Values systems: What differentiates students with a “high” from those with a “low” sense of meaning?

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims to demonstrate how creative, experiential, and attitudinal values can be applied in an education setting. Its overarching objective is to determine whether there are differences between the value systems of students who scored high on the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) from those who scored low. A stratified sample of two groups, 10 students with high PIL-scores and 10 students with low PIL-scores, was selected from 101 participants. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information.

A computer software package (NUD*IST) was used to analyse the interviews. The results of the current study revealed that value systems of students who scored high on the PIL differ from those who score low. What is distinctive about participants with higher PIL scores is that they see meaning in their studies, are more interested in providing service, and they maintain positive attitudes. On the contrary, participants who scored low on the PIL don’t see meaning in their studies, are more interested in money and status, and they tend to hold negative attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

There are three values that can promote sense of meaning, that is, creative, experiential, and attitudinal values. In this way, meaning philosophy led the way in helping us identify our individual paths for being inventors of values, by placing emphasis on our highest capabilities. These values are important because they serve as resources that might contribute to the students’ successful adjustment and performance. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how students can use these values within an education setting.

CREATIVE VALUES

Studies indicate that career uncertainties are one of the major causes of depression, amongst students (Rengito, 2003). Students can give meaning to their lives by realising creative values, that is, by achieving tasks. Creative values relate to what a person gives to the world and the way in which an individual acts or deals with human conditions (Giovinco, 2001). Therefore, it is the responsibility of each student to clarify his or her values and goals and to find ways to actualise them in their studies and careers (Pattakos, 2004).

EXPERIENTIAL VALUES

Some people are waiting for the BIG meaning to be revealed to them; however it is
important for them to realise that every situation has its own meaning (Giovinco, 2001; Shantall, 1997). Students can give meaning to their lives by realising experiential values, that is, by experiencing the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. In other words, it is important for students to learn to appreciate and accept what life presents to them (Pattakos, 2004).

ATTITUDINAL VALUES

Last but not least, students can realise meaning by choosing the right attitude. The attitudinal values are the highest possible values (Frankl, 1967). They are also the most important in the sense that they relate to the attitudes students adopt when faced with a fate they cannot change (Merullo, 2002). When students are exposed to stressors, such as, poverty, HIV/AIDS, crime, being unprepared for university, mismatch between student and field of study, studying through a second or third language, and many more, choosing a positive attitude during these times does not only influence the academic performance of students but also their health and well-being. Likewise, a negative attitude may serve to accentuate their stress and, in effect, result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Therefore, it is important for students to realise that they can’t always control what happens to them in any particular moment, but they do have a choice to respond in a positive or negative way (Pattakos, 2004).

This is the reason why life never stops to have meaning, because even a student who is deprived of both creative and experiential meaning is still challenged by a meaning to fulfil, which is to choose the right attitudes towards suffering. Suffering without meaning is likely to bring despair, however suffering with positive attitudes (meaning) is likely to bring fulfilment (Frankl, 1988). What matters in this case is the attitude that one adopts.

To highlight the importance of attitudinal values, Frankl (1988) indicates that Rolf H. Von Eckartsberg conducted a study at Harvard University to look into the adjustment of Harvard’s graduates. The results of the latter study revealed that despite the fact that they were successful in their professional lives as lawyers, doctors, surgeons, and analysts; many reported that were caught up in existential vacuum. They were experiencing a phenomenon which could be described as despair despite success (Frankl, 1988).

In an ideal world students should be assisted towards a phenomenon which can be described as fulfilment with success. A world in which students realise all three values, this however, at times seems impossible to imagine. There are situations, due to one reason or the other, where students do not realise their creative and/or experiential values. In such situations students can still be helped to maintain positive attitudes despite their challenges and/or failures (Frankl, 1967).

This study was designed to explore the impact of creative, experiential and attitudinal values on the adjustment of first-year students. Its overarching objective is to determine whether there are differences between the value systems of students who scored high on the PIL from those who scored low.
METHODS
An exploratory design was used. Data was collected by means of focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

Subjects
The study sample consisted of 101 (74 females, 27 males) first-year students from the Faculty of Management Sciences, at the Central University of Technology, Free State (Welkom Campus). Their ages ranged from 17 to 22 years, with a mean age of 19.38 years. Although English was the primary means of communication, participants listed their home language as South Sotho 71 (70.29%), Xhosa 18 (17.82%), Tswana 5 (4.95%), Afrikaans 5 (4.95%), Tsonga 1 (0.99%) and Zulu 1 (0.99%).

Instruments
*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 questionnaires (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.*

Procedure
*Firstly,* the researcher handed out the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) to participants, with instructions on how they should complete the questionnaires. One hundred and one (101) students participated by completing and returning the questionnaires. There were no exclusions as all questionnaires received were fully completed. 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. The purpose of dividing the students into two groups was to explore differences between those with a high sense of meaning and those with a low sense of meaning.

*Secondly,* the researcher presented each focus group with a brief scenario aimed at eliciting the participants’ comments on factors contributing to their sense of meaning. The scenario used, was adopted from Joseph Fabry’s (1988) book, *Guide Posts to Meaning.* In addition the researcher compiled 16 open-ended questions to help the participants elaborate further on the scenario.

*Thirdly,* individual semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher to investigate the subjective experiences of respondents on the construct on meaning in life, specifically their value systems.

