



EFFICACY OF A BRIEF MEANING- centred intervention among young people in the Free State, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The study evaluated the efficacy of a sense-of-meaning intervention with a sample of adolescents and young adults. The participants included 47 high school learners and 22 university students from South Africa (age range 14 to 28 years, females made up 63.2%, majority (55%) were Sesotho-speaking). Data was collected on their sense of meaning regarding the intervention by means of the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II). In addition, qualitative data was collected on the participants' subjective experiences of the intervention. A one-group, pretest-posttest design was employed. The quantitative data was analysed with *t*-tests for paired samples. The qualitative data was analysed by means of themes. A sense-of-meaning intervention appears to result in significant improvements in levels of meaning and significant reduction of depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults. When comparing the two groups, the young adults showed significantly higher meaning in life, and significantly lower depressive symptoms than the adolescents, before and after the intervention.

Keywords: young people; sense of meaning; meaning intervention; adolescents; young adults; depressive symptoms

The construct "meaning of life" has received growing attention in recent years, probably due to the fact that individuals, especially young people, are constantly seeking to understand themselves, others, as well as the world in which they exist. Some researchers argue that the search for meaning develops parallel to identity development (Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler 2006). They argue that as in identity



development, people may go through different stages of meaning development. While the search for identity is defined by an individual's level of exploration, the stages for meaning may be defined by the search for and the presence of meaning. A study by Keeley (1976) found that when compared to the parental generation, the younger generation seems to have countless doubts about the meaning of life, a lesser level of satisfaction with it, and a greater fear of death. Moreover, a study by Michelson (1991) found a significant relationship between age and coping efforts. As a result, the younger generation, more than any group, is overwhelmed by feelings of inner emptiness and/or an existential void. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), nearly 10% of teenage deaths in South Africa are as a result of suicide (SADAG 2013). They believe that for most teenagers, suicidal feelings are often combined with depression and feelings of inner emptiness.

Much research has been conducted into the relation between the lack of meaning of life and psychopathological variables such as depression and anxiety, self-harm trends and substance abuse (Harlow, Newcomb and Bentler 1986; Ishida and Okada 2006). A significant relationship has been reported between the construct of meaning in life and wellbeing (Ishida and Okada 2006; Makola 2009; Meraviglia 2005; Pinqart 2002; Ryff and Singer 1998; Shek 1992; Zika and Chamberlain 1992). For instance, a high sense of meaning is a mitigating factor for personal wellbeing. There is also evidence that lack of meaning is associated with psychopathology (Pinqart 2002; Ruffin 1984).

Meaning in young people

Adolescence may be seen as a phase of harmonising the old with the new (Kegan 1982) where childhood views begin to change and incorporate new perceptions of the world as there are increased demands of adulthood (Fitzgerald 2005). In order to reach identity achievement, it is expected of adolescents to create a complex image of the world around them and assimilate the many, and sometimes contradictory, information sources (Marcia 1966). The need to evaluate the internal and external experiences propels adolescents to search for the meaning of life (DeVogler and Ebersole 1983). This search ultimately results in psychological growth.

A study conducted in the United States among a group of adolescents aged 13 to 17 years revealed that 87% of them believed that their lives had an overall purpose and 13% indicated that they saw no purpose in their lives (Gallup Jr 2004). The experience of meaning among adolescents appears to be independent from academic performance. The results of a study by Bronk, Finch and Talib (2010), conducted with a group of adolescents, suggest that particularly strong academic capabilities are not necessary or even ideal for the pursuit of purpose.



According to Fabry, Bulka and Sahakian (1979), a sense of purpose and/or meaning addresses the problems of young adults on multiple levels. A study by Shek, Mau and Cheung (1994) suggests that having meaning in life is a protective factor, associated with lower levels of aggressive and antisocial behaviours.

