

A. Längle (2000)

## The Method of Capturing Meaning (MCM)

Längle first published a method to capture meaning in 1988(a) under the name of „Steps to Existential Meaning” (p. 42). It was the practical experience with patients searching for an existentially fulfilled life, or a (new) meaning in life, that led to the development of this method. *Frankl's definition of meaning* and basic theoretical considerations prepared the way. Frankl (1982, 68-73) compares the perception of meaning with that of Gestalt – with the difference that a *possibility* appears to the perception of meaning (instead of Gestalt) and sets itself off from the „background of reality“. He thus defines meaning as „a possibility in front of the background of reality“. This already contains two important elements for the finding of meaning. One is meaning's *character of reality* and its relation to circumstances we find ourselves in (environment and psychological and physical conditions of our human existence, like age, gender, personality etc.). Possibilities for existential meaning are disclosed in front of this background of reality. What is predefined by reality is *perceived* and accepted as real. Perception of reality sets the frame to where meaning can be found in a situation.

The other element that constitutes meaning, according to this definition, is the *possibility* we perceive. „Possibilities“ are not yet determined; they are ways of behavior that can be realized or things that can happen. They open our view for the future leaving room for creativity and fantasy. Fear and hope accompany these possibilities and, if they concern a person's behavior, challenge us to decisions. So possibilities require *freedom* on the part of the subject. Freedom thus constitutes a second element for meaning.

Concerning the process of realizing meaning, Frankl writes (1984, 202): „We fulfill the meaning of our being here – our being here is filled with meaning – always by realizing values“. So it is not enough to find out about possibilities; these possibilities should also be important and significant *values*, which draw us. This is the third constitutive element of meaning that is part of the method to find it: The feeling of values or *emotionality*.

The fourth element results from the *fundamental existential attitude*, the key to finding meaning. According to this fundamental attitude in Frankl's existential analysis, being human means being in question and living means giving an answer to the questions of life (Längle 1987, 1988b, 10). Frankl (1982, 72) says it like this: On should „give the question for the meaning of life a Copernican turn: it is life itself that is posing us questions. It is not up to us to ask, it is we who are asked by life and should answer it - should answer for it re-sponsibly. The answers we give, however, can only be concrete answers to concrete 'questions of life'. Their answering comes through our being responsible, in existence we 'realize' the answering of it's own questions.“ Again we are reminded here of this moment of openness, which is necessary for the finding of meaning and gives access to reality. But this openness is now seen from another perspective: being questioned and finding meaning by answering life's questions – by acting *responsibly*.

These four constitutive elements of meaning are now put in context with theoretical concepts of acting. According to these concepts every worthwhile and meaningful action begins with the perception of what is given and its conditions. This is followed by a process of evaluating the possibilities, which orders them in a hierarchy of importance and significance. This in turn forms the basis for decision, for choosing between the possibilities and for resolving their realization. Finally, we realize the possibilities by acting.

Finding meaning is a sequence of these four steps (outside of intuitive „inspirations of meaning“, when meaning dawns on us or surprises us in a flash immediately and often unintentionally – a phenomenon we cannot approach methodically but which the psychology

of creativity has been describing in similar processes for quite some time). These four steps are mostly realized spontaneously in every day life and are usually not conscious. In detail the four steps of capturing meaning follow these contents and processes (Längle 1988a, 43f):

1. The first step of capturing meaning is about the ability to perceive *existentially relevant contents*. This relevance comes through *determining* the facts and their conditions. This is the beginning – requiring the subordination of the „sub-ject“. The *possibilities* are to be found among the facts, leaving the conditions of the situation open for the person involved. This first step of finding meaning serves the *gathering of information*, preparing the material for the following steps. Special care should be taken that ideas, wishes, hopes and learned patterns of behavior are not mixed with contents of perception.
2. Possibilities for action are not equivalent and differ in many ways: whether they are in tune with one’s own concept of life, in the difficulty of their realization and in their consequences. For this reason possibilities (as potential reasons for action) should be weighed against each other and in their entirety. This process happens intuitively by *feeling their value*. E.g.: There are many ways of dealing with a partner. We can bury a conflict in silence, act it out somewhere else, appease, address it etc. The best and most meaningful possibility in the eyes of the person deciding cannot be merely figured out and logically deduced, but must be essentially felt.
3. What is (subjectively) recognized as „right“ and felt as „good“ does not necessarily lead to action. Thoughts and feelings do not determine action. Whether we act and the way we act still needs to be decided on. This is an act of the person’s free will, who gets involved in the situation *him-/herself*. A deliberate *decision* (mostly subconscious and spontaneous) is „saying yes“ to one of the possibilities at hand. What happens in this „affirmative act“? One’s own value is added to the value of the situation. This act of realizing self is the basis for forming the situation. This in turn relies on the way we understand ourselves and on our self-esteem as well as on the way we understand the world. Our own concept of life, of what should become and of the way we understand ourselves, is part of the decision. It enables us to enter into the situation and makes us ready to act (acting is not just reacting to a stimulus, it involves decision and affirmation, which can happen consciously).
4. Besides cognitive and emotional processes, realizing what is intended is part of existential meaning. For this we need to find means and ways, *methods and strategies*, activate and finally try them. We choose these means mainly from previous experiences, often supplemented by the experiences of others. In psychotherapy various psychotherapeutical methods can be used here. It is relatively easy to talk about *possibilities* of meaning. Realizing them, however, brings decisions close to home: Now we have to do what we decided. Only by *entering into* the situation, by getting involved with something, does *existence happen*. In this step we open ourselves again to the world after a moment of reflection and approach it. We ourselves are the price we set for fulfillment of meaning - our reward is fulfillment of being, is fulfillment of life.

Action	Psychological function	Anthropological implication
<b>1. Perceiving</b>	<b>Cognition</b> → Information	Self-distancing (SD)
<b>2. Valuing</b>	<b>Emotion</b> → Closeness, Empathy/compassion	Self-transcendence (ST)

<b>3. Choosing</b>	<b>Decision</b> → Attitude, Willingness to act, involving one's being	Freedom (F)
<b>4. Realizing</b>	<b>Realization</b> → Existence, meaning, dedication	Responsibility (V)

Tab. 1: *The Method for Capturing Meaning (MCM) according to Längle (1988a) with an overview of its 4 steps.*

The structure of the Existential Scale (ESC) also follows these four steps of realizing „personal-existential competence“. Every step is examined in terms of use and development. Every step has a basis in Frankl's anthropology. By naming the subscales of the ESC after their anthropological emphasis, the test was connected to the anthropology. This should help in operationalizing and handling the abstract anthropologic terms practically. On the other hand the steps for capturing meaning are integrated anthropologically and can be understood in their existential dimension, because they are part of the theoretical system. The relation of the anthropological theory to the methodical steps becomes plain to a large extent. ...

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