

 [My critique of Heitzelman & King's article by Paul TP Wong](#) by Louise S. [2014, Oct 22]

Hi Louise,

Attached is the rough draft of my critique of Heitzelman and King's article in American Psychologist
(http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Laura_King5/publication/257935202_Life_is_Pretty_Meaningful_1_Life_is_Pretty_Meaningful/links/00b495265344045022000000).

Would appreciate quick feedback from the IP listserv so that I can revise it for submission.

Kind regards,

Paul

www.drpaulwong.com

 [Wong comment on Heitzelman King Oct 20 2014](#)

 [Comment by John Christopher](#) by Louise S. [2014, Oct 25]

Hi Paul,

I think your critique is right on target and needs to be heard. I have to confess I can't bear to read much of King's work or Seligman's — it's painful!

The one point I might add is that both King and Seligman (and most of psychology) completely neglect issues of ontology. For instance, it seems rather obvious, particularly from a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, that meaning exists on multiple levels (simultaneously). Psychology needs to have an ontology of the self that makes sense of and helps us think through these kinds of issues instead of imposing a kind of coherence or univocality upon the self that flattens out the complexity of what human beings are. I've found Mark Bickhard and Robert Campbell's interactivist model of the Knowing Levels to be a particularly helpful way of elaborating the basic insights of Heidegger into engaged agency and putting them into a developmental framework. In a special issue of Theory and Psychology (2008, vol 18, no 5) on positive psychology, Robert and I tried to provide a metatheory for positive psychology that is ontologically more sound. In the same issue there are a number of compelling critiques including the critique Sarah Hickenbottom and I did of the ethnocentrism of positive psychology. I'd be happy to send you copies if you think they'd be helpful.

All the best,

John

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 [Comment by Paul Wong](#) by Louise S. [2014, Oct 25]

Thanks so much for your thoughtful response, John. I must confess that I literally felt nauseating reading Laura King because of her shallowness, smugness and dismissive attitude towards humanistic and existential psychology. I feel the same way when I read much for the writing by positive psychologists, who all have caught the same disease.

Yes, please send me you papers.

Paul
www.drpaulwong.com

 [Comment by Louise Sundararajan](#) by Louise S. [2014, Oct 25]

Dear Paul,

I resonate with you and John's sense of nausea toward this paper entitled "Life is Pretty Meaningful," of which my critique, if I were to write one, would be titled: "Life is pretty Meaningful, but this Study is Not." The authors claim that

"Large scale representative surveys and numerous studies of meaning in life suggest that meaning in life is widespread and relatively high."

What does it mean to say that "meaning in life is commonplace"? Are the authors talking about meaning construction being commonplace? In what way is this a new discovery? Humans are meaning making animals. So what else is new?

Your points are well taken. But I would like to argue for a more nuanced formulation of reductionism. In what way is this approach to meaning reductionistic? You mentioned those "silly tests." I would say that the psychological measures and tests are not necessarily

reductionistic in and of themselves. Rather, it is the interpretation of the results that can be reductionistic. For instance, this study focuses on the cognitive dimension of meaning, consisting of purpose, significance and coherence. This would not be reductionistic, if the researcher acknowledges the fact that there are other dimensions of meaning such as self transcendence that lies outside the pale of her measures. But this did not happen, hence the reductionism. Your argument would have been made easier, had there been studies of the structure of meaning to delineate the multiple dimensions of the phenomena. For instance, the cognitive dimension and the spiritual dimension of self-transcendence tap into very different kinds of meaning. Along the cognitive dimension, meanings are constructed by the mind, just as God is made in the image of man. Along the spiritual/self transcendent dimension, the first question of faith is not "Who am I?" so much as "For whom am I?". Thus w/man is made in the image of God, and meaning lies in transcending all the self-serving meanings manufactured by the mind.

Finally, the real problem lies not in this silly study on meaning, so much as in the editor who published it. The authors asked "Where are the French existentialists?" I ask: Where is the responsible editor who would have invited an expert on existentialism to review this paper? But this did not happen. If you write a research paper on rats, it would be reviewed by a specialist, I am sure. But if a psychologist makes an observation about Chinese poetry, or Heidegger, or Maslow, more often than not such observations are not reviewed by specialists on China or Humanistic psychology. Obviously these specialties don't count. This, I think, is the main reason why papers of sub-standard quality such as this one by Laura King gets published in the flagship journal, the American Psychologist. It is a tragedy for the field.

Thanks for the good work,

Louise
louiselu@frontiernet.net

 [Comment by Judith Gibbons](#) by Louise S. [2014, Oct 25]

Dear all,

I have enjoyed this lively discussion, and it prompted me to read the paper on "Life is meaningful" and I agree with many (most) of the comments made by members of this listserve. However, with respect to Louise's placing the blame on editors, I would like to comment. As the editor of an APA journal I often have to make 20 requests for review before I am able to convince three scholars to review a manuscript. By the time I reach number 20 or 21 on the list, the reviewers might not be so expert as I would like. So, I respectfully ask that if a manuscript is in your area of expertise, please do not decline reviews. Our field will only advance if we all take on that responsibility.

Best to all,

Judith Gibbons, Editor
International Perspectives in Psychology

Judith L. Gibbons, Ph.D.

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 [Comment by Paul TP Wong](#) by Louise S. [2014, Oct 25]

Dear Judith,

I have served as a reviewer for more than 30 years. Currently, I still review many papers. Sometimes my reviews are two or three pages long. I think the authors deserve a conscientious and responsible review. I have also served as an editor for many years and I know the difficulty of recruiting competent reviewers. But the difficulty of getting reviewers is no excuse for publishing papers without proper review. I don't believe that the AP editor has actually contacted any experts in humanistic-existential psychology to review Heintzelman and King's paper, which grossly misrepresents our views. In that sense, Louise is correct in criticizing the editor for being biased toward positive psychology and giving positive psychology a pass, even when it has major flaws.

Kind regards,
Paul
www.drpaulwong.com

 [Comment by Judith L. Gibbons](#) by Louise S. [2014, Oct 26]

Paul,

Thanks for your message. I am happy to hear that you do so much reviewing. And I do not disagree with your claim that editors are, in the end, responsible for what is published. I just wanted to present an editor's point of view along with encouraging scholars to take on reviews.

Thanks again.

Warm regards,
Judith

Judith L. Gibbons, Ph.D.

