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Exploring Frankl's Purpose in Life with College Students

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Abstract

This exploratory study of 354 college sophomores was designed to determine if there was a relationship between a student's activities on a college campus and his/her sense of purpose in life using a model based on psychologist Viktor Frankl's (1959) work.

In recent years, articles about spirituality in college students have appeared with greater frequency in student affairs literature. Love (2001), Parks (2000), Tisdell (2003), and other scholars have increasingly studied the role of spirituality and faith in adult and higher education. Although many draw a distinction between spirituality and religion, most of the articles discuss establishing some form of relationship with a celestial otherness. That may concern student affairs professionals uncomfortable with the idea of promoting religion or belief in a higher being. But, central to much of the recent spirituality research is the notion of helping students create meaning in their lives and finding their place in the larger world. To this point, Moran (2001) recently called attention to the work of Viktor Frankl (1959, 1979, 1984, 1997), a psychologist who studied how people develop purpose in life without the connotations of a celestial other.

Frankl's Purpose in Life

Frankl made a substantial contribution in developing a theoretical foundation for studying the development of purpose in life, and has been considered the preeminent scholar on this subject in the field of psychology (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Frankl (1959, 1979, 1984, 1997) first explored and defined purpose in life in the clinical literature over 40 years ago, and is generally considered the father of a form of psychotherapy conceived of as therapy through meaning. Frankl's initial ideas of meaning or purpose in life were developed prior to World War II. Those ideas were reinforced by his experiences as a prisoner in a concentration camp (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), revealed in his acclaimed Holocaust testimony, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959). He believed an individual discovered meaning in several ways. The first way, which he felt was quite obvious, was "by creating a work or doing a deed" (Frankl, 1984, p. 115). Purpose could stem from an individual's work or vocation. Frankl also believed that meaning could be derived from experiencing "nature and culture" or "by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness—by loving him" (p. 115). Finally, Frankl believed individuals found purpose

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even “when confronted with a hopeless situation” (p. 116)—what matters is how a person transforms that personal tragedy into achievement.

Frankl held that every individual has an innate desire to develop a purpose in life, which he termed *will to meaning*. “With this we designate man’s striving to fulfill as much meaning in his existence as possible, and to realize as much value in his life as possible,” he said (Frankl, 1959, p. 161). Those who failed to experience a sense of purpose in life were in an *existential vacuum* or *existentially frustrated*. Frankl believed that individuals who experienced existential frustration compensated for their lack of purpose by engaging in risky behaviors.

Based on Frankl’s (1953) theory of purpose in life, Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) developed the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) to measure the degree a person experiences a sense of purpose. The PIL has been used widely in clinical and outpatient contexts in clinical psychology, which has established a thread of relationships between the instrument and behavioral issues that student affairs professionals deal with frequently, from alcohol and drug abuse to campus engagement. Studies have proven PIL’s effectiveness in determining levels of occupational meaningfulness (Crumbaugh, 1968), degree of engagement in college campus activities (Doerries, 1970), and lesser degree of purpose among prison inmates (Reker, 1977). Studies have shown that those with higher PIL scores suffer less anxiety and have greater self-confidence (Yarnell, 1971), self-acceptance (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969), and social attitudes (Pearson & Sheffield, 1975). They also experience greater satisfaction with their lives (Reker & Cousins, 1979), have more positive expectations of the future (Reker & Cousins, 1979), and enjoy increased emotional stability (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969). Using the Eysenck Personality Inventory, researchers have also shown that individuals with higher PIL scores are also less neurotic and more sociable (Pearson & Sheffield, 1974).

In the past 20 years, finding a life purpose has continued to gain the attention of researchers within their own spheres of interest. Lazuras and DeLongis (1983) established that sources of personal meaning influence the stress and coping process throughout the life span. In two different studies, Newcomb and Harlow (1986) found that perceived meaninglessness in life mediated the relation between uncontrollable stress and substance use. Harlow, Newcomb, and Bentler (1986) found a direct connection between a sense of purpose and an individual’s level of depression and feelings of self-degradation. They also found a lack of purpose led to greater tendency toward drug use among women and suicidal ideation among men. On the other hand, they determined that having purpose in life led to greater levels of happiness. Other studies have shown the relationship of purpose in life with responsibility and self-control (Simmons, 1980), and well-being (Lazuras & DeLongis, 1983). Additionally, studies have shown that those who lack purpose in life are more susceptible to suicide and hedonistic value orientation (Crandall & Rasmussen, 1975).

