MEANING IN LIFE AMONG LATINO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

PERCEPTIONS OF MEANING IN LIFE AMONG FIRST-SEMESTER LATINO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
The Purpose In Life Test (PIL) (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1976) was used to obtain perceptions of meaning and purpose in life among 156 Latino first-semester undergraduate students (64 men and 92 women) at a Hispanic Serving Institution located on the border of Texas and Mexico. Results revealed an unexpected significant higher perception of meaning in life among Latinos than those of predominantly White undergraduates. Significant differences were also found on employment status and religious/spiritual disposition variables. Non-significant differences were found on college major, family’s history of college attendance, and college residence status.

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From the moment of our birth we are presented with opportunities; not guarantees or rights, but opportunities. Our birth certificates are not stamped with a guarantee of health, wealth, or happiness. The Bill of Rights is not attached as an addendum. Moreover, although many would argue that our rights as Americans are inalienable, “life” offers no such promises...not to Americans or to anyone else.

Frankl (1992) captured the essence of human existence when he contended that life does not promise us happiness but rather the opportunity to find meaning. In fact, he argued that

Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life...this meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning. (p.105)

Meaning in life has been variously defined. For example, meaning has been equated with purpose in life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Ryff, 1995), as the integration of external demands on the individual in relation to his or her internal world (Yalom 1980), as a perception of coherence (Antonovsky, 1987). However, in addition to the generally accepted interchangeability of the terms ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’, we believe Reker’s (2000) definition best conceptualizes the construct as, “the cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (p. 41).

From Reker’s (2000) definition, we note that the construct has a temporal nature. The opportunity to find meaning occurs “from birth to death through a string of unique life situations” (Graber, 2004, p.87). These life situations provide opportunities to find the “meaning-of-the-moment” and are not contingent upon “state” specific conditions such as our present health, physical surroundings, socioeconomic status, cultural...
heritage, whether or not we receive the perfect class schedule, or any other condition known to modern Homo sapiens. Finding meaning is a “trait,” not a “state,” condition and can be discovered in all circumstances.

Park and Ai (2006) noted that under normal (i.e., non-traumatic) conditions people tend to find “global” or general meaning in life. However, when trauma (life) occurs, global meaning can be shattered and “meaning-making,” as defined by Reker (2000), must be restored. Friedrich Nietzsche’s familiar existential quote, “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how,” reminds us of the meaning-making imperative in spite of present circumstances.

Examples of human suffering and the importance of finding meaning in life are found in the literature. Himself a Holocaust survivor, Frankl (1992) provided a snapshot of life in a German concentration camp in his book “Man’s Search for Meaning.” In his description, Frankl attempts to snatch readers from the comforts of their present world and slam them into an existence in which meaning can, and must, be found in spite of inescapable suffering. Studies related to combat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Southwick, Gilmartin, Mcdonough, & Morrissey, 2006), cancer patients/survivors (Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000), abstinent Alcoholics Anonymous members (Kairouz & Dube, 2000), and HIV patients (Vaughan & Kinnier, 1996), all have elucidated the importance of finding meaning and purpose in life during times of suffering. However, the need to find life meaningful is not restricted to those who are suffering.

A purpose, or meaning-centered orientation, has broad appeal and includes transitions across the lifespan and across cultural boundaries. For example, Kanahara (2001) found that children in Japan who suffered from school avoidance responded well to interventions that focused on meaning and purpose. Shek’s (1999) study of adolescents in Hong Kong demonstrated that higher levels of meaning and purpose were associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem. Fitzgerald (2005) provided an exposition on the similarities between adolescence and existentialism (of which finding meaning and purpose in life is a high priority). In his view, the search for meaning and purpose is a necessary component of normal adolescent development. However, he also acknowledges that the quest for meaning can lead many adolescents to an increased sense of anxiety and personal emptiness. Dixon’s (2007) study involving perceived wellness and “mattering to others” among older adults (70 years and older) determined that “the more powerful predictor for older adults’ wellness was their reported purpose in life” (p. 89). Thus, finding meaning in life is necessary for successfully transitioning the lifespan, and is an existential component of the human condition, regardless of racial/ethnic or cultural affiliations. We now turn our attention to the transition between the adolescent period of high school and the young adulthood of college.

