The role of a sense of meaning in the adjustment of first-year students: A qualitative analysis

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OVERVIEW

➢ The work of Frankl inspired some researchers, to investigate the concept of meaning/ purpose in life and how it influences adjustment and general functioning.

➢ Thus, a number of studies argue for the mediating effects of meaning in life on well-being.

➢ The majority of these investigations used the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964) to assess Frankl's construct of meaning in life.

➢ Research studies have found that students with a high sense of meaning cope much better when exposed to stressors, than those with low sense of meaning (Courtenay & Truluck, 1997; Edwards & Holden, 2001; Hullett, 1994).

➢ Students with high sense of meaning also engage in behaviour that lead to academic success (Hermon & Hazler, 1999; Prochaska, 1995).

AIM OF THE STUDY

➢ This study was designed to investigate the role played by a sense of meaning in the adjustment of first-year students.

➢ The researcher postulates that, irrespective of the stressors they are exposed to, students with a high sense of meaning are much better adjusted, than those with low sense of meaning.

METHOD

■ An exploratory design was used.

■ Data was collected by means of

1) focus groups and

2) semi-structured interviews.

Subjects

■ A stratified sample of two groups

1. 10 students with high PIL-scores (5 males and 5 females)

2. 10 students with low PIL-scores (5 males and 5 females)

■ Selected from 101 first-year students in the Faculty of Management Sciences, at the Central University of Technology, Free State (Welkom Campus).

■ Age range =17 to 22 years (age mean = 19.38 years)

■ Means of communication= English (participants listed their home language as South Sotho, Xhosa, Tswana, Afrikaans, Tsonga and Zulu).

Measures

- *Purpose in Life Test (PIL)* of Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969). This was administered to measure the extent to which students experience a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.
- *Focus groups.* Two focus group sessions, comprised of a brief scenario and 16 open-ended questions (compiled by the researcher) were used.
- *Individual semi-structured interviews.* For individual interviews, the researcher compiled 25 open-ended questions to help the participants elaborate further on themes that emerged in the focus group session. The questions were centred on *creating meaning.*

The questions were grouped according to the following topics:

- Stressors they are exposed to
- Coping mechanisms
- Support systems
- Creating meaning

Procedure

- Permission was obtained from campus management to conduct this study.
- The Purpose in Life Test (PIL) was administered to all first-year students in the Faculty of Management.
- One hundred and one (101) students participated by completing and returning the test.
- Each participant signed a consent.
- A stratified sample of two groups, that is, 10 students with high PIL-scores (High Meaning Group) and 10 students with low PIL-scores (Low Meaning Group) was selected. This was one to explore differences between students with a high sense of meaning and those with a low sense of meaning.

- Each focus group was presented with a brief scenario aimed at eliciting the participants' comments on factors contributing to their sense of meaning.
- In addition 16 open-ended questions were compiled to help the participants elaborate further on the scenario.
- Individual semi-structured interviews were also conducted to investigate the subjective experiences of respondents on the construct on meaning in life, specifically their value systems.
- All of the qualitative interviews were tape-recorded, with the participants' permission, and each participant signed a consent form allowing the researcher to use the transcripts for research purposes.

- Data was analysed and interpreted by an independent researcher.
- A computer software package (NUD*IST programme) (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997) was used to analyse data.
- In interpreting the results, the independent researcher conducted a discourse analysis to look for themes relating to students' experience of meaning.

RESULTS

In comparing the two groups:

- Mean for participants in the High Meaning Group is 133.6, or 21.6 points higher than the score indicating a definite purpose in life, and
- Mean for participants in the Low Meaning Group is 77.6, or 14.4 points lower than the score indicating a lack of meaning.
- The PIL score range for participants in the High Meaning Group is from 128 to 140, and
- for participants in the Low Meaning Group is from 62 to 91.

Analysis of interviews

> In the interviews with the students, several typical subjects kept recurring. In the process of coding, these were sorted into meaningful groups and subgroups.

OBSTACLES

The following are the obstacles the students were faced with:

- Death of either a parent or sibling;
- Break-up of families through divorce;
- Families (parents) forcing their will on students in terms of where and what they should study;
- Being out of contact with old school friends;
- Negative influence of the peer group;
- Increase in responsibility and concomitant self-control (making their own decisions about how best to spend their time);
- Dealing with greater independence;
- Financial difficulties;
- Finding accommodation (lack of hostel facilities in the institution);
- Transport problems;
- Being separated from their families;
- Studying a second or third choice course; and
- Alcohol and marijuana abuse.

While participants from High and Low Meaning Groups equally experienced the above-mentioned challenges and difficulties; it seems as if students from the Low Meaning Group found it more difficult to adjust at university as compared to those from the High Meaning Group.

> With regard to how they coped with challenges, participants from Low Meaning Group mentioned the following.

