life through logotherapy may help integrate with the social work values which often emphasise the strengths, autonomy and self-determination of our clients (Bisman, 2004). Reflecting on their life meaningfulness may also facilitate their awareness of how helping professionals' values and beliefs may affect the helping process.

Helping professionals, like social workers and nurses, particularly appreciated the learning of logotherapy which may guide them to reflect on meaning in life and guide them to help service users to search for meaning in life despite the sufferings. Meaning in life and in a broader sense spirituality has been highlighted as important in the practice of palliative care professionals (Best *et al.*, 2020), but different helping professionals, such as social workers, doctors and nurses who worked in contexts other than end-of-life and bereavement also shared that the learning and reflections of meaning in life are crucial for them (Loboprabhu and Lomax, 2010; Lewinson *et al.*, 2015; Canda *et al.*, 2019). In fact, facilitating service users' search for meaning in life may be relevant in various life situations and challenges. Helping professionals particularly appreciate how logotherapy provides a solid framework, such as the three tenets (meaning of life, freedom of will and will to meaning) and the dimensional ontology, for them to reflect on a coherent understanding of the search for meaning in life.

Moreover, integrating the component of meaning in life with self-care training for helping professionals seems to be promising. The effectiveness of self-competence in death work training suggests that logotherapy may provide a framework for developing helping professionals' capacity to cope with existential challenges, such as their queries on life meaningfulness. The book sharing of Frankl's logotherapy also provided an opportunity for helping professionals to focus on themselves. The self-care message is imminent in this kind of training: helping professionals' meaning in work and in life is worth their concern. In fact, helping professionals may also find themselves

rejuvenated after this self-care training and reconfirm their passion to serve in the helping profession.

Reflections as a social work educator and researcher

Over the years, I have tended to modify my teaching pedagogy and teaching materials to better meet the needs of social work students and helping professionals. For example, logotherapy may have its own limitations, including its ontological views on life, which presume life is meaningful in all circumstances, and meaning ought to be searched instead of created (Frankl, 1988). To address this, I later modified my teaching materials and particularly include and compare alternative views on meaning in life, such as other views of existential philosophy, which often perceive life as meaningless and that we human beings have to create our own meanings in life (Tomer and Eliason, 2008; Boston *et al.*, 2011). This may also help respond to different views of students and helping professionals and invite them to reflect on how we may respond to service users who may not share the same ontological views on life with us.

Another comment on learning and reflecting on meaning in life may be more on its ‘nature’—ambiguity, as mentioned (Park and George, 2013; King and Hicks, 2021). In response to this, students and helping professionals may often desire a more concrete and systematic approach which may provide step-by-step procedures in facilitating one’s and others’ search for meaning in life. For some helping professionals, meaning in life has been a highly philosophical concept, and they may feel inadequate in sharing it with others in both their personal life and clinical practice. This may also be the reason why they often felt a lack of confidence in conducting meaning-based interventions (Breitbart *et al.*, 2015). Yet, learning meaning in life via logotherapy may often require helping professionals to feel and reflect on life paradoxes and ambiguities, which may be different from acquiring knowledge or structured intervention with protocols (Stefan *et al.*, 2019). This discrepancy from their expectations may help explain why they found training in logotherapy inspiring yet difficult. One may say this is one of the limitations of logotherapy: lack of a concrete and detailed description of the intervention approach, including the skills. Many original teachings of Viktor Frankl may be rather conceptual and philosophical, and some of the skills taught by Frankl focus on dealing with psychiatric symptoms like phobia and anxiety (Schulenberg *et al.*, 2008; Southwick *et al.*, 2016). Other followers, like Elisabeth Lukas, have attempted to apply logotherapy in various clinical contexts (Lukas and Schönfeld, 2019), but it may lack clarity in the intervention process. However, the lack of details in the intervention processes may also be the strength of logotherapy: it is an open approach that encourages helping professionals to integrate logotherapy with their

own practice approach and does not necessarily apply logotherapy solely (Ameli and Dattilio, 2013). Future training may be improved by including more case examples and demonstrations. Helping professionals may have more opportunities to discuss and exchange the way logotherapy can be applied in their practice. Helping professionals also reported their desire to receive more systematic and continuous training in logotherapy and recognised its uniqueness in managing and reflecting on the topic of meaning in life and the search for meaning in sufferings.