Method of analysis
Data from focus group sessions and individual interviews was analysed and interpreted by an independent researcher. In interpreting the results, the independent researcher conducted a discourse analysis to look for themes relating to students’ experience of meaning. A computer software package (NUD*IST programme) was used (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997).
All of the qualitative interviews were tape-recorded, with the participants’ permission. The recordings were then transcribed into MSWord documents. These documents then formed the basis for 17 raw data files for the QSR NUD*IST program (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997). One document each was created for the individual interviews with the high meaning and low meaning respondents. Two additional documents were created for the focus group sessions with the High and Low Meaning Groups. These documents were imported into, and then analysed with the NUD*IST program.

Ethical considerations
All students who participated in this study completed a consent form. Participants were assured that all information would be treated as confidential and anonymous. The condition of the confidentiality that group members are not allowed to discuss other members’ issues outside the session was also discussed in the focus group session. Feedback was provided to participants and those who displayed signs and symptoms of pathology were advised to go for counselling.

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were also conducted by the researcher, but the interpretation of transcribed data was conducted by an independent researcher with extensive experience of the NUD*IST programme.

RESULTS

Values
Literature has revealed that there are three ways in which meaning can be found:
1. Through creative values (what people give to life),
2. Through experiential values (what people take from life), and
3. Through attitudinal values (acceptance of an unchangeable fate).

Each of these will be explored in terms of the student responses from the various interviews.

Creative values
Many of the students expressed creative values when asked what gives meaning to their lives. They wanted to achieve their goals, to see their dreams come true, to become successful, and to excel at their chosen or desired field of work. Sometimes, these values were frustrated, as when they could not study the course they wanted to, or attend the university they wanted to attend. In these instances, they had to learn to adapt (attitudinal values) or remain frustrated.

A number of students also had creative values on the side of artistic expression, such as making music, writing stories and poetry, and so forth.

Experiential Values
While a number of experiential values were mentioned which gave meaning to the students’ lives, these values were mentioned much less than either creative or attitudinal values, which were more or less equally often mentioned (See the discussion of attitudinal values below). The very experience of receiv-
gained added meaning because of the positive feedback she had received after losing weight.

Attitudinal Values
Many students noted the importance of a positive attitude in providing life with meaning. They learned to accept things that they could not change, and continue with their lives. However, it should be noted that a number of students struggled to accept things the way they are, that is, to accept the bad things that have happened to them.

One student’s comments, from the Low Meaning Group, are particularly insightful: “The challenges basically I thought it was... (Pause), it’s something that someone experiences during your lifetime, but I just ask myself why me, why me, why me (repeats)?... Yes. It’s just that, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t (repeats)... (Pause) cope more with the situation. To just accept the situation the way it is seems hard, you know”.

While another student, from the High Meaning Group, said: “There are some things that you cannot change and to some things that you can change, it is up to you whether you choose to change that fact or you don’t. If ever I have to force myself to be accepted for some people I wouldn’t do it. It took me some time and hard work to make me who I am. To accept me for whom I am”.

DISCUSSION
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. Most participants in the High Meaning Group indicated that they saw meaning in their study courses; despite the fact that some were studying towards their second, third or even fourth career choices.

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. The latter participants indicated that they see meaning in the service they will provide.

Lastly, amongst those students who gave expression to attitudinal values, all those who struggled with them were from the Low Meaning Group; and none of the students from the High Meaning Group struggled with this value. While this researcher believes that this is significant, it should be interpreted with caution, as there were one or two students from the Low Meaning Group who did not struggle with an attitude of acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Values provide people with meaning, however, a clash between them can also complicate meaning. For one to experience meaning in totality all three values, creative, experiential and attitudinal, are important, especially attitudinal values. The results of the current study revealed that value systems of participants who scored high on the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) are different from those who scores low on the PIL. What is distinctive about participants who scored high on the PIL is that they see meaning in their studies, are more interested in the service they will provide, and they maintain positive attitudes. Research findings have highlighted a strong correlation between sense of meaning, which encompasses all three values, and well-being (Meraviglia, 2005; Pinquart, 2002; Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Ryff & Singer, 1998a; 1998b; Shek, 1992; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

On the contrary, participants who scored low on the PIL are unable to see meaning in their studies, more interested in money and status, and they tend to harbour negative attitudes.

Due to their diminished interest, in their current study courses, participants with low meaning are more at the risk of experiencing job burnout in their future careers. These participants are more likely to experience a phenomenon which could be described as despair despite success (Frankl, 1988). Research studies have also indicated that, career uncertainties are one of the major causes of depression (Rengito, 2003).

For the Low Meaning participants money is an end and not a means to an end. Because they are more interested in money and prestige, these students pose a greater risk of compromising service as future employees. They are also more likely to quickly move from one job to the other in pursued of more rewards (money). Money should not be the only thing that draws people to a specific career (Finck, 2002). It should not be consid-
ered an end in itself, but rather a means to an end (Finck, 2002).

With their tendency to harbour negative attitudes, students who scored low on the PIL are at a high risk of compromising their well-being. Evidence is also available from research studies which indicate that lack of meaning is associated with psychopathology (Pinquart, 2002; Ruffin, 1984; Yalom, 1980).

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, the findings of this study may contribute to the development of intervention programs aimed at improving the sense of meaning (the creative, experiential and especially the attitudinal values) of young people. Considering the important contribution of values in the meaningful adjustment of students at university, we should use more time and energy to promote them.

It offers a rich avenue of exploration. By understanding the traditional existential context of mindfulness meditation, it is hoped that a greater understanding of the inherent transformative capacity of this practice can be conveyed in its current and future applications. Although initially taught to practitioners in the charnel grounds of South Asia, mindfulness can be applied to all of our lives in our relationships and daily hardships. Mindfulness of suffering and death, although seemingly distant from the goals of modern psychotherapy, offers valuable insight and motivation for living a more compassionate and meaningful life.
REFERENCES


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