Based on the published research about the PIL, having a sense of purpose in life clearly contributes to establishing positive characteristics, strong values, and healthy mental attitudes. Because student affairs administrators are interested in helping students succeed in their personal and academic lives, Frankl’s purpose in life construct can be a valuable asset in the theoretical work of this field. However, while there is rich research on the PIL and purpose in life, no recent research on the PIL specifically with college students was identified in the literature. The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between a student’s environmental and involvement activities on a college campus and his/her sense of purpose in life using a model

based on Frankl's work. This initial study was designed to provide a foundation to determine if future exploration of Frankl's construct of purpose among college students was worthwhile.

Method

To conduct this study, a random sample of 1,000 sophomore students, enrolled full time (12 or more credit hours) at a large Midwestern university, was selected. They were equally divided among four types of housing: residence halls, residential colleges, emerging apartment communities, and general off-campus. Web-based data collection methods were used to survey the sample participants. Students were contacted three times by e-mail to be asked to fill out a Web-survey designed for collection of these data. As an incentive, those who participated in the study were entered into a drawing for a \$150 gift certificate for their choice of a store in the local mall.

Instrumentation

Purpose in Life Test. Based on Frankl's (1959, 1979, 1984, 1997) theory of purpose in life, Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) developed the Purpose in Life Test to measure a person's sense of meaning. The test includes 20 statements. For each statement, the students rated themselves on a 7-point scale. The end points of each scale were descriptive anchors, and the middle position 4 was labeled as neutral. An example of a statement incorporated in the PIL included the question "I am usually..." and the choices of "completely bored" as one anchor of a seven-point scale to "exuberant, enthusiastic" on the other. More positive and more negative anchors were rotated to different ends of the scale. In the example question given above, the more positive response of "exuberant, enthusiastic" is on the right side of the scale. The PIL also asks the question of "My life is..." The more positive response anchor of "in my hands and I am in control of it" is on the left side of the scale, while the more negative anchor "out of my hands and controlled by external factors" was on the right. The final score was calculated by assigning the highest score of seven-points to the most positive anchor, and one-point to the most negative anchor. Adding the scores of each of the 20 statements created a composite PIL score of between 20 and 140 points. Based on the findings of previous studies, students with higher PIL scores were expected to have a greater sense of purpose in life.

The PIL is used widely in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Hutzell & Peterson, 1986). Crumbaugh (1968), Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964), Meier and Edwards (1974), and Phillips (1980) all found support for the validity of the instrument as measuring Frankl's construct of purpose in life in relation to other similar measures of this construct, as well as in test-retesting and factorial analysis. Crumbaugh believed the measures of concurrent validity of the PIL were "in line with the level of criterion validity which can usually be obtained from a single measure of a complex trait" (p. 79). The split-half correlation of the PIL (N = 120) yielded a coefficient of 0.85, corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula to 0.92, indicating the survey was reliable.

Demographic Variables. For this study, students were asked to type in their age, gender/sex, and sexual orientation. They were also asked to select the best answer for race/ethnicity, residential setting, and socioeconomic status (Pell-Grants were used as a proxy).

Environmental and Involvement Factors. Three series of questions were designed to assess the campus involvement level and school activities of each participant. Students were asked how

many hours they spent each week on a series of academic, non-academic, and personal activities. Participants were also asked to rank their level of involvement and leadership in different types of student organizations and to indicate how often they participated in a list of specific university- and non-university-sponsored activities and services. These questions ranged from reading the campus newspaper to talking with professors outside of class.

Sample

A total of 445 students attempted to complete the survey for an initial response rate of 45%. After coding and removing incomplete cases, 354 usable surveys remained, for a usable survey response rate of 35%. Of those usable surveys, 34% were men ($n = 120$), 13% ($n = 47$) students of color, and almost 4% ($n = 14$) indicated a sexual orientation categorized as non-heterosexual. A total of 47% ($n = 171$) of the students indicated they lived in a general on-campus residence hall; 9% ($n = 34$) said they lived in a residential college; 12% ($n = 42$) indicated they lived in an emerging off-campus apartment complex; and the remaining 32% ($n = 116$) said they lived off-campus.

Chi-Square analysis determined that the responders did not vary significantly from the statistical makeup of the student population of the campus of study for the variables of age, race/ethnicity, and gender. However, more of the participants in the study lived in emerging apartments than the number of students in the general population, which was expected because of the sampling method used.

Findings

A one-way analysis of variance tests (ANOVA) on the scores and the on independent variables of age, race-coded, gender, sexuality-coded, residence, and socio-economic status were completed. Of the independent variables analyzed, only gender had a statistically significant effect on the PIL Score $F(1, 357) = 3.99, p < .05$. Men in this study showed a slightly lower sense of purpose than women in this study. No other demographic variables showed a relationship with the PIL.