Interventions to reconstruct meaning are possible. For instance, Fillion, Duval, Dumont, Gagnon, Tremblay, Bairati et al. (2009) reported on a meaning intervention with nurses in palliative care. Nurses in the experimental group reported more perceived benefits of working in palliative care after the meaning-centred intervention. A study by Brassai, Piko and Steger (2012) also found that young people are capable of searching for more meaning in their lives in a manner that is not driven by a loss or by lack of meaning but rather as part of a healthy developmental process of fulfilling their own personal potential.

Goals of the study

The current study targeted young people, i.e. adolescents and young adults. The aim of the study was to investigate the efficacy of a meaning-focused brief therapy intervention on the sense of meaning in adolescents and young adults with regard to their depressive symptoms. The primary research question was: Can a brief intervention focused on creative, experiential and attitudinal values enhance the levels of meaning and decrease depressive symptoms in young people and foster resilience amongst them? The secondary research question was: Are there notable differences in the levels of meaning and depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults?

Method

Research design

The study used both qualitative and quantitative research methods. A pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was used in this study. The study was exploratory and aimed at determining the efficacy of a meaning-oriented intervention with young people involved in a peer helper programme.

Participants

The participants comprised 47 high school learners and 22 university students, all from the Free State in South Africa. Both groups, students and learners, were part of the peer helper programme in their respective educational institutions. Their ages ranged from



14 to 28 years; 63.2% were females; and the majority (55%) were Sesotho-speaking. The mean age of high school learners was 16.54 years and that of university students 22.14 years. The sample was purposively selected.

Data collection

Participants completed the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) (Crumbaugh and Maholic 1969) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II) (Beck, Steer, Ball and Ranieri 1996) pre- and post-intervention. Demographic data was also gathered.

The PIL was designed to operationalise Frankl's ideas and to measure an individual's experience of meaning and purpose in life.

The BDI-II was administered to measure the levels of depression and depressive symptoms of the participants.

Qualitative interview. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to gain insight into the participants' impression of the brief meaning-centred intervention.

Procedure

Planning for innovation/transforming assessment practice. Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the managements of Eldoret High School, Harmony High School and Central University of Technology, Free State. After permission was granted, the researcher conducted a one-hour session to inform the participants about the purpose of the study. All participants, and parents in the case of minors (<18years), gave consent to take part in the study, and consent forms were duly completed.

Pre-intervention: The participants (N=69) were divided into three groups. The Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II) were administered to each group of participants. Thereafter, each group reflected on and interpreted the outcome of the planning phase.

Intervention: The intervention applied didactic and process-oriented strategies, including guided reflections, experiential exercises, and education based on themes of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy. During the intervention the facilitator presented the theory (based on a self-compiled manual and slides) and gave practical exercises, e.g. taught them songs and showed videos with themes on the meaning and purpose of life.

The following topics were presented:



- ◆ Who is Viktor Frankl?
- ◆ Background to logotherapy
- ◆ Three ways to discover meaning
- ◆ Five areas where meaning can be found
- ◆ Practical ways to apply logotherapy in our lives
- ◆

The intervention offered a holistic view of the entire person in the present moment. It emphasised that, although meaning is personal, it cannot be found in one place. Meaning can be found everywhere, even in voluntary services. There are three principal ways to discover meaning in life: (i) what we give to life (creative values); (ii) what we receive or take from life (experiential values); and (iii) the attitudes we attach to life (attitudinal values). Coupled with the latter there are five areas in which meaning is most likely to be found: self-discovery, choice, uniqueness, responsibility and self-transcendence.

Post-intervention: The researcher and participants reflected on the intervention phase by re-administering the Purpose in Life Test and the Beck Depression Inventory. The main purpose of re-administering the questionnaires was to determine whether the intervention had an influence on the participants' feelings of purpose (as measured by the PIL) and reduced depressive symptoms (as measured by BDI-II). The participants also completed an open-ended questionnaire to provide additional information on the impact of the brief meaning-centred intervention on their lives. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to evaluate the participants' impression of the intervention. Specifically, the questionnaire was used to determine in which way, if at all, the intervention helped the participants to improve on their creative, experiential and attitudinal values. The questionnaire was also used to establish whether the intervention assisted participants to gain a better insight into the five areas (uniqueness, self-discovery, choice, responsibility, and self-transcendence) in which meaning can be discovered.

