

Astrology and Meaningfulness: Exploring the Value of Astrology for Finding Meaning

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Abstract

Ample research has been conducted to test astrology's construct validity, but little attention has been given to the appeal of astrology as a system of meaning. In spite of prevalent scientific repudiation, astrology remains a popular system of knowledge for apprehending the meaning of personal experiences. This research project employed a phenomenological method to investigate the experience of people who frequently turn to astrology to find meaning and gain self-knowledge. The participants of the study (n = 4) were asked to describe their experience of using astrology for understanding their life experience or themselves. The research distilled the following essential themes common to all participants: a) meanings are relative and relational to a larger context; b) new meanings emerge in the process of comparison between literal experiences and symbolic descriptions; c) astrology serves as a system of spiritual or philosophical guidance; d) the study of astrology has psychological benefits (such as verification of self-concept, extended self-knowledge, a sense of purposefulness, and certainty); e) astrological symbols are fluid, evolving, manifold, and metaphoric—qualities suitable for finding meanings; and f) understanding of self, significant others, and/or cultural trends contributes to the general sense of meaningfulness.

Keywords: astrology, meaningfulness, phenomenology, finding meaning, symbolic and projective meaning

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to find essential themes in the articulated experience of people who turn to astrology to find meaning in their lives. This analysis aids the understanding of astrology's appeal and its potential benefits as a system of meaning; it also illuminates how

astrology lends itself to the psychologically significant process of finding meaning. Using the qualitative phenomenological method, four in-depth interviews were analyzed in order to identify the essential themes in the process of finding meaning with the aid of astrology. The sample consisted of two men and two women, ranging in age from 33 to 64 years old. Three participants were Caucasian, and one southern Asian. The author is not aware of the international research on astrology's appeal for finding meaning, but she hypothesizes that the results are generalizable, as they align with those of other studies conducted in the USA and Europe on the reasons for astrology's appeal.¹

History of Research on Astrology

More than 2000 years ago, Ptolemy pointed out that “astrology could not claim to be an exact science like astronomy, since astronomy dealt exclusively with the abstract mathematics of the perfect celestial movements, while astrology applied that knowledge to the necessarily less predictable imperfect arena of terrestrial and human activity.”² This point remains relevant today, as astrology is generally considered a pseudoscience because it cannot demonstrate exact results when tested with the methods of natural sciences. As a discipline that deals with the changeable nature of human behavior, character, and experiences, both external and internal, astrology is similar to other social sciences, such as psychology and sociology, and cannot be reduced exclusively to objectively identifiable and quantifiable variables. Of those scientific studies of astrology conducted in the last 70 years, the vast majority were based on a quantifiable approach to testing astrology's construct validity, such as correlations between the psychological scores of extroversion/introversion and sun signs, or between the moon cycles and the number of homicides/suicides. Such studies produced ambiguous results and are generally credited as proof of astrology's invalidity.³

Frankl⁴ discussed the idea of *dimensional ontology*—the analysis of a multidimensional phenomenon from a dimension lower than its own may produce ambiguous and contradictory results. Dimensional ontology occurs when research methods rooted in the natural science paradigm and designed to test observable and quantifiable data are applied to a multidimensional system of knowledge such as astrology. The natural scientific approach to social disciplines has been criticized for its inability to study subjective internal experiences, as opposed to observable external behaviors. In the past 50 years, psychology as a science has expanded in its theories and

research methods from a purely behaviorist approach to a cognitive, and even existential, humanistic perspective; nonetheless, the natural scientific paradigm remains predominant in application to psychological research. Such an approach is concerned with the cause-and-effect (or stimulus–response) relationship between two variables, where one is tested for its influence on the other; and in psychology, it is the connection between observable and measurable variables and the resulting behaviors.⁵

A qualitative research methodology has been developing in response to a need for investigation of subjective and internal experiences, or experiences that cannot be understood or studied by observing behavioral expressions only. Phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl as a methodology that aimed to understand and contact phenomena as they are lived and experienced. Giorgi and other social science researchers further developed and adapted this methodology to the needs of psychological and social research.⁶ Phenomenology approaches the studied phenomenon as a system and is not based on the principles of object/subject dualism or causality. The phenomenological psychological method has been chosen for this research as particularly suitable for the systemic, symbolic, and metaphoric nature of astrology.