The National Center for Educational Statistics estimated that approximately 2.7 million students graduated from high school in 2005 and 3.2 million more will have graduated in 2006-2007 (Shettle, Roey, Mordica, Perkins, Nord, Teodorovic, Brown, Lyons, Averett, and Kastberg, 2007). For some of these graduates, the obligatory 12-year educational rite of passage was endured and it is time to move on to more “meaningful” activities (including employment) unrelated to higher education. For others, the perception of freedom following high school graduation is short-lived and the responsibility to earn a college degree lies just beyond a brief summer vacation. Taking into account that six out of every 10 jobs require postsecondary education (Raley, 2007) the time invested in college education appears warranted. And, considering the economic imperative of a college degree, it is especially alarming to note that only approximately 10 percent of the Latino high school completers will earn an associate’s degree (Fry, 2003). The “educational bar” has been raised to the four-year college degree level and it is therefore essential that Latino students perceive higher education as a meaningful goal to attain.

Although the importance of discovering meaning and purpose in life appears obvious, there have been very few studies that focused on the
construct among the college/university population in general, and none that focused on the Latino college population specifically. Using the Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1976), Coffield and Buckalew (1986) examined meaning in life across different college majors, but were unable to draw any meaningful conclusions due to methodological problems. In a replication of Coffield and Buckalew’s study, Geiger, Weinstein, and Jones (2004) did not find significant differences between college majors’ PIL scores, but did find that nontraditional students had higher PIL scores than traditional students. This finding supported Coffield and Buckalew’s hypothesis that purpose in life is a function of age; that is, a sense of meaning and purpose in life increases as one gets older. In a recent study, Boggs (2007) compared the PIL scores among first-time community college students and found no significant differences between the PIL scores of persisters and non-persisters. In terms of ethnicity, Geiger, Weinstein, and Jones (2004) provided no indication of the ethnic makeup of their sample, and Boggs’ (2007) sample of 177 only included 30 Hispanics.

In an effort to expand our understanding of first-semester university students’ perceptions of meaning in life, and to address specifically those perceptions from the Latino student’s perspective, this study was designed to address the following questions:

1. To what degree do first-semester Latino university students find life meaningful/purposeful?
2. Is Latino students’ PIL contingent on college major?
3. Is Latino students’ PIL contingent on employment status?
4. Is Latino students’ PIL contingent on family’s history of college attendance?
5. Is Latino students’ PIL contingent on college residence status?
6. Is Latino students’ PIL contingent on religious/spiritual disposition?

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants included 156 Latino first-semester undergraduate students at a Hispanic Serving Institution located on the border of Texas and Mexico (64 men and 92 women). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 years (M=18.4, SD=1.01). All students were enrolled in a freshman seminar and volunteered to participate. Declared college majors included: Education (n = 44; 28%), Nursing (n = 13; 8%), Business (n = 28; 18%), Math/Science/Engineering (n = 34; 22%), Fine Arts (n = 9; 6%), Social Sciences (n = 12; 8%), and Undecided (n = 18; 10%). Eighty-six (55%) of the participants were employed (M=13.1 hours/week, SD = 11.50). Most of the participants (n = 91; 54%) were first-generation college students and (n = 133; 79%) resided off-campus. Most participants were single, never married (n = 168; 99%). One participant reported being divorced or separated. In terms of religious/spiritual disposition, 41 (24%) participants identified themselves as “very” religious/spiritual; 104 (62%) reported being “somewhat” religious/spiritual; and 24 (14%) reported “not at all” religious/spiritual.