Data analysis

Data was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. The independent variable (brief meaning-centred intervention) on the dependent variable (PIL score/sense of meaning and BDI-II score/depressive symptoms) was examined for change post-intervention. The data from the one group pretest-posttest design was analysed by means of a non-parametric test procedure for small sample size designs. The qualitative data was thematically analysed using the procedures recommended by Guest (2012). These procedures focus on examining themes within data. Thematic analysis is a very useful method for capturing details of meaning within a data set.



Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for both groups. As can be observed from the table, the intervention increased PIL scores of the entire group by 9.15 ($p < .01$); and it decreased their BDI-II scores by 5.55 ($p < .01$). The descriptive statistics of adolescents and young adults are presented in tables 2 and 3, respectively. Notably, the young adults ($X=116.41$) showed significantly (t -test assuming unequal variances, $t=-3.34$, $df=54$, $p < 0.01$) more purpose in life than adolescents ($X=104.98$) before the workshop. As can be seen from the tables, the intervention increased the PIL scores of adolescents by 7.27 ($p < 0.01$), and those of young adults by 13.00 ($p < 0.01$); and it decreased their BDI scores to 10.38 ($p < 0.01$) and 6.23 ($p < 0.01$) respectively.

Table 4 presents the distribution of PIL groupings for pre-post intervention, as a system of comparing the two groups further. As can be seen from the table, none of the young adults reported low meaning in life compared to 26% of adolescents; after the intervention only 7% of adolescents reported low meaning in life. Another observation from the table is that 59% of the young adults reported a definite meaning in life compared to 34% of adolescents. The difference between the two groups was still noticeable after the intervention - 55% of adolescents compared to 82% of young adults reported a high meaning in life.

Table 5 presents the distribution of BDI groupings for pre-post intervention, as a system of comparing the two groups. As can be seen from the table, none of the young adults reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms compared to 36% of adolescents; nonetheless, after the intervention only 11% of adolescents reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms. An added observation from the table is that, among the young adults, 73% did not present with depressive symptoms, and indicated normal fluctuations in daily life, compared to 38% of adolescents. The difference between the two groups was still noticeable after the intervention; 66% of adolescents compared to 91% of young adults were considered normal.

The improvement in creative, experiential and attitudinal values appeared consistent with the intent of the brief meaning-centred intervention. With regard to the *Creative Values*, the adolescents and young adults affirmed that they learned new skills and/or they improved on existing ones such as problem-solving, advocacy, increased willpower, being resourceful, listening, self-control, goal-setting, being thoughtful, practical, communicating better, decision-making, being productive, selfless, empowered, making inputs, explanation, active participation, patience, perseverance, responsible, making choices, hard-working and resilience. Below are some of the adolescents' illustrative statements in this regard:

- ◆ I have been reminded to plan for the future. (Participant 4)
- ◆ I will work hard in order to achieve my goals. (Participant 47)



- ◆ I will work more on my talent and improve it. (Participant 29)

They further indicated that they gained more knowledge; as a result it will be easier for them to meet any challenges that come their way and solve them to the best of their abilities. More importantly, the adolescents acknowledged that the skills they acquired will result in improved team work, patience, giving and problem-solving, for example:

- ◆ It has helped me to think out of the box. (Participant 13)
- ◆ I will be able to communicate better with others. (Participant 10)
- ◆ The skills we learned will help us to define the direction which we would like our organisation to take so that we can be more productive and render better service to our peers. (Participant 12)

The latter are vital components in most peer help environments.