Study design

Four participants ($n = 4$) participated in the study. The participants' knowledge of astrology varied from intermediate to professional. All participants had some form of higher education ranging from a bachelor's to a doctoral degree. Two were divorced and two unmarried; they ranged in age from 33 to 64 years old. Three participants were Caucasian, and one South Asian. There were two males and two females. During a semi-structured one-hour in-person interview, the participants were asked to provide a few examples of how they used astrology to understand significant life experiences. They were also invited to speak about the benefits and drawbacks of using astrology in their lives. Their narratives were recorded and

transcribed into hundreds of pages of data, which was later analyzed according to the phenomenological methodology.

Because of its emphasis on the participants' lived experiences, the phenomenological method does not require a large number of participants. The life experiences provide ample raw data for investigation. The focus of the qualitative phenomenological study is not to statistically prove or disprove some phenomena, as was discussed earlier in this article, but to investigate and distill the essential themes present in the studied experience. The validity of the qualitative study findings is in their practical applicability to other phenomena of similar nature (e.g., meaning making, symbolic meaning making, and value of symbols for meaning making). The results of this study find support in previous research, which focused on the reasons for astrology's appeal and popularity¹ and the process of meaning making.^{7,8} For a complete discussion of this study's methodology, study design, data treatment, and limitations, interested readers are referred to the published dissertation by the author of this article.⁹

The phenomenological method requires the following steps in treating the data: (a) bracketing; (b) getting a sense of the whole from the entire description and then dividing the description into meaning units; (c) expressing meaning units in a psychological language; (d) reducing the essential meaning units, or *constituents*, pertaining to the phenomena studied; (e) obtaining a description of a situated structure; and (f) obtaining a description of a general structure by comparing the situated structures for the repeated meaning units.

The essence of the phenomenological method is *reducing* (eliminating) nonessential elements in the narrative to those which are essential or, in phenomenological terms, *invariant*. In other words, the final description, called the *structure of meaning*, cannot be removed from the individual narrative without altering its essential meaning. After individual narratives have

been reduced, the resulting structures are compared to one another until a final reduction is made. The final structure contains the key themes common to all or most individual structures and captures the essence of the phenomena under investigation. In this study, the final structure contains all the key themes in the experience of finding meaning with astrology. These themes will be presented and discussed in the following section.

This study had a few delimitations. One delimitation was that the sample chosen for the study was limited to people knowledgeable about and favorably disposed to astrology. The positive regard of astrology was implied in the fact that the participants had employed it to interpret their life experiences. Consequently, the results may not be generalized to people who do not believe in astrology or do not know astrology well. Although the researcher supposes that astrology may be valuable to people who are skeptical or unfamiliar with its principles, the nature of the study excluded this group from consideration. Future research into the value of metaphor and symbolic meaning for finding meaning may illuminate this issue more fully.

Results

Meanings are Relative to a Broader Context

One of the main findings of this research is that meanings are relative; in other words, new meanings are found in relation to a broader philosophical or spiritual context provided by astrology. The new meanings emerge in the process of comparison between subjective understanding of one's experience and symbolic meaning associated with astrological symbolism such as planetary transits concurrent with the experience, or natal chart interpretations applied to the concrete situations. When accurate correlations are found, the participants' subjective experience becomes illuminated, which produces a shift in understanding from ego-centric and

subjective to a broader, Universe-centric perspective. A few examples from the narratives shared by the participants will illustrate this theme.