A series of stepwise regression analyses were completed to determine the relationship of environmental and involvement factors on how students spend their time, their involvement in student organizations, and other activities on their scores on the PIL. A number of factors showed a statistically significant relationship with the dependent test score variables, as summarized below and more fully identified in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Three Regression Analyses of the Purpose in Life Test (PIL)

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	<i>b</i>	
Time Spent Variables				
Work On-Campus	0.16	0.45	0.02	
Work Off-Campus	0.16	0.41	0.02	
Community Service	1.24	0.91	0.08	
Exercise/Athletic Activity	1.52	0.65	0.13	*

Study/Class Attendance	1.89	0.65	0.16	**
Attending Social Events/Parties	1.44	0.70	0.12	*
Watching TV	-1.54	0.61	-0.14	**
Online/Accessing Internet	-1.00	0.56	-0.11	
Talking with Friends	1.36	0.58	0.15	*
Playing Video/Comp Games	-2.36	0.73	-0.17	**
Student Org./Activities	0.26	0.62	0.02	
Involvement Variables				
Intercollegiate Athletics	0.32	1.90	0.01	
Intramural or club sports	1.43	1.41	0.06	
Social Fraternity or Sorority	-0.23	1.34	-0.01	
Religious or interfaith groups	2.60	1.44	0.11	
International or language groups	5.46	2.77	0.12	
Minority or ethnic organizations	-1.83	1.93	-0.06	
Political and social action groups	-1.01	2.11	-0.03	
Music or other performing arts groups	0.14	1.78	0.00	
Student newspaper, radio, TV, magazine, etc.	-2.15	3.21	-0.04	
Pre-professional, honor or academic groups	2.11	1.55	0.08	
Campus student government	0.36	2.63	0.01	
Residence hall government	-0.57	2.24	-0.02	
Service organization	1.77	1.65	0.07	
Activity Variables				
Read the [student newspaper name]	0.12	0.52	0.02	
Read Another Daily Newspaper	-1.02	0.51	-0.13	*
Read educational flyers/brochures	-0.35	0.71	-0.04	
Read something on bulletin board†	0.32	0.67	0.08	
Access the WWW/Internet	1.23	1.15	0.06	
Attend an educational workshop/speaker	2.46	1.00	0.18	**
Attend a cultural/intellectual event†	-1.09	0.91	-0.09	
Attend a sporting event as a spectator	0.45	0.63	0.04	
Participate in a sporting event/activity	0.29	0.52	0.04	
Contact professor outside of class†	2.00	0.67	0.19	**

Talk with friends about current events	1.67	0.63	0.16	**
Get encouraged to attend event/activity†	-0.31	0.63	-0.03	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. † Text of original question truncated for reasons of space.

Time Spent $R^2 = .164$ ($n = 340$, $p < .00$); Involvement $R^2 = .051$ ($n = 340$, $p = .183$);

Activity $R^2 = .188$ ($n = 340$, $p = .00$).

For the dependent variable of PIL score, three regression analyses indicated that students who spend more time exercising ($B = 1.52$, $SEB = .65$, $p < .02$), studying ($B = 1.89$, $SEB = .65$, $p < .00$), attending parties or social events ($B = 1.44$, $SEB = .70$, $p < .04$), spending time with friends ($B = 1.36$, $SEB = .58$, $p < .02$), attending educational workshops ($B = 2.46$, $SEB = .10$, $p < .01$), talking with professors outside of class ($B = 2.00$, $SEB = .67$, $p < .00$), and discussing current events with friends ($B = 1.67$, $SEB = .63$, $p < .01$) had a higher PIL score. Watching TV ($B = -1.54$, $SEB = .61$, $p < .01$), playing video games ($B = -2.36$, $SEB = .73$, $p < .00$), and reading a local newspaper ($B = -1.02$, $SEB = .51$, $p < .05$) showed a negative and statistically significant relationship on a student's PIL score. As a block in the regression analysis, the Time Spent factors accounted for 16% of the variance and the Activities factors accounted for almost 19% of the variance in PIL scores.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if the environmental and involvement activities of college students had a relationship with a student's sense of purpose in life. Before more expansive work with Frankl's construct and the PIL Test is undertaken with this population, it was critical to determine if the PIL was related to college student activities. Based on the data of this study, it is clear that activities in which college students engage is related to their sense of purpose in life, as measured by the PIL. This study identified a number of important considerations for student affairs practitioners working with students on developing that sense of purpose and for the theoretical work on purpose in life.