**Procedures**

Three first-year experience instructors collaborated and provided a brief description of the study to their respective first-year, first-semester classes. Following the description of the study each faculty member asked for volunteers and provided an informed consent form to those who agreed to participate. After signed informed consent forms were collected, each participant received a demographic survey and the Purpose In Life Test (PIL) (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1976). Completed instruments were each assigned a participant number to ensure anonymity.

Data were analyzed using a four-step process. First, data were analyzed descriptively to determine the mean PIL score of Latino first-semester college students. Second, a one-sample t test was used to determine if the mean PIL score of Latino students in the present study were significantly different from the undergraduate sample reported by Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1976). Third, independent samples t tests were used to determine if the mean PIL scores in the present study differed by gender, family’s history of college attendance, and residence status.
Finally, One-way ANOVA’s were used to examine mean PIL score differences by college major, by employment status, and by religious/spiritual disposition. An alpha level of .05 of significance was used in all statistical tests.

Instruments

The demographic survey included items related to gender, age, class standing, academic major, employment, first-generation college student status, campus residential status (i.e., on-campus or off-campus), race/ethnicity, marital status, and religious/spiritual disposition.

The PIL Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1976) is comprised of three parts. Part A includes 20 self-report, seven-point (1-7) Likert scale items which are scored objectively. Total PIL raw scores range from 20-140. Raw scores between 113 and 140 suggest ‘definite purpose and meaning in life’; raw scores between 92 and 112 indicate ‘somewhat uncertain purpose and meaning in life’; and raw scores below 92 suggest a ‘lack of clear purpose and meaning in life.’ Part B of the instrument involves the completion of 13 sentences (exp., “More than anything I want …” or “The thought of suicide ……”). And Part C asks the participant to write a paragraph related to his or her goals in life. Each part of the PIL is designed to measure Viktor Frankl’s concept, “existential vacuum” or lack of meaning in life; however, considering that Part B and C are clinical in nature, they have been excluded from analysis in the present study. Part A can be completed within 10-15 minutes (Crumbaugh & Maholick).

RESULTS

The results of our descriptive data analysis show that the mean PIL scores among Latino first-semester undergraduates fell in the ‘somewhat uncertain purpose and meaning in life’ range (N=156; M=111.96; SD=14.78). Seventy-nine (51%) reported scores were reflective of ‘definite meaning in life’, 58 (37%) were reflective of ‘uncertain meaning in life’, and 18 (12%) were indicative of ‘lack of clear meaning in life.’

Next, Latino students’ PIL scores were examined in relation to those of Crumbaugh and Maholick’s (1976) undergraduate sample (N=417; M=108.45; SD=13.98) and Boggs (2007) first-semester community college sample (N=177; M=107.2; SD=15.2). Although Crumbaugh and Maholick did not identify their undergraduate participants by ethnicity, Boggs’ sample was predominantly (65%) White, non-Latino. Given that Crumbaugh and Maholick’s mean scores were higher and represented a larger N reflective of the population of undergraduates, their group was selected for comparison. The results of a one-sample t test comparing the mean PIL score of the present sample (M=111.96; SD=14.78) with the PIL mean scores in the Crumbaugh and Maholick (M=108.45; SD=13.98) indicated a significant difference (t (154) = 2.985, p < .001), indicating a significantly greater perception of meaning/purpose in life among Latino students. A comparison of the mean PIL score between males (M = 110.84, SD = 15.60) and females (M = 112.73, SD = 14.23) within the sample found no significant differences (t (153) = -.780, p > .05).

PIL scores for Latinos across seven college majors (including undecided) were compared using a one-way ANOVA. No significant difference was found (F(6,148) = 1.16, p > .05). These results support Geiger, Weinstein, and Jones’ (2004) findings and suggest that perceptions of meaning in life do not differ significantly across college major.

