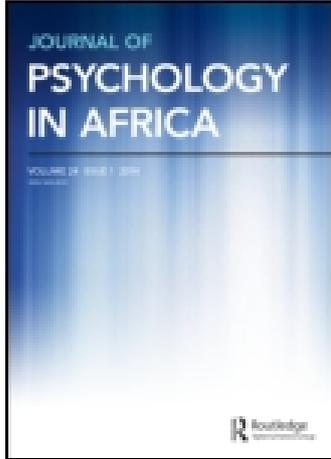


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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Psychology in Africa

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpia20>

Sense of meaning and study perseverance and completion: a brief report

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Published online: 28 Oct 2014.



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To cite this article: Solomon Makola (2014) Sense of meaning and study perseverance and completion: a brief report, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 24:3, 285-287

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2014.906084>

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BRIEF REPORT

Sense of meaning and study perseverance and completion: a brief report

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The study examines sense of meaning influences on study perseverance and course completion among students within a faculty of management sciences at a South African university ($n = 40$). Participants were selected for high scores on the Purpose in life (PIL) scale ($n = 20$; 50%) and contrasting low scores on the same ($n = 20$; 50%) (age range = 27 to 30 years, females = 73%, majority ethnicity = 70% Sotho speaking). Data were analysed using independent-samples *t*-test group comparison procedure. The results suggest that a high sense of meaning can explain study perseverance and completion.

Keywords: purpose in life, sense of meaning; study completion, study perseverance; wellness

Introduction

Sense of meaning plays a significant role in higher education, with effects that are likely to supersede socio-economic background (Akoojee, 2004; Sennett, Finchilescu, Gibson, & Strauss, 2003; Gonzalez, Greenwood & WenHsu, 2001; Ross, Cleland & Macleod, 2006). Meaning helps students exposed to stressors such as unemployment, poverty, and relationship difficulties better, thus preventing or decreasing potential stresses related to circumstances (Makola, 2007; Savolaine & Granello, 2002). Meaning and purpose are important characteristics of the life of the well individual (Hetter, 1980; Ryff & Singer, 1998a, 1998b). One way that meaning might have positive effects on an individual's wellness is related to intra-psychoic functioning or psychological well-being. For example, meaning can help in inspiring a sense of personal values and students may be guided by such values in order to overcome their stressors. In other words the stressors are no longer perceived as something frustrating but as a challenge (Purvis, 1979). In a study by Chambel and Curral (2005) general well-being was found to have a direct impact on student performance. In a study by Makola (2007), first-year students with a high sense of meaning coped much better academically because they used more effective coping strategies.

Meaninglessness may result in a number of problems, including difficulties in relating to others, lack of initiative, insecurity and many forms of irresponsibility (Edwards & Holden, 2001; Makola, 2007; Roberts, 1980). Edwards and Holden (2001) postulate that lack of life purpose is a risk factor for suicide amongst students (see also Silverman 2004).

Meaning status appears to influence learning task persistence through use of specific learning styles (Boyle, Duffy, & Dunleavy, 2003; Drysdale, Ross, & Schulz, 2001; Jones, Reichard, & Mokhtari, 2003), effective study strategies or methods (Bosch, Boshoff, & Louw, 2003; Yip & Chung, 2005), class attendance (Moore, 2005), and time management (Bitzer, 2003; Jackson, Weiss, Lundquist, & Hooper, 2003; Marlowe, Koonce, Lee, & Cai, 2002). Makola and

Van Der Berg (2010) suggested that students with a high sense of meaning are much better adjusted than those with a low sense of meaning. However, the differences may be best measured at the higher and lower ends of personal meaning statuses. The aim of the present study is to investigate whether persistence is significantly greater in students with a high sense of meaning compared to those with a low sense of meaning. It is a follow-up on a study conducted with the same participants to investigate how a sense of meaning assists first-year students in their adjustment at university. The findings of this study may contribute to the development of intervention programs aimed at improving the meaning potentials (the creative, experiential and especially the attitudinal values) of young people.