- One student said: *"I was not able to cope with them"*.
- While another said: *"My parents pushed me a lot, they pushed me and I was with my friend who did well at school they tried to motivate me"*.
- The third student put it this way: *"I didn't have that thing to go and sit and study, so there was a lot of work here and I didn't know what to do man, but I tried"*.

COPING MECHANISMS AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

- Although all students have to find ways to cope with these challenges, the sad fact is that not all do. It is thus important to know what coping mechanisms and support systems are available to the students, and how well they are functioning.

Coping Mechanisms

The following are the coping mechanisms students relied on:

- Religious faith;
- Harbouring positive attitudes;
- Having patience and perseverance, even when tempted to lose hope;
- Taking personal responsibility for a solution;
- Being honest with oneself;
- Seeking professional counselling;
- Withdraw from negative influences, be it friends, parties, alcohol, and so forth;
- Being humorous;
- Using substances for relaxation;
- Self-acceptance; and
- Setting time aside for reflection.

> It is important to note that most of the coping mechanisms mentioned above were found to be unique to either the High or Low Meaning Groups. The exceptions to this were humour, positive attitudes, responsibility, (amongst high meaning respondents), honesty, counselling, and drugs (amongst low meaning respondents).

Support Systems

- Students relied on a number of support systems as they met the challenges of university life.
- Students' families were their most important sources of support and motivation, and the ones they wanted to please most;
- Having friends at university was very important to the students;
- Having role models; and
- Making use of professional counselling on campus.

- Interestingly, most students from the High Meaning Group chose family members as role models, while most students from the Low Meaning Group chose celebrity personalities as their role models.

CREATING MEANING

Values

- The literature has revealed that meaning in life is found through different values, i.e. creative, experiential, and attitudinal values.
- It should be noted that both the High and Low Meaning Groups expressed all three sets of values.

Some differences, however, did stand out.

- Firstly, amongst those who gave expression to creative values, all of those who could not see meaning in their studies were from the Low Meaning Group.
- Secondly, almost all participants from the Low Meaning Group indicated that the money they will make and/or status that they will gain after completing their studies is more important than the service they will provide. Of significance is that, even though participants from the High Meaning Group also experienced financial difficulties, none of them indicated that they see meaning in the money they will make after completing their studies.
- Lastly, amongst those students who gave expression to attitudinal values, all those who struggled with them were from the Low Meaning Group.

Circumstances

Literature also mentioned that there are five circumstances that lead to a stronger sense of meaning and purpose in life:

- self-discovery;
- choices;
- uniqueness;
- responsibility; and
- self-transcendence (rising above circumstances).

Notably, self-transcendence was the only of the five sets of circumstances reflected upon only by students from the High Meaning Group.

Losing Meaning

- Generally, life situations (challenges, losses, problems), which the students had not been able to cope with, resulted in their lives having a sense of meaninglessness.
- Again here, it is notable that while not all of the students from the Low Meaning Group expressed these feelings of meaninglessness (some said that life did, have meaning for them), none of the students from the High Meaning Group grappled with these issues. Although they also had experienced setbacks, life still had meaning for them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- The results of the present study revealed that even though respondents in the Low and High Meaning Groups were equally exposed to stressors; high meaning students coped much better, despite being exposed to stressors.

The following are some of the distinct characteristics of high meaning respondents.

- They harbour positive attitudes.
- Such attitudes make them to see meaning in their studies despite being exposed to stressors. They are able to turn defeat into victory.
- Their motivation to undertake activities comes from within. Their focus is more on the service they will provide after completing their studies, rather than the money they will make.
- Because their lives are filled with meaning, they do not resort to drugs and other substances to find meaning.
- They are self-transcendent, which is the specifically human capacity to reach beyond themselves and act for the sake of someone they care about or for the sake of a course that means something to them.

From this we can conclude that first-year students with a high sense of meaning presented with effective coping skills, which enabled them to adjust much better at varsity, irrespective of the stressors they are exposed to.

The following are some of the distinct characters of low meaning respondents.

- They abuse substances like alcohol and marijuana.
- When exposed to stressors they are unable to see meaning in them. For example, one respondent mentioned non-specific "wounds" caused by "difficult times" which had not healed, and which made the respondent's life not worth living.
- They find it difficult to set aside time for reflection, because they think of bad things from the past or they experience loneliness.
- They are more extrinsically motivated, e.g for them meaning in their studies comes from the money and prestige they will gain after completing.

Because of their existential vacuum, first-year students with low sense of meaning, find it difficult to adjust at university.

- The results of this study should be interpreted against the following limitations; the sample size was small and it was taken from one faculty, in one institution. Irrespective of the above-mentioned limitations, it is envisaged that the outcomes of the research could have relevance to other universities. For example, university personnel could assess all students in the beginning of their study course with the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and try to identify those with low PIL scores, to participate in programs or interventions aimed at promoting their resources or coping skills.

Thank you