Employment status was also considered as a variable that may affect meaning in life. Eighty-five (55%) reported being employed. Forty-four (52%) of those employed reported working 21 or more hours per week, 41 (48%) reported working between one and 20 hours per week. Seventy (45%) were not employed. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in mean PIL scores among the students based on employment status (F(2, 152) = 3.546, p < .05). Using the Tukey’s HSD, our analysis revealed that PIL mean scores of Latino students who worked 21 or more hours per week (N=44; M = 107.89; SD = 15.50) was significantly lower than those who worked between one and 20 hours per week (N=41; M=116.29; SD=12.37) or those who were not employed (N=70; M=111.98; SD=15.08).
An independent t-test comparing first-generation college students mean PIL score (M=112.01; SD=15.88) with non first-generation college attendees’ mean PIL score (M=111.90; SD=13.44) indicated no significant difference, (t (153) = .047, p > .05).

To determine if meaning in life is associated with campus residence, the mean PIL scores of Latino students who resided on campus (M=113.88; SD 13.54) were compared with the mean PIL score of those who resided off campus (M=111.46; SD=15.10). An independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference between the two groups (t (153) = .821, p > .05).

Finally, the mean PIL scores of Latino first-semester college students were compared according to their reported level of religious/spiritual disposition. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference among the student groups (F(2,152) = 8.41, p < .0001). Results of the Tukey’s HSD revealed that PIL mean scores of Latino students who reported “very religious/spiritual” affiliation (M = 114.89, SD = 13.02) were significantly higher than those who indicated “somewhat religious/spiritual” affiliation (M = 113.58, SD = 12.45) or those reporting “not at all religious/spiritual” (M = 101.17, SD = 20.61).

**DISCUSSION**

One of the greatest gifts offered to humans is the opportunity to seek out a unique purpose, or meaning in life. Life itself offers no assurance of actually finding this meaning, but there is an inner tugging—a notion that a unique meaning is there waiting to be discovered. Graber (2004) acknowledges the ‘demand quality of life’ and that “human existence, always points at something beyond itself...a meaning to fulfill, another human being to encounter” (p. 88). Therefore, it can be assumed that the potential to find meaning is present in every circumstance, positive or negative, throughout the lifespan for all people.

Although the search for meaning is inextricably tied to the human condition, only a few researchers have examined the construct among the college population (Crumbaugh & Maholic (1964); Coffield & Buckalew, (1986); Geiger, Weinstein, & Jones (2004); Boggs (2007), and none have focused specifically on the Latino population. Could it be that we have become so obsessed with an ‘achievement focus’ that we have forgotten the importance of a ‘meaning focus’? For the most part, existing studies have examined the role of meaning in life in relation to traumatic or life-threatening conditions (Greenstein & Breitbart, (2000); Kairouz & Dube (2000); Park and Ai (2006); Southwick, Gilmartin, Mcdonough, & Morrissey (2006); Vaughan & Kinnier (1996). The perception of meaning and purpose in life is especially salient for those embarking on a new educational journey. The transition from high school to college, while not typically life-threatening, can nonetheless be challenging, anxiety-provoking, and, at times, traumatic. In addition, the perception about meaning in life by those who decide to attend college later in life may be shaped by challenges and anxieties provoked by family responsibilities. During this transitional period from high school, from employment, or other non-educationally related circumstances, it is normal to wonder about the meaning of one’s life and the role higher education may play in it. Revisiting Reker’s (2000) definition of ‘meaning in life’ as “the cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (p. 41), we call attention to the importance of worthwhile goals and sense of fulfillment as especially relevant to the new Latino college freshmen. It is assumed that anyone who is willing to endure the transitional suffering as a first-semester freshman is doing so because he or she perceives the experience is meaningful. Moreover, given that Latinos are underrepresented in higher education, the examination of their perceptions of meaning in life is clearly warranted.

This study is the first to examine first-semester university students’ perceptions of meaning in life specifically from the Latino student’s perspective. The first question, “To what degree do first-semester Latino university students find life meaningful/ purposeful?” was answered in the “somewhat uncertain” range as measured by the
PIL Test (Crumbaugh & Maholic, 1976). No gender differences were found.