Method

Participants and setting

A stratified sample of two groups, 20 students who scored high on the Purpose in Life (PIL) test, and 20 who scored low on the PIL test, was selected from a random sample of 101 continuing students alumnae from the Faculty of Management Sciences, of a university of technology, in South Africa. Defining characteristics of the research participants: mean age 27.38 years (SD 1.29); females = 73.26%, and home language South Sotho 70.29%.

Measures

Participants completed the Purpose in Life Test (PI: Crumbaugh & Maholick 1969). The PIL is a 20-item Likert type scale (1 = low, 7 = high); total scores range from 20 (low purpose) to 140 (high purpose). According to Crumbaugh & Maholick (1969), PIL scores of 92 or less are indicative of low meaning, and scores of 112 and more indicate definite purpose in life, with moderate meaning in between. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84 was observed for the study sample.

Demographics, study persistence and completion data were taken from Student Records as gathered by the institution's academic administrator. Academic transcripts of the participants provided a direct record of study completion.

Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Management of Central University of Technology, Free State. All students who participated in this study completed a consent form. Participants were assured that all information would be treated as confidential and anonymous. Data were collected in the first and also second semesters of the first year of study.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed descriptively to compare sense of meaning, and against persistence level, as measured by the extent to which students persevere with their studies or drop out of university. Independent *t*-tests were used to determine if the differences in meaning and study persistence and completion were different with higher and lower purpose of life scores.

Results

There was a significant difference in the scores for High Meaning Group ($M = 3.150$, $SD = 1.785$) and Low

Meaning Group ($M = 0.500$, $SD = 1.573$) conditions; $t(38) = 4.267$, $p < 0.001$. These results suggest that a high sense of meaning resulted in a higher level of task perseverance and study completion. About 85% of students with a high sense of meaning completed their studies, while 15% dropped out; most (10%) of those who dropped out did so in the first year, and the remaining 5% in the third year. By contrast, 90% of participants from the Low Meaning Group dropped out of university before completing their studies, while only 10% persisted to completion of the course (see Figures 1 and 2). Almost half (45%) of those students from the Low Meaning Group who dropped out did so in the first year, with an additional 10% in each of the subsequent three years of study.

Discussion

This research is a follow-up on a study conducted with the same participants to investigate how a sense of meaning assists first-year students in their adjustment at university. The initial study discovered that first-year students with a high sense of meaning are much better adjusted to

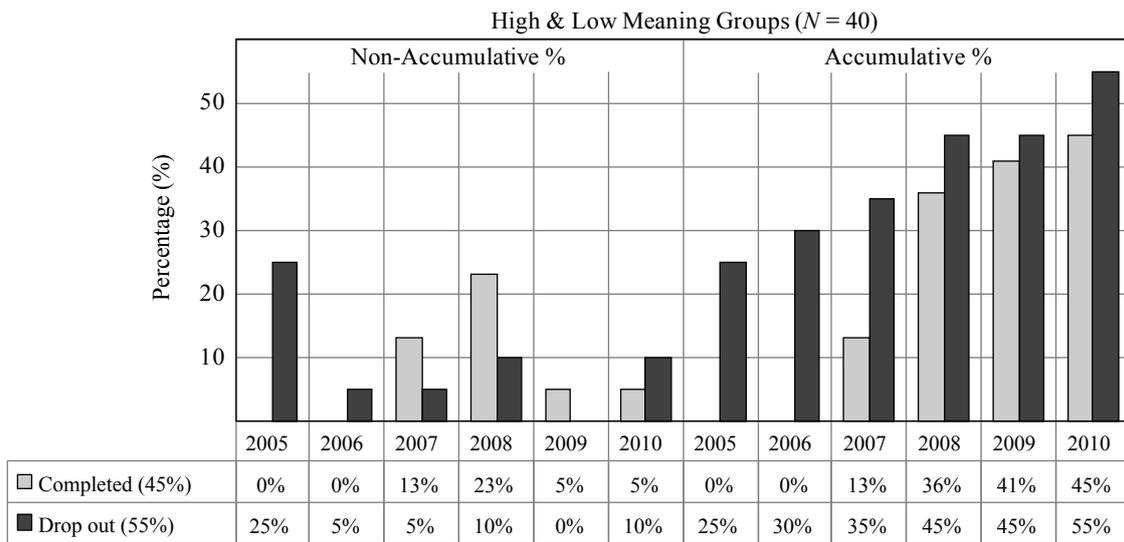


Figure 1. Participants in the high and low meaning groups who persisted with their studies