For example, MaryAnn was deceived in financial matters by someone she had trusted. She later made sense out of this experience by correlating it to the transit of Neptune over her natal Mercury. MaryAnn saw it as a process during which she had to overcome confusion, lack of mental clarity, deception, and change her response to a very challenging situation. Similarly, Iris understood her challenging experience of being committed to a mental health institution when she reflected on the meaning of Pluto transit over her natal Sun. She viewed Pluto as a “destroyer” of her old sense of self, devastating her life but ultimately bringing her on the path of psychological healing and a new professional purpose. Astrology provided a unique framework within which the participants’ challenging experience had a positive purpose.

Astrology as a System of Guidance

The second finding of this study is that astrology is utilized as a system of spiritual or philosophical guidance, for understanding the participant’s “life lessons” and intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges and dynamics, as well as finding a sense of direction and purpose. Most participants came to astrology not having found a philosophy—a system of meaning—that would enable them to put their life experiences in broader spiritual context. Some participants (Iris, Alex) were exposed to purely materialistic philosophies (that could not explain their internal experiences), while others (Hardy) became disenchanted with the religions of their fathers and turned to astrology to find a philosophical system of meaning. For example, Hardy explained how he turned to astrology for a sense of meaningfulness:

I didn’t have—and I think this is true of very many people in our Western culture right now—I didn’t have a lot of signposts to guide me, having been disenchanted with the belief systems that my forefathers gave me. I had to find my own way. And I think it’s important, though, that there is meaning in this life . . . And partly what gives me that

feeling of the meaning of life is my studies of astrology and my studies of how the universe seems to chime with the efforts of people as they open themselves to a spiritual direction. So I believe there are no coincidences. I believe everything happens for a purpose. If somebody has a stroke, it might be there's a higher purpose involved and they can benefit from it. So that's a very powerful, useful philosophy and works for me. And a lot of it comes through my work with astrology.

For Hardy and MaryAnn, the professional astrologers, astrology serves as a spiritual system that informs their philosophy of life. They see the Universe as purposeful, and subject to spiritual as well as physical laws. Individual life purpose is recognized as one's own evolution and betterment. This perspective reduces negative feelings connected with challenging and stressful experiences, which are perceived as ultimately beneficial for the participants.

For instance, MaryAnn sees challenging situations and events in her life as something that she needed to experience for her evolution and growth. She shared:

I do believe is that we cannot avoid certain lessons. Okay—so I chose to have that experience with my mother. I chose to have that experience with my ex-husband. I did choose that, I do believe that, and I do believe that I chose my birth chart, and I chose those transits to happen when they did to trigger those events because these are lessons that I had to learn. But I don't believe that I was victimized by that, because—I could have been, if I didn't use the energy well, but instead I look at it as an opportunity to grow as a person and to grow in my own level of awareness.

The participants tend to attribute positive meaning to even the most challenging events when they view them as necessary and serving their higher good.

Psychological Benefits: Self-Identification, Self-Validation, and Others

The study of astrology provides a number of psychological benefits for the participants. All of them are particularly interested in gaining in-depth self-knowledge. Recognition of the most essential psychological qualities is a valued psychological process that contributes to self-identification and self-validation. Self-understanding eases inner tensions, promotes self-acceptance, and often encourages positive changes in behavior. For example, Alex stated:

I used my birth charts to understand my character tendencies or temperament. For instance, one of the aspects I have [is between] Saturn in Aries and Moon in Sagittarius. I use it kind of to explain my drive for independence and freedom. At the same time, there are upsetting tendencies, like the Neptune rising in Scorpio. It leads toward a tendency towards idealism, daydreaming, and also romanticizing. And it actually tends to upset or counteract the fiery tendencies.

All four participants look to astrology for positive encouragement, psychological support, and a sense of hope. Three out of four participants reaffirm their talents and a sense of purpose. All participants view astrological knowledge as psychologically beneficial, although Iris fears that over-conceptualizing her experiences with astrological meanings would distract her from gaining insight from living in the moment. At the same time, when she finds affirmation of her qualities or positive encouragement, she finds astrology beneficial.

