

Influence of Purpose in Life on Meaning in Life among International Chinese University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Logotherapy theory of Frankl suggests that the fundamental drive of human existence is to constantly seek the meaning and purpose of life to satisfy psychological needs, and the meaning in life is the basic element for an individual to experience happiness in life. Some scholars have verified that meaning in life has a positive effect on college students' life satisfaction and well-being. However, there are a lot of studies on college students, while there are few studies on international students. Moreover, compared with local college students, international students need to leave the familiar environment to adapt to different cultures and study with unfamiliar people, so their mental health needs to be paid more attention. Meaning in life among international university student has a significant purpose in life and mental health impact. Chinese students make up the largest group of international students in Malaysia. This study aimed to present an integrative model of factors that

contribute to variability in meaning in life among international Chinese university student, including background demographic (gender, education background, religion), and the relationship of purpose in life and meaning in life. Participants responded to a questionnaire online via Google form. There are two instruments used in this study, Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Cronbach's Alpha=0.926) is for investigating the level of meaning in life and the Purpose in Life Test (PLT) (Cronbach's Alpha=0.933) is for investigating the level of purpose in life among international Chinese students. As for validity analysis, the test results showed that the KMO test values of these two variables in the survey data were 0.847 (MLQ) and 0.822 (PLT). In Pearson correlation test, the results showed that MLQ and PLT were significantly correlated with each other, with p-values less than 0.01 and correlation coefficients greater than 0, showing a significant positive relationship. The study highlights the importance of enhancing the meaning of life among international university students.

Keywords: Logotherapy, Meaning in Life, Purpose in Life. International Student

Introduction

As we endeavor to enter new and modern millennium, The values, and the meaning of life of international university students have become a major zone of psychological investigation and exploration. The university period is a crucial developmental and growth period of one's life. However, many college students gradually appear mentally and spiritually distressed and do not know why they study abroad. Do not know what the value and meaning of existence are, leading to the lack of meaning in life and resulting negative behaviors have become more and more common social phenomena (Gan, 2019). Globally, mental health conditions affect 16% of youth and adolescents while depression is one of the leading causes of illness among the youth (World Health Organization, 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO; Hendin et al., 2008) has found that over the last 50 years, global suicide rates have increased by 60 percent. It is alarming that suicide is the second commonest cause of death among people aged 25–40 and the third commonest cause of death for young people whose age range is from 15 to 24 (Toussaint, 2006). The statistics in Malaysia are consistent with the report from WHO as the Malaysian Health Ministry has identified those aged 16–25 as being the highest suicide risk group. These two groups of young people, adolescents (15–19 years of age) and emerging adults (20–25 years of age) have been identified as being most vulnerable to suicide attempts (Hendin et al., 2008; Tam, Lee, Har, & Chan, 2011).

According to Leong and Chou (2002) research, there was 15% to 25% chance for international students to experience psychological and psychiatric problems when facing new situation. Another study conducted on 551 international graduate students in America also showed that around 44% had emotional or correlated stress which considerably exaggerated their health or academic performance in the last year (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2007). Xu (2016) first proposed that the phenomenon of "hollow disease" among college students was a psychological disorder caused by the loss of values.

The meaning of life

Meaning of life was understood as "the sense made of, and significance felt regarding the nature of one's being and existence" (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006, p. 81). Viktor Frankl, the founder of existential logotherapy, a Holocaust survivor, suggests that searching for meaning is fundamental for human existence (1963). For Frankl, "the will to meaning" is quite like the spiritual dimension and he holds that meaning is a motivation of life and is a fundamental part of the make-up of human being. Frankl believed that meaning is discovered

when man can self-transcend, and a meaningfulness life can be attained by directing one's energy towards others instead of focusing on oneself. Frankl believes that the root of human motivation is the search for meaning in life, that is, the primary and primary human motivation is to strive to achieve or find meaning in life. Frankl also suggested that people need to live for something or someone, but that it is people's own needs and needs that their lives have purpose and meaning. At the same time, he points out that the search for meaning creates tension, which originates within the individual, but which is an essential prerequisite for mental health.