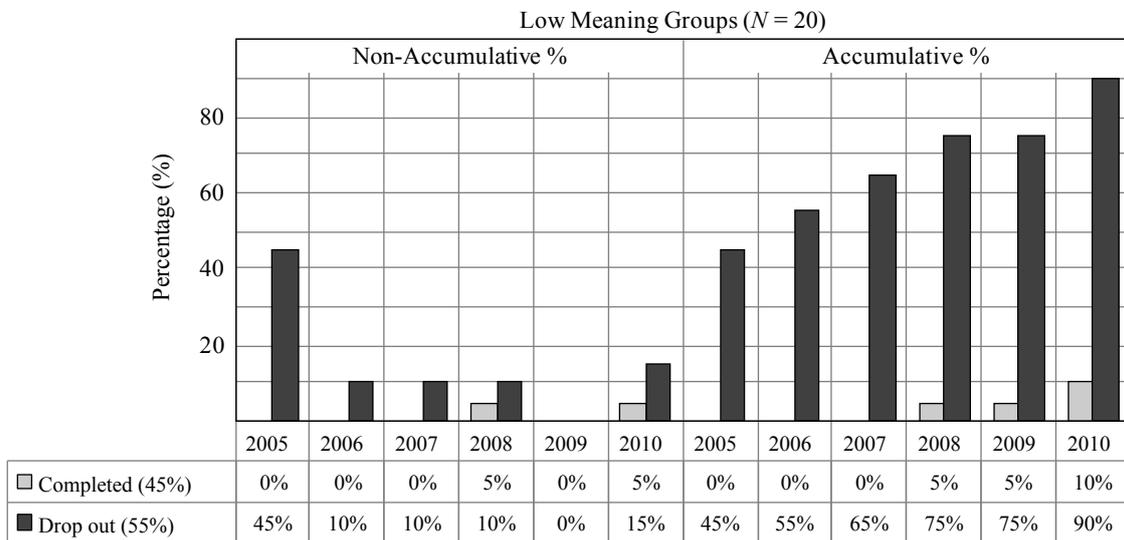


Figure 2. Participants in the low meaning group who dropped out of university

the demands of studying than those with a low sense of meaning (Makola & Van Den Berg, 2010). The results of the current study confirm the findings of Tinto (1993) that high motivation levels of students, especially in the first year of study, are considered to be the defining time for the rest of their university career. In addition, the findings confirm those of a study by Makola (2007) which revealed that sense of meaning is one of the constructs which helps students to tolerate life stressors more effectively, thus improving adjustment to the life demands, including academic demands. An earlier study by Nackord (1983) also proposed a significant relationship between meaning orientation and scholastic achievement. Lately, results of a study by Greenway (2005) reported that academic engagement is a strong predictor of success amongst university students and that meaning in life was significantly predictive of a student's level of engagement.

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. In order to develop the model further, more studies should be conducted whereby the levels of meaning of all first-year students are assessed with the Purpose in Life (PIL) test at the beginning of the year. Secondly, brief meaning-centred interventions will be conducted for students who achieved low PIL scores. Thirdly, the PIL will be re-administered at the end of the first year. Finally, the PIL scores will be compared to the academic performance of students, at the end of the first year, and subsequent years. In this way we would further advance this theory and the related literature on student persistence and students from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education.

In conclusion, students with a high sense of meaning are likely to persist with their studies and obtain a qualification. A high sense of meaning acts as a buffer against challenges faced by students.

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