In spite of a positive evaluation of astrology's benefits, two out of four participants experienced uncertainty and fear when faced with ambiguous or negative interpretations. For example, MaryAnn feared that the placement of Uranus on the descendent of her natal chart represented a sudden separation and even the possible death of her husband.

Meaning and Perceptions of Certainty/Uncertainty

Astrology is reassuring for all participants when it reduces uncertainty. Coping with challenging experiences is easier when their timing and duration can be approximated and their archetypal nature understood. MaryAnn provided the following explanation:

The more I use [astrology], the more I can see the cyclical patterns of when something will begin and when it will end. So right now, for example, I am going through a significant legal battle and a divorce. And I am using astrology to track my cycles and to see that, yes, there will be an ending to this. And what I am tracking is, transiting Pluto is now square my natal Venus, [and] transiting Saturn is opposing my natal Venus at the same time. This is a very difficult time for love and money, when Venus is afflicted. But I can see, as an astrologer, when these cycles would end, and that helps me know that, okay, my divorce and the finances will be settled by this time.

The occasional ambiguity about astrological meanings and negative interpretations produces feelings of anxiety. This usually coincides with attributing unfavorable literal meanings to astrological symbolism, or self-identification with undesirable qualities. For example, Iris sometimes identifies with the negative interpretations of her chart. She explained:

I think [I often] constrain myself or judge myself or [am] being harsh on myself. . . . Or I take the idea of having a chart ruler in detriment and use it to make myself feel bad. Also, the Moon in a masculine sign, I use that to make myself feel bad. And then all those planets in the third house—oh, it's weak. I can really judge myself in a spiritual way with those kinds of pronouncements, and so I have to really—I can say I should be careful around it, but I'm not careful around it. I'm really hard on myself with those things.

Finding meaning as a process, however, reduces negative feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Finding meaning occurs when a specific experience is understood as a purposeful component of a larger schema with which it is interrelated.

Symbolic Retrospective Process

The participants most often derive meaning from astrological symbolism by applying it to past experiences in hindsight. Alex shared:

One thing I am doing in most cases, unless something is very outstanding, I try to use astrology more in retrospect, to make sense of events that happened . . . in [the] recent past. Unless something extreme [is going on], I try not to base my behavior in the future based on astrological predictions, because I am afraid that part of it [laughing a little] may be a self-fulfilling prophecy, that to some extent I may create my future. And I am even resistant to the notion of doing that.

Interestingly, the participants turn to astrology for predicting the future infrequently; more commonly, they apply astrology to past experience, although all four consider transits of planets meaningful for understanding past and future experiences and occasionally use other predictive branches of astrology, such as horary astrology or progressions. No participants base their day-to-day choices and behavior on astrology; rather, they refer to it as a broad

metaphorical system to put experiences in perspective. However, the participants' insights gained through astrology often lead to transformation of meaning and changes in their behavior.

Symbolic Meanings Are Evolving and Manifold

The meanings associated with astrological symbolism are evolving, not fixed. They shift from literal to symbolic, from internal to external, and from superficial to more in-depth—and vice versa. Multiple meanings often emerge from the same symbolism, which may represent psychological traits as well as external relationships and circumstances. Astrology is unique for providing symbolism that not only gives archetypal representation of internal and external experiences but implies their deep interconnectedness. For example, MaryAnn explained how the meaning shifted first from literal to symbolic when she considered Uranus on the descendant in her natal chart:

At the very beginning of studying astrology, I saw Uranus right on my descendant, and I thought my husband was going to die; and I got freaked out and I started saying, "Oh, my God, raise your life insurance, you're gonna die." There were so many silly things like that. But since I was so new to studying astrology, I didn't understand that that symbolized an archetype of me projecting my own need to be a free, innovative, individual person onto the spouse; and because I was not in touch with that need, I attracted a disruptive relationship to get me in touch with the fact that I am an unusual person with an eccentric interest. Okay, that's Uranus on the descendant. But that's me. It's my chart.

Over time, meanings tend to become more symbolic and encompass broader understanding of the experience; they also shift as the participant deepens or expands his or her original understanding. Evolving meanings allow for an expanding and evolving self-concept and for changing behavioral dynamics when one recognizes they no longer work.