One surprising finding was that the residential status of the participants in the study had no discernible impact on their sense of life purpose. This was contrary to the research of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), whose studies showed that a student's residential status impacts almost all areas of his or her development, with on-campus students generally achieving higher levels of development than off-campus students. In fact, they found that living on campus was the single most consistent determinant of impact on overall measures of college student development. But, unlike other research on college students, residential setting had no relationship on the student PIL test scores in this study. An explanation for this discrepancy may be that more colleges are making an effort to reach out to its off-campus students because of the increasing scarcity of on-campus housing. Today, on-campus residence halls are unable to house the growing number of students attending college, and more of those students are forced to live off-campus. Because of this shift, many college administrators are establishing strategies to connect off-campus students with the on-campus community, possibly to reducing the negative impacts of isolation. Emerging off-campus complexes are also beginning to provide services more like those found in on-campus residence halls, such as educational programs, computer labs, workout rooms, and resident advisors. Further study of the impact of residential setting on this new generation of college students will be an important consideration for future socio-developmental research.

Using the regression analyses, a number of factors were identified that affect a student's sense of purpose, which can help guide student affairs professionals in helping students create meaningful lives. The findings of this study suggest that staff who work with students suffering from a lack of purpose should encourage them to spend more time engaged in campus activities, a conclusion supported by most research on student development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Spending more time with friends, studying, exercising, attending parties and social events, working on campus, and interacting with faculty outside of the classroom have a statistically significant positive relationship on a student's sense of purpose. Minimizing time spent watching TV and playing video games is also recommended, based on the negative relationship of those activities on the PIL scores.

This study shows that activities that engage students with others within the campus community are positively related to their development of purpose, while more isolating activities, such as watching TV and playing video games, is more negatively related to their search for meaning and personal fulfillment. Based on this study, student affairs professionals who encourage students to become active in campus activities may help those students develop a sense of purpose.

Additional Research

This study provided an initial exploration of purpose in life among college students, using the PIL Test based on Frankl's conception of purpose in life. The results of this study indicate that a college student's activities are related to his/her sense of purpose in life, as measured by the PIL. However, additional study is needed to develop a practical framework for helping students develop a concrete plan for putting these suggestions into action.

For example, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors include a specific vector related to purpose in life. For Vector 6, Developing Purpose, the authors concluded that developing purpose requires establishing a plan of action that integrates vocational plans, avocational personal interests, and interpersonal and family commitments. To measure the development of purpose, Winston, Miller, and Cooper (1999) developed the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Assessment–Purpose instrument. For the same reason, Barrett (1978) created the Developing Purposes Inventory (DPI). But little research is available comparing these two instruments to each other or to other similarly defined constructs, such as the PIL. Exploratory correlational study comparing student scores on all three measurement instruments would help bridge the gap between the research in the fields of clinical psychology and student affairs and development. It would also create concrete steps for administrators trying to help students find their life purpose. The review of the literature shows that a lower PIL score relates to a number of negative behaviors, while a higher PIL relates to behaviors that are more positive. Student affairs professionals often struggle with how these negative behaviors have a secondary impact on the broader campus community. Although the PIL has clearly established relationships between test scores and these behaviors, using stronger empirical methodology with randomized samples of college students would permit researchers to apply the findings to all college students with greater certainty. It is important to conduct additional study of the relationship between the PIL and constructs such as substance use, college dropout rates, suicidal tendencies, and major life changes.

Exploring how purpose differs among subcultures of the campus community, such as fraternity/sorority members, athletes, students of color, and others, could assist student affairs

professionals in establishing one explanatory factor to behavioral issues common among a particular subpopulation, such as fraternity/sorority members and high levels of alcohol and substance abuse. These kinds of studies could also assist in determining focused interventions to increase the sense of purpose of members of a particular subpopulation.

Continued exploration of ways to improve a student's sense of purpose, including intervention strategies, would provide additional information to student affairs professionals as they assist the psychosocial development of their students. Intervention strategies for increasing purpose in life have been developed in the clinical psychology literature surrounding the PIL. Translating those strategies from the clinical environment to the campus would benefit student affairs professionals and the students they serve.

Limitations

The study design had a number of limitations. Because the sample was limited to sophomores, presumed development due to maturation could not be examined. This study was also confined to a single, residential campus in the Midwest. Because of this, the role of organizational cultural differences in student development across institutional type could not be determined.

Conclusion

Studies have shown that having a sense of purpose or meaning in life is a strong and consistent predictor of psychological well-being (Chamberlain, 1987). In their review of studies on purpose, Zika and Chamberlain (1992) reported that "meaning in life is consistently related to positive mental health outcomes, while meaninglessness is associated with pathological outcomes" (p. 135). In 2001, Moran called for student affairs professionals to give greater attention to helping students find a purpose in life. This study is only the beginning. Before college administrators establish programs and policies to promote a sense of purpose in its students, researchers must conduct additional empirical studies to give student affairs professionals the requisite tools to make informed decisions.

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