We found an unexpected significantly higher perception of meaning in life when we compared the Latino sample with the predominantly non-Latino samples of Crumbaugh and Maholic (1976) or Boggs (2007). It may be that while the meaning of life is worthy for Whites, they may not anticipate nor expect antagonistic factors to thwart attainment of life’s goals. In short, they may perceive fewer threats in being part of society. On the other hand, Latino’s perceptions about the meaning of life may be heightened by a guarded attitude toward goal attainment, which may be shaped by a history riddled with struggles that served to question their real acceptance by society. Therefore, for Latinos, the difficulty in attaining accomplishments may give rise to an exalted meaning of life.

These findings fail to support Geiger, Weinstein, and Jones (2004) and Coffield & Buckalew’s, (1986) contention that higher PIL is related to age given that the present Latino sample was of traditional college freshmen age (M=18.4; SD 1.01). Regarding the second question, “Is Latino students’ PIL contingent on college major?” support was found for Geiger, Weinstein, and Jones’ (2004) results that meaning in life is not affected by college major. The third question, “Is Latino students’ PIL contingent on employment status?” was answered in the affirmative. Latino students who worked 21 hours or more per week perceived life as less meaningful than those who did not work. However, it is also interesting to note that students who worked part-time (i.e., between one and twenty hours per week) perceived life as more meaningful than those who did not work. This finding suggests that balancing the academic load of college with the ‘real-world’ weight of part-time (rather than full-time) employment has a positive effect on creating meaningful life experiences. Questions four and five related to first-generation college status and residence location yielded no significant differences. Meaning in life was perceived similarly regardless of whether or not the student was the first in the family to attend college or whether they lived on or off-campus. Question number five, “Is Latino students’ PIL contingent on level of spirituality?” was affirmed. There was a difference between self-reported disposition toward spirituality and perception of meaning in life. Those who identified themselves as ‘very religious/spiritual’ were more likely to find life meaningful than those who identified themselves as ‘not at all religious/spiritual.’ This finding is consistent with Fabry’s (1968) notion that “…religious traditions helped believers in their search for meaning” (p. 164).

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

A limitation to the generalizability of the study is the relatively small sample (N = 156) of Latino freshmen attending a Hispanic Serving Institution in the border region of south Texas. This sample is drawn from a population in which 98 percent of the residents in the geographic region are Latino or of Mexican decent. The students self-identify as members of the ‘majority’ rather than of the ‘minority’ and issues related to discrimination based on ethnicity are largely unknown. Another limitation is the potential of response bias; however, the range and distribution of PIL scores support the assumption that students answered honestly.

Future research studies are clearly needed to better understand the ‘meaning in life’ construct. While attention has been given to finding meaning in life during times of trauma, relatively little is known about the construct as related to the normal transitions across the lifespan. Specifically, future research should focus on perceived meaning in life during the transitional periods of adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and the later years. Variables related to gender, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, vocation, occupational aspirations, and religious/spiritual disposition should also be studied in relation to perceived meaning in life. Future studies may also consider the degree to which perceived meaning in life serves as a mediating or moderating variable in degree completion among the various groups listed. It will also be important to study the impact of “high stakes testing” and our societal emphasis on “product over process” as related to finding meaning in life. Finally, yet
certainly not exhaustively, future research may focus on the interrelationships between motivation and finding meaning in life.

In conclusion, there is a special “demand quality” (Graber, 2004) to life. The ‘demand’ is the inner tug that humans experience when they are called to ask one of the most profound questions, “What is the meaning and purpose of my life?” The moments of pondering during life’s question and answer period hold within an opportunity to find the answer—to find the unique meaning of the moment. Frustrated by the lack of ready-made answers and simple solutions, many will ignore life’s opportunity to find meaning and instead seek out the temporary euphoria of happiness. However, seldom does happiness result in meaning. Only in grappling with life’s most challenging questions does one discover happiness as the by-product of having found meaning (Frankl, 1992). Collaborative and ongoing research is needed to understand the factors that lead one to find meaning in life. As with all opportunities, however, research focused in this area offers no guarantees—only opportunities to find our work meaningful.

References