Understanding Self and Others

All participants employ astrology to evaluate areas of compatibility and tension in personal relationships, to understand other people better, or to recognize specific patterns in

relating. Astrology provides another dimension for understanding the potential compatibility between two people, but it does not manifest in a predictable manner for all participants. Alex said:

Well, I know sometimes I use astrology to check my compatibility with either a close friend or a dating partner, just to see what kind of tension I may be holding or what compatibility there is. And I found that it works very accurately, and the accuracy is pretty uncanny, because it exactly identifies the compatibility areas, and also there is tension.

Often, meanings are found in retrospect and are not fixed. Occasionally the potential of a new relationship is evaluated.

Cultural Context

Two out of four participants consider astrology an important source of archetypal information that applies to individual as well as cultural and social developments. Hardy, for example, is presently working on attributing a new archetypal meaning to recently discovered asteroid Eris by correlating historical and social occurrences of current times to its influence. Iris and Hardy consider the meaning of astrological symbols enigmatic, which draws unending interest to a deeper understanding of their cultural and personal significance. Iris explained:

You know, the planets are very conveniently named for the gods and goddesses. So it's very clear that they have relationships to patterns of energy that are meaningful or significant in groups of people over long periods of time. And you know, when you have that kind of pattern, you can call it an archetype—something that is transpersonal that is influential in more ways than we can understand, but we're always drawn to try to understand them.

Because of its archetypal nature, the meaning found through astrology is applicable to individual experience and to the culture at large.

Astrology as a Psychological Tool

All participants consider astrology an invaluable tool for in-depth psychological work for its sophisticated symbolic representation of psychological dynamics and complexes. Developing

self-knowledge, identifying priorities, and becoming aware of the spectrum of possible expression are meanings found through astrology that contribute to healing and internal changes.

For example, Iris stated:

I had been going to psychiatrists for years at that point, and never had I had interpretations that felt like they actually had any psychological sophistication or literacy. So in astrology was really the first time, that I had found psychology to offer something. I knew that it could, but it just never had until I found these interpretations and I really liked them.

Recognition of the dominant psychological dynamics may or may not lead to immediate changes in behavior. Some participants feel strengthened psychologically by understanding how to work on personal psychological complexes.

Conclusions

In the introductory stage of this study, two questions were posed: (a) Why do people find astrology subjectively meaningful? and (b) What are the benefits of working with a complex symbol system such as astrology in understanding self and others? Both questions are answered on the basis of this study's findings.

The participants of the current study find astrology meaningful for a multitude of reasons. They typically become interested in astrology after having been unable to find a system of meaning that would provide a broader spiritual perspective on their experiences. All four participants need such a perspective in order to orient themselves amidst chaotic or stressful life experiences, and to find a sense of purposefulness and direction. For example, by reflecting on the archetypal pattern of Neptune in the eighth house of her chart, MaryAnn found meaning in the experiences of being twice deceived in financial matters. Alex gained deeper understanding of his internal psychological dynamics of relating by pondering the significance of the challenging Pluto–Moon and Pluto–Venus aspects in his chart. Iris viewed her stressful

experience of being committed to a mental institution as a manifestation of the Pluto archetype destroying her old identity but ultimately leading her in a new direction of growth and healing. Hardy reaffirmed his purpose in life as an educator and entrepreneur and found, in astrology, a spiritually based philosophy of life.

Astrology is a suitable system for philosophical and spiritual guidance because it provides a broad metaphoric, metaphysical, and symbolic frame of reference for understanding life experiences. In addition, astrology provides a symbolic language that is particularly suitable for finding meaning because of its fluidity; holistic, metaphoric, and evolving nature; and plurality. Fluidity is a process that occurs when participants compare the literal and symbolic meanings of a particular experience and, as a result, reorganize their original understanding. This aspect of meaning-making is considered essential by many theorists and researchers of meaning-making.^{10,11,12,13}

All participants began using astrological language quite literally, but over time their understanding evolved and shifted to a much deeper symbolic understanding of their conscious experiences and the unconscious psychological dynamics. Shifts between the literal and symbolic meanings allow for changing perspectives and the alignment of one's subjective experience with the broader archetypal, universal forces. In other words, such shifts enable seeing one's experience as a part of a wider whole. A variety of meanings from global to literal and from internal to external may be derived because of astrology's metaphoric and multidimensional symbolism.