Crumbaugh (1973) put forward that the sense of meaning in life is a kind of goal, which enables individuals to have a sense of direction and value. However, in the process of realizing this goal, individuals will also obtain a sense of identity of "becoming a person of value".

1.1 Logotherapy theory

Logotherapy is based on a philosophy of life with three interlocking basic beliefs. Freedom of Will, Will Meaning and Meaning of Life are the three basic theoretical premises of Frankel's theory of logotherapy. Frankel believes that freedom of will is the basic feature of human existence. Except for schizophrenics and fatalists, man is completely spiritually free and can constantly make his own choices. People have no freedom of will, it is impossible to choose the attitude of life, can only passively accept the domination of needs. Even in the state of almost powerless, people can transcend the constraints of the environment through their own choices, to achieve their own ideals and aspirations. Human being is a whole which is composed of physiological, psychological, and spiritual needs. Physiological needs to meet, so that people survive; The satisfaction of psychological needs, make people happy; The satisfaction of spiritual needs makes people feel valuable. Among them, the spiritual aspect is the will to pursue the meaning and the desire for the meaning of existence. Frankel believes that the will to pursue meaning is the most basic human motivation, and he affirms that everyone has the meaning of life to search for the value of truth, goodness and beauty. If an individual lacks the will to seek meaning and does not understand the meaning of his existence, there will be problems such as existential frustration and neurosis. Frankel believes that the meaning of life has objectivity and subjectivity. On the one hand, meaning has its own reality, which is not invented, but discovered; On the other hand, meaning is unique and single. Different people have their own unique meaning of life, and the same person has different meaning of life under different conditions. Only when one takes responsibility in life can one discover the essence of one's own existence, and only when one assumes the obligation of life can one discover the meaning of life.

Frankel proposed that there are three ways for people to obtain the meaning of life, that is, to discover the meaning of life by realizing the three values. One is creative value. It refers to the realization of personal value through some type of activity, i.e., merit or path of achievement, i.e. the meaning of work. Finding meaning in life through personal work, hobbies, sports, service, self-giving or contribution, and relationships with others. Individuals find meaning in life through their down-to-earth daily work, and this value and meaning is linked to their contribution to society. The second is experiential value. The individual finds meaning in life by experiencing something. Some people with illness can relieve their negative feelings by experiencing love from others or appreciating the beauty of nature. The third is attitude value. This is the meaning of suffering, the highest value of human existence. For example: personal beliefs or values in life. Frankel believes that the most primitive motive power of human beings is the will to seek meaning. When people feel meaningless to their

lives, their behavior will lose basis and be troubled by "existential emptiness", which is the setback of the will to seek meaning, which is called "existential frustration" by meaning therapy. Many of the related psychological symptoms or diseases are caused by this. People in this situation can find or recover life purpose through the help of meaning healers or through self-exploration. A person who has a purpose in life will feel that life is meaningful.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this research is to explore the level of meaning and purpose of International Chinese students in Malaysia and the relationship of these two variables and we have a few good instruments that we can use. Therefore, quantitative method is more suitable for this research. Realizing that the students consist of different demographic and academic background, the study also incorporated certain demographic variables in the questionnaire. The data was collected at a single point of time to measure the personal background, IV and DV. Used Google form via the Internet, like email, Whatsapp and WeChat. The study used Purpose in Life Test (PIL) and Meaning in Life questionnaires (MLQ) to collect data and analyzed using SPSS statistics version 22. The Cronbach's alpha analysis was used to find out the degree of instrumental reliability. Cronbach's test was applied to the scale for meaning in life by Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler (2006). The internal consistency of reliability of meaning in life questionnaire on the Linkert scale that had 10 items was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.78$). Likewise, for this study, the value of Cronbach's Alpha PIL is at 0.930 level, considered to be very satisfying. This value meets the general criteria that item variations should be associated with a common source. (DeVellis, 2003)

2.1 Measures

2.1.1 Meaning in life Questionnaire.

MLQ is a scale developed by American scholar Steger (2006) to measure the meaning of life. The scale is divided into two dimensions—seeking meaning of life and experiencing meaning of life. The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) is a widely used psychological instrument designed to assess an individual's sense of meaning and purpose in life. It was developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick in 1964 and has since been revised by other researchers. The MLQ consists of various items that aim to measure two main dimensions of meaning in life: the Presence of Meaning (POM) and the Search for Meaning (SFM).