Illustrative statements from young adults with regard to *Creative Values* include:

- ◆ I will approach things differently. (Participant 60)
- ◆ I will engage more actively in activities. (Participant 49)
- ◆ To maximise potential in order to reach your goals. (Participant 66)

Changes in *Experiential Values* are reflected by the fact that the adolescents and young adults indicated that the skills they acquired will help them to be empathetic, self-transcendent, and help them to be role models, be a positive influence, appreciative, confident, contribute to teamwork, realise uniqueness in others, build group cohesion, be more trusting, sensitive, tolerant, and better communicators.

The adolescents' illustrative statements for *Experiential Values* include:

- ◆ I will be able to help others to find the meaning of their lives; in this way I will plough back to my community and school. (Participant 23)
- ◆ I have learned to establish good relations with other people. (Participant 37)
- ◆ Now I know that I am not only living for myself but also for the community. **AUTHOR, PARTICIPANT?**

Illustrative statements from young adults with regard to *Experiential Values* include:

- ◆ I will be a committed team member. (Participant 52)
- ◆ I have faith in myself and I believe I will be able to bring change into other people's lives. (Participant 69)
- ◆ I will encourage others to find meaning in their lives. (Participant 67)



With regard to the *Attitudinal Values*, the adolescents and young adults expressed the view that they had adopted positive attitudes, their mindsets had changed, they had faith, hope, were able to introspect, were persistent, tough minded, resilient, accepting, sincere and more determined to find meaning in their services and life.

The adolescents' illustrative statements for *Attitudinal Values* include:

- ◆ I have been empowered through sense of meaning. (Participant 40)
- ◆ I have learnt to never give up. (Participant 47)
- ◆ I have learnt to always maintain a positive attitude. (Participant 46)

Illustrative statements from young adults with regard to *Attitudinal Values* include:

- ◆ I now perceive life in a totally different way. (Participant 50)
- ◆ I will not be easily discouraged no matter how difficult things might seem. (Participant 51)
- ◆ I learned to make peace with my pain and not to deny it. (Participant 57)

Discussion

The findings of this study show that there was an improvement in the levels of meaning and a decline in depressive symptoms in the adolescents and young adults after a brief meaning-centred intervention. Creative meaning improved in that the participants affirmed that they learned new skills and/or they improved with regard to existing ones such as problem-solving, advocacy, willpower, resourcefulness, listening, self-control, goal-setting, care, being practical, communication, decision-making, productivity, selflessness, empowerment, making inputs, explanation, active participation, patience, perseverance, being responsible, making choices, hard-working and resilience. These findings are supported by a number of studies which report a significant relationship between the construct of meaning in life and wellbeing (Ishida and Okada 2006; Makola 2009; Meraviglia 2005; Pinquart 2002; Ryff and Singer 1998; Shek 1992; Zika and Chamberlain 1992). In addition, a study by Fillion et al. (2009) shows that a brief meaning-centred intervention can also be used to improve the levels of meaning of health educators who provide services on a voluntary basis.

Experiential values improved in that adolescents and young adults specified that the skills they acquired will help them to be self-transcendent, they will be role models, have a positive influence, be appreciative, confident, contribute to teamwork, realise uniqueness in others, build group cohesion, be more trusting, sensitive, tolerant, and better communicators. These findings are consistent with those of Fillion et al. (2009) who found that a meaning-centred intervention helped to change the perceptions of palliative-care nurses about their job. Another study with adolescents found that



meaning in life can act as a protective factor, and is associated with lower levels of aggressive and antisocial behaviours (Shek, Mau and Cheung 1994).

Attitudinal values were positively impacted in that adolescents and young adults expressed the view that they adopted a positive attitude, their mindsets changed, they had faith, hope, were able to introspect, were persistent, tough minded, resilient, accepting, sincere and more determined to find meaning in their services and life. This finding is supported by a study by Brassai, Piko, and Steger (2012) which found that in the youth the search for meaning in life was positively correlated with presence of meaning and negatively correlated with hopelessness. In addition, a number of studies reported a significant relationship between sense of meaning and positive variables which are indicators of wellbeing (Ishida and Okada 2006; Makola 2009).