All four participants particularly value astrology as a symbolic system of reference that aids in-depth psychological understanding and evolving self-knowledge. The study of astrology and its application to life experience provide many psychological benefits, including but not

limited to self-validation and verification, increased feelings of certainty and purpose, positive encouragement and hopefulness, and a sense of meaningfulness. Feelings of certainty that arise from finding meaning in otherwise ambiguous experiences are psychologically beneficial and indicate that the feelings of certainty and meaningfulness are interconnected. Potential problems likely for people with a less identified or disturbed sense of self include negative identification with undesirable qualities or projected literal negative interpretations, as well as over-conceptualization or dependency on concrete astrological meanings.

Working with symbols to construct meaning is particularly beneficial because symbols represent archetypal and cultural meanings that are fluid, holistic, and multidimensional. Comparisons between literal experiences and symbolic meanings enable shifts in perspective from an ego-centered to a broader holistic point of view which, in turn, brings feelings of meaningfulness and psychological wholeness. In addition, astrological symbols allow us to access personal, interpersonal, and cultural archetypes—all three appear to be important for a sense of meaningfulness.

In addition to being potent metaphorical expressions for self-understanding, astrological symbols are commonly used for evaluating key strengths and weaknesses in relationships. Astrological symbols provide an archetypal, symbolic perspective on relationship dynamics, while at the same time capturing some of their concrete and fundamental essences.

In my research, I have shown that meaning-making functions of astrological symbols are helpful for healing and contain numerous psychological benefits. However, the meaning-making function of symbols may be enhanced further by their use within a psychotherapeutic context. For example, Alex had insights into his issue with boundaries in intimate relationships, as symbolized by Venus in Pisces, and his simultaneous desire for freedom and independence, as

symbolized by the Moon in Sagittarius. A psychotherapist may use these symbols for transformative process rather than the merely reflective aspect of finding meaning, which would make the use of astrological symbols more teleological, as opposed to merely descriptive, or etiological.

Noteworthy is the fact that in this study, the participants who were professional astrologers (Hardy and MaryAnn) more frequently referred to astrology for transformation and growth (teleological approach), especially when they employed astrology as a system of guidance. Two other participants (Alex and Iris), who were not professional astrologers but had substantial familiarity with astrology, also looked to it for guidance but most commonly used symbols in an explanatory and descriptive way (etiological approach). Occasionally, the latter two participants had transformative insights and found new meaning in their life experiences, such as when Iris began to consider her experience of being in a mental institution as having a beneficial purpose for her self-understanding and healing. Alex understood the psychological tension in his relationship with his mother that led to the increased efforts in finding balance between his drive for freedom, on the one hand, and intimacy and responsibility, on the other.

It appears that the transformative or guiding element of astrology coincided with increasing knowledge of the subject. In a psychotherapeutic context, the therapist may use a symbolic process to inspire the transformative, teleological aspect of astrology rather than simply describing psychological dynamics and core issues.

At the conclusion of this research project, the author remains fascinated with the particular significance of astrology as a spiritual guidance system and, more generally, with the correlation between a sense of meaningfulness, spirituality, and psychological well-being. Some recent studies have explored the psychological connection between spirituality and stress

adjustment.¹³ Future research could explore the essential significance of spirituality for a meaningful perception of life, and feelings of contentment and emotional well-being. Further research may be needed to investigate whether the findings of this study would not significantly deviate between people of different cultural backgrounds, or between those who have an interest in astrology and those who turn to other symbolic methods for finding meaning.

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