For self-care training, helping professionals mostly appreciate the experiential format, which allows them to get in touch with their inner self and reflect on their own meaning in life. However, they commented that they may need to receive these self-care training sessions at regular intervals, as they believe reflecting on their meaning in life and work is a changing process which needs continuous attention. Future studies may further explore how the meaning in life of helping professionals may be considered a new benchmark of their psychological health both in personal and professional contexts.

In retrospect, logotherapy may have its strengths and limitations, but it has provided me a coherent framework to integrate meaning in life in my social work education and professional training. It is possible to teach meaning in life with different frameworks which are based on other existential approaches (Yalom, 1980; van Deurzen, 2023). However, logotherapy is the one I find which is open enough to allow different people to integrate the learning with their lives and develop their new reflections and perspectives, as well as the one which can be complementary to the social work values and perspectives. For example, logotherapy emphasises that when sufferings are inevitable, human beings are still free to take a stand to face their sufferings and in turn able to find the meanings through actualising the attitudinal values (Frankl, 2008, 2010). Whilst social work emphasises the importance of advocacy for changing the social environment, the learning of logotherapy may provide a perspective to social workers to search for meaning in life with their service users by modifying their attitudes towards inalterable sufferings. Social work traditionally focuses on the more deprived and disadvantaged groups in society, and their adversities may lead to a crisis of meaning in life. But logotherapy may also broaden social work's perspective by suggesting that though people may become more resourceful and the society becomes more affluent, feelings of meaninglessness may become more pervasive. Therefore, teaching meaning in life via the framework of logotherapy may give broader implications to social work education.

Conclusion

Meaning in life is such an important topic worthy of more of our attention in the training and education of social workers and other helping professionals. This article has reviewed some of the previous examples of teaching meaning in life in professional training and education in Hong Kong. Logotherapy is an existential approach developed by Viktor Frankl, and it has shown to be a useful framework that may invite social work students and helping professionals to understand and reflect more on meaning in life. Teaching meaning in life is crucial not only for social workers and other helping professionals to acquire the skills of facilitating clients' search for meaning but also has great implications for their self-care and in turn their personal and professional psychological health. It is hoped that this article may provide a starting point for further discussion on teaching meaning in life for social work students and helping professionals.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

References

- Ameli, M. and Dattilio, F. M. (2013) 'Enhancing cognitive behavior therapy with logotherapy: Techniques for clinical practice', *Psychotherapy (Chicago, IL)*, **50**(3), pp. 387–91.
- Baker, C. and Stern, P. N. (1993) 'Finding meaning in chronic illness as the key to self-care', *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research Archive*, **25**, 23–36.
- Best, M., Leget, C., Goodhead, A. and Paal, P. (2020) 'An EAPC white paper on multi-disciplinary education for spiritual care in palliative care', *BMC Palliative Care*, **19**(1), pp. 9–10.
- Bisman, C. (2004) 'Social work values: The moral core of the profession', *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**(1), pp. 109–23.
- Boston, P., Bruce, A. and Schreiber, R. (2011) 'Existential suffering in the palliative care setting: An integrated literature review', *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, **41**(3), pp. 604–18.
- Breitbart, W., Rosenfeld, B., Pessin, H., Applebaum, A., Kulikowski, J. and Lichtenthal, W. G. (2015) 'Meaning-centered group psychotherapy: An effective intervention for improving psychological well-being in patients with advanced cancer', *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, **33**(7), pp. 749–54.
- Burton, J. E. (2020) 'Reframing social work practice education: Practice educators' perceptions of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and the support provided during implementation', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, **34**(1), pp. 39–52.
- Canda, E. R., Furman, L. D. and Canda, H. J. (2019) *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press.

