

CATEGORIZATION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' MEANING OF LIFE

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Summary.—This study was designed to develop meaning-in-life categories which have adequate interrater reliability and stability over time. Also of interest were the categories which college students endorsed and the number of students who reported no meaning in life. A pilot study was used to develop appropriate categories. 100 students from a State University class were asked to write about the three most meaningful things in their lives and then ranked their written meanings in order of importance to them. Eight categories had adequate interrater reliability and stability over a 3-mo. period. The "relationship" category was most often chosen followed by "service," "growth," "belief," "existential-hedonistic," "obtaining," "expression," and "understanding." Only 5% of our sample claimed life to have no meaning.

Although many personality theorists have referred to the importance of meaning or its lack in one's life, surprisingly little empirical research has dealt directly with this concept. Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969) have developed a Purpose in Life Test to assess Frankl's approach to meaning in life, but it measures only intensity of meaning, ignoring the type or content of meanings reported. Allport-Vernon-Lindzey's Study of Values (1951) was the only empirical approach relevant to categorization of the content of meaning, but, among other problems, this scale had the drawbacks of not indicating if the person felt a lack of meaning in his life and not being appropriate for potential future investigation of the depth of the meanings reported. In light of these limitations we eschewed these approaches and instead chose to use a free-response essay question format. Our initial concerns were primarily methodological: to see if adequate interrater reliability of the categorizations could be achieved and to determine the stability of the subjects' meanings over time. Given adequate reliability and stability, we felt that the meaning content categories college students endorsed versus those they did not would be of interest. Finally, we were interested in what percentage of this group reported lack of meaning.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 106 undergraduate volunteers from an introductory psychology class. The mean age of the 76 females was 18 yr. and of the 30 males was 19 yr. Less than 10% were psychology majors. Detailed demographic data were not gathered but the state university's population is almost entirely white middle-class. In the preliminary study approximately 100 undergraduate students from an earlier comparable introductory psychology class were tested.

Procedure

For the main study an anonymous, numbered questionnaire was distributed which asked the subjects to describe and rank their three most important meanings and a concrete experience associated with each. If they felt life had *no* meaning, they were to say so and express why that was so.

Three months later the students were retested with an identical questionnaire; 3 could not be matched. From 98 returned, 55 questionnaires were selected from 35 women and 20 men.

For the preliminary study a modification of Battista and Almond's (1973) six life-orientation categories was used by the two investigators to classify independently the written meanings. Since the interrater reliability was low (73% agreement), the six categories were modified and two others (No. 7 and No. 8 categories below) were added to the original six. The resulting eight categories were used to classify written meanings in the final study. These categories, with brief, clarifying examples used for the final rating, are listed below:

1. *Understanding*: Concrete examples of trying to gain more knowledge, e.g., "My meaning is to learn all I can about the subject that interests me."
2. *Relationship*: An interpersonal orientation including family, friends, and romantic relationships, e.g., "Spending time with my friends and boyfriend is most meaningful to me."
3. *Service*: A helping, giving orientation dealing with people in the abstract, e.g., "My meaning is to help children learn."
4. *Belief*: Living according to one's beliefs (religious, political, or social), e.g., "Now I have found God my life is full of meaning."
5. *Expression*: Concrete expressions of self through such things as art, athletics, music, writing, etc., e.g., "When I see my artistic talent expressed by making something with my hands I feel full of meaning."
6. *Obtaining*: Emphasizes obtaining possessions, respect, and responsibility, e.g., "I want to make as much money as possible so that I feel secure."
7. *Growth*: Emphasizes a striving towards developing potentials, obtaining goals, e.g., "I believe I was born to find out about myself and to develop my talents. That's what life is about: change, growth, and obtaining goals."
8. *Existential-Hedonistic*: Includes general expressions that pleasure and daily life are most meaningful, e.g., "My meaning is to enjoy each day as fully as possible."

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interrater Reliability and Temporal Stability

Two independent raters obtained 86% agreement (73% in the preliminary study) in assigning the protocols to the eight categories. The chosen categories were stable over a 3-mo. period. There was a statistically significant deviation from chance ($z = 9.55$) in the proportion of times (.49) the retest meaning was both the same meaning category and ranked in the same order of importance as the original meaning. If ranked order of importance was not considered (if only whether the person gave the same meaning upon being

retested as had originally been mentioned), then the proportion of agreement rises to .73, which is also statistically significantly different from chance ($z = 6.45$).

Percentage of Meaning Categories

The total number of meanings reported by our college students was the following: 36% for Relationships, 14% for Service, 13% for Growth, 12% for Belief, 10% for Existential-Hedonistic, 6% for Obtaining, 4% for Expression, and 2% for Understanding (senior author's ratings). The miscellaneous category was resorted to only 5% of the time. By t test there were no statistically significant sex differences in the rankings ($p > .05$).

These percentages were over-all percentages of all meanings written. When the meanings were separated into those ranked first, second, and third in importance, these percentages were congruent with the over-all figures with one exception: a much larger percentage of subjects (29%) cited the Belief category as their most important meaning than was true of the over-all Belief percentage (12%). Logically and from a reading of the protocols this can be explained by stating that a person tended either to feel strongly about religion or not care for it at all.

Erikson's (1959) developmental approach, in which young adulthood is spent struggling for intimacy in relationships, is congruent with the Relationship category being ranked first for this particular sample. Of course, it is possible that developing a relationship is important to all age levels. A future study is planned to ascertain which idea is more correct.

For the category of Understanding to rank lowest is depressing for at least our state university system unless our goal is to increase respect for learning and understanding rather than to import knowledge to the already motivated.

Lack of Meaning

The preliminary study indicated 18% of the subjects reported that they had no meaning in their life; in the present study only 5% said this. Both results were well below Frankl's (1963) 51% reported from an informal survey of patients and nursing staff in a hospital setting. We do not automatically place much credence in Frankl's figures, but we suspect that our own percentages might be on the low side for several reasons: the instructions biased people toward writing about meaning rather than their lack of it, college students may have more meaning than less motivated people of their age group, and the perfunctory nature of some of the reports led us to question how strongly some really were involved in their stated meanings. Of course, it is too much to expect that our subjects will continually be burning with meaning, but the most striking subjective, qualitative observation obtained from reading these protocols was that some people had shallow conceptions of what meaning could be.

An optimistic position about the meaning-richness of our students can be taken on the basis of only a small percentage who stated they have no meaning. In addition, only a small percentage named meanings that were basically materialistic (Obtaining meaning, 6%) or either living just for today or simply for pleasure (Existential-Hedonistic meaning, 10%). On the other hand, the traditionally idealistic posture of wanting to "help others" (Service meaning, 14%) is not strongly represented. Instead, our students seemed most generally to have turned toward close, personal relationships (36%) for meaning (rather than out toward people they do not know) and toward retaining a commitment to some sort of belief (29% ranking Belief as their most important meaning).

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