Comparing the results of both groups, the young adults showed significantly more purpose in life and lower depressive symptoms than adolescents before and after the intervention. This finding is supported by Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler (2006) who believe that people may go through different stages of meaning development. A study conducted by Keeley (1976) found that younger people struggle with issues of meaning in life. Furthermore, a study by Michelson (1991) found a significant relationship between age and coping efforts.

Despite these findings, the current study has found that adolescents are capable of searching and finding meaning in life. This finding is supported by a study by Brassai, Piko and Steger (2012) according to which youth are capable of searching for more meaning in their lives in a manner that is not motivated by a loss or by lack of meaning but rather as part of a healthy developmental process of fulfilling their own personal potential.

Conclusion

The findings from this study show that it is possible to support young people in their search for meaning by means of an intervention, and that this can help in alleviating depressive symptoms. Also, the meaning-centred intervention seems to be a promising intervention for instilling resilience among young people who participate in peer helper programmes at schools and universities. Young people also indicated they could apply the theory to their personal lives. More importantly, the participants indicated that the skills they acquired during the intervention could be used in their work as peer helpers. It is thus recommended that this intervention be part of the ongoing training sessions for peer helpers in their respective settings.



The results of this study suggest that adolescents are able to search for meaning just as well as older people, and that the implications for the wellbeing of people are the same regardless of where they find themselves in their lives. The study found that adolescents, when compared to young adults, seem to struggle with issues related to meaning and purpose; however, both groups benefited significantly from the brief meaning-centred intervention. As an overall conclusion, the findings point to the significant role that a brief meaning-centred intervention may play in the sense of wellbeing of young people.

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Appendices

Table 1: Pre-post Intervention Means (with Standard Deviations) for Young People Meanings and Depression (N=69)

| Variable | N | Pre-Intervention Mean | Post Intervention Mean | Difference Score |
|------------|----|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Depression | 69 | 14.68 (8.25) | 9.01 (6.95) | +5.55 (5.55) |
| Meaning | 69 | 108.62 (15.60) | 117.99 (19.00) | -9.15 (14.84) |

Table 2: Pre-post Intervention Means (with Standard Deviations) for Adolescents Meanings and Depression (N=69)

| Variable | N | Pre-Intervention Mean | Post Intervention Mean | Difference Score |
|------------|----|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Depression | 47 | 16.98 (7.84) | 10.38 (7.60) | +6.52 (5.88) |
| Meaning | 47 | 104.98 (15.93) | 112.40 (15.24) | -7.27 (13.67) |



Table 3: Pre-post Intervention Means (with Standard Deviations) for Young Adults Meanings and Depression (N=69)

| Variable | N | Pre-Intervention Mean | Post Intervention Mean | Difference Score |
|------------|----|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| Depression | 22 | 9.77 (6.96) | 6.23 (4.34) | +3.55 (4.26) |
| Meaning | 22 | 116.41 (11.77) | 129.41 (19.69) | -13.00 (16.65) |

Table 4: Distribution of PIL Groupings for Pre- (post) Intervention

| PIL Category | All Pre- (post) | Adolescents Pre- (post) | Young Adults Pre- (post) |
|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Low meaning in life | 12 (5) | 12 (5) | 0 (0) |
| Moderate meaning in life | 28 (18) | 19 (14) | 9 (4) |
| Definite purpose in life | 29 (44) | 16 (26) | 13 (18) |

Table 5: Distribution of BDI Groupings for Pre- (post) Intervention

| BDI Category | All Pre- (post) | Adolescents Pre- (post) | Young Adults Pre- (post) |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Normal | 34 (51) | 18 (31) | 16 (20) |
| Mild depression | 16 (11) | 12 (9) | 4 (2) |
| Moderate depression | 15 (3) | 13 (3) | 2 (0) |
| Severe depression | 4 (2) | 4 (2) | 0 (0) |