- Chan, W. C. H. (2016) 'Assessing meaning in life in social work practice: Validation of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire among clinical samples', *British Journal of Social Work*, **47**(1), p. bcv144.
- Chan, W. C. H., Chan, S. O., Wong, A. L. Y. and Ng, P. K. L. (2020) 'Understanding family involvement in body donation: A qualitative study of registered donors and bereaved family members', *Health & Social Care in the Community*, **28**(1), pp. 270–8.
- Chan, W. C. H., Tin, A. F., Wong, K. L. Y., Tse, D. M. W., Lau, K. S. and Chan, L. N. (2016) 'Impact of death work on self: Existential and emotional challenges and coping of palliative care professionals', *Health & Social Work*, **41**(1), pp. 33–41.
- Chan, W. C. H. and Tin, A. F. (2012) 'Beyond knowledge and skills: Self-competence in working with death, dying, and bereavement', *Death Studies*, **36**(10), pp. 899–913.
- Chan, W. C. H., Tin, A. F. and Wong, K. L. Y. (2015) 'Coping with existential and emotional challenges: Development and validation of the self-competence in death work scale', *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, **50**(1), pp. 99–107.
- Chan, W. C. H., Tin, A. F. and Wong, K. L. Y. (2017a) 'Effectiveness of an experiential workshop for enhancing helping professionals' self-competence in death work in Hong Kong: A randomized controlled trial', *Health & Social Care in the Community*, **25**(3), pp. 1070–9.
- Chan, W. C. H., Tin, A. F. and Yu, T. K. (2022) 'Professional quality of life, depression, and meaning in life among helping professionals: The moderating role of self-competence in death work', *Death Studies*, **46**(4), pp. 958–68.
- Chan, W. C. H., Wong, B., Kwok, T. and Ho, F. (2017b) 'Assessing grief of family caregivers of people with dementia: Validation of the Chinese version of the Marwit–Meuser caregiver grief inventory', *Health & Social Work*, **42**(3), pp. 151–8.
- Cole, H. L. (2023) 'What are we teaching in spirituality and social work elective courses? A qualitative content analysis of BSW syllabi', *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, **42**(1), pp. 3–35.
- Crisp, B. R. (2020) 'Charting the development of spirituality in social work in the second decade of the 21st century: A critical commentary', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **50**(3), pp. 961–78.
- Elsherbiny, M. M. K. and Al Maamari, R. H. (2018) 'The effectiveness of logotherapy in mitigating the social isolation of neglected institutionalised older people', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **48**(4), pp. 1090–108.
- Fischer, I. C., Secinti, E., Cemalcilar, Z. and Rand, K. L. (2021) 'Examining cross-cultural relationships between meaning in life and psychological well-being in Turkey and the United States', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, **22**(3), pp. 1341–58.
- Frankl, V. E. (1983) *The Doctor and the Soul*, New York, NY, Vintage Books.
- Frankl, V. E. (1988) *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy*, New York, NY, Meridian.
- Frankl, V. E. (2000) *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, New York, NY, Basic Books.
- Frankl, V. E. (2008) *Man's Search for Meaning*, London, Rider.
- Frankl, V. E. (2010) *The Feelings of Meaninglessness: A Challenge to Psychotherapy and Philosophy*, Milwaukee, WI, Marquette University Press.
- George, M. and Ellison, V. (2015) 'Incorporating spirituality into social work practice with migrants', *British Journal of Social Work*, **45**(6), pp. 1717–33.
- Harr, C. and Moore, B. (2011) 'Compassion fatigue among social work students in field placements', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, **31**(3), pp. 350–63.

- Holloway, M. (2010) *Spirituality and Social Work*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Itzick, M., Kagan, M. and Ben-Ezra, M. (2018) 'Social worker characteristics associated with perceived meaning in life', *Journal of Social Work*, **18**(3), pp. 326–47.
- King, L. A. and Hicks, J. A. (2021) 'The science of meaning in life', *Annual Review of Psychology*, **72**, 561–84.
- Krill, D. F. (2014) 'Existential social work', *Advances in Social Work*, **15**(1), pp. 117–28.
- Lewinson, L. P., McSherry, W. and Kevern, P. (2015) 'Spirituality in pre-registration nurse education and practice: A review of the literature', *Nurse Education Today*, **35**(6), pp. 806–14.
- Lin, L. and Shek, D. T. L. (2019) 'The influence of meaning in life on adolescents' hedonic well-being and risk behaviour: Implications for social work', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **49**(1), pp. 5–24.
- Loboprabhu, S. and Lomax, J. (2010) 'The role of spirituality in medical school and psychiatry residency education', *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, **7**(2), pp. 180–92.
- Lukas, E. and Schönfeld, H. (2019) *Meaning-Centred Psychotherapy: Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy in Theory and Practice*, Hamburg, Germany, Elisabeth-Lukas-Archiv Ggmbh.
- Moreno-Milan, B., Cano-Vindel, A., Lopez-Dóriga, P., Medrano, L. A. and Breitbart, W. (2019) 'Meaning of work and personal protective factors among palliative care professionals', *Palliative & Supportive Care*, **17**(4), pp. 381–7.
- Nilsson, H. (2018) 'Existential social work and the quest for existential meaning and well-being: A conceptual framework', *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, **37**(1), pp. 64–76.
- Oxhandler, H. K. and Pargament, K. I. (2014) 'Social work practitioners' integration of clients' religion and spirituality in practice: A literature review', *Social Work*, **59**(3), pp. 271–9.
- Park, C. L. and George, L. S. (2013) 'Assessing meaning and meaning making in the context of stressful life events: Measurement tools and approaches', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, **8**(6), pp. 483–504.
- Quinn, C. and Toms, G. (2019) 'Influence of positive aspects of dementia caregiving on caregivers' well-being: A systematic review', *The Gerontologist*, **59**(5), pp. e584–96.
- Rando, T. (ed) (2000) *Clinical Dimensions of Anticipatory Mourning: Theory and Practice in Working with the Dying, Their Loved Ones, and Their Caregivers* Champaign, Champaign, IL, Research Press.
- Rapp, C. A., Saleebey, D. and Sullivan, W. P. (2005) 'The future of strengths-based social work', *Advances in Social Work*, **6**(1), pp. 79–90.
- Ryan, F., O'Dwyer, M. and Leahy, M. M. (2015) 'Separating the problem and the person: Insights from narrative therapy with people who stutter', *Topics in Language Disorders*, **35**(3), pp. 267–74.
- Schulenberg, S. E., Hutzell, R. R., Nassif, C. and Rogina, J. M. (2008) 'Logotherapy for clinical practice', *Psychotherapy (Chicago, IL)*, **45**(4), pp. 447–63.
- Southwick, S. M., Lowther, B. T. and Graber, A. V. (2016) 'Relevance and application of logotherapy to enhance resilience to stress and trauma', in Bathyány, A. (ed), *Logotherapy and Existential Analysis: Proceedings of the Viktor Frankl Institute Vienna*, vol. **1**, Cham, Switzerland, Springer International Publishing.

- Stamm, B. H. (2009) *Professional quality of life: Compassion satisfaction and fatigue version 5 (ProQOL)*. Retrieved from: <https://proqol.org/proqol-measure>.
- Stefan, S., Cristea, I. A., Szentagotai Tatar, A. and David, D. (2019) 'Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for generalized anxiety disorder: Contrasting various CBT approaches in a randomized clinical trial', *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, **75**(7), pp. 1188–202.
- Stroebe, M. and Schut, H. (2010) 'The dual process model of coping with bereavement: A decade on', *Omega*, **61**(4), pp. 273–89.
- Tham, P. and Lynch, D. (2019) 'Lost in transition?'—Newly educated social workers' reflections on their first months in practice', *European Journal of Social Work*, **22**(3), pp. 400–11.
- Tomer, A. and Eliason, G. T. (2008) 'Existentialism and death attitudes', in Tomer, A., Eliason, G.T. and Wong, P.T.P. (eds), *Existential and Spiritual Issues in Death Attitudes*, New York, NY, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- van Deurzen, E. (2023) 'Existential therapy for grief', in Neimeyer, R.A., Steffen, E., Steffen, M., Milman, E. and Milman, E.J. (eds), *The Handbook of Grief Therapies*, London, SAGE.
- White, C. A. (2004) 'Meaning and its measurement in psychosocial oncology', *Psycho-oncology*, **13**(7), pp. 468–81.
- Worden, J. W. (2018) *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, New York, NY, Springer Publishing Company.
- Yalom, I. D. (1980) *Existential Psychotherapy*, New York, NY, Basic Books.
- Yoon, E., Cabirou, L., Hoepf, A. and Knoll, M. (2021) 'Interrelations of religiousness/spirituality, meaning in life, and mental health', *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, **34**(2), pp. 219–34.
- Zika, S. and Chamberlain, K. (1992) 'On the relation between meaning in life and psychological well-being', *British Journal of Psychology (London, England: 1953)*, **83**(1), pp. 133–45.