Presence of Meaning (POM): This dimension explores the degree to which an individual perceives their life as meaningful, significant, and purposeful. It assesses feelings of fulfillment, coherence, and a sense of direction in life. Search for Meaning (SFM): This dimension examines an individual's active exploration and pursuit of meaning and purpose in life. It measures the individual's motivation to search for answers to existential questions and their willingness to engage in self-reflection and introspection.

The MLQ typically consists of several statements or items related to these dimensions. Respondents rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement using a Likert scale. The scores obtained from the MLQ can provide insight into an individual's overall perception of meaning in life, the presence of meaning, and the level of search for meaning.

2.1.2 Purpose in Life Test

Based on Frankl's (1953) theory of purpose in life, Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) developed the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) to measure the degree a person experiences a sense of meaning, purpose and value in life. The PIL test is a 20-item self-report attitudinal scale,

composed of 20 Likert-type response items on a 7-point scale designed to measure the level to which a respondent recognizes a general sense of meaning, purpose and in life. (Frankl, 1985). However, for this study, a 5-point scale to make it easier for a respondent to decide. The PIL measures two main dimensions:

Purpose: This dimension assesses the individual's perception of having a purpose or reason for living, feeling a sense of direction and intentionality in life, and experiencing a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction from pursuing their goals. **Meaning:** This dimension explores the individual's perception of their life as meaningful, significant, and coherent. It examines feelings of connectedness, understanding, and the perception that life has a deeper purpose or value.

By completing the PIL, individuals can gain insights into their level of purpose and meaning in life. The scores obtained from the test can help identify areas of strength or areas where individuals may need to enhance their sense of purpose.

2.2 Participants

To conduct this study, a random sample of 58 university students, enrolled full time at Malaysian public university was selected. Male respondents recorded 18 persons or 31%, while female respondents were 40 or 69% This shows that female respondents have a higher percentage than male respondents.

A total of 5 public universities, representing 5 different regions were involved in this study. Respondents from UM amounted to 15 persons (25.9%) and 10 students (17.2%) were from USM, 11 students (20 %) from UPM. 2 students (3%) from UKM, 20 students (34.5%) from UTM.

A total of 40 (70%) respondents are postgraduate students and 18 (30%) respondents are undergraduate students. This shows that postgraduate have a higher percentage than undergraduate.

For the religion of respondents, only 8 (14%) students with religion and 50 (86%) respondents without religion.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study is to determine the level of meaning and purpose in life among international university's students. So, the results are divided into two parts: the differences between the demographic variables in this study and the level and relationship between IV and DV

3.1 Demographic Variables of this Study

The demographics of the participants are presented descriptively using the scheme of gender, education background, religion, different university, and if staying in Malaysia. The results in Table 1 show the differences on IV and DV between with varied demographics.

Table 1: An independent sample T-test of gender on the meaning and purpose in life

| | Gender (Mean±SD) | | t | p |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------|--------|-------|
| | Female(n=40) | Male(n=18) | | |
| Meaning in life | 5.126±1.394 | 5.372±1.169 | -0.653 | 0.517 |
| Purpose in life | 4.728±1.051 | 4.982±1.074 | -0.848 | 0.4 |

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

T-test is used to study the differences of different genders in the meaning of life, as can be seen in Table 1: The t value and p value of Female and Male groups were -0.653 and 0.517,

indicating that there was no significant difference between the two groups ($p>0.05$). The sample size of the first group was 40, the mean value was 5.126, and the standard deviation was 1.394. The sample size of the second group was 18, the mean was 5.372, and the standard deviation was 1.169. The mean difference between the two sets of data is -0.246.

T-test is used to study the differences of different genders in life purposes, as can be seen in Table 1: The T-value and P-value of Female and Male groups were -0.848 and 0.4, indicating that there was no significant difference between the two groups ($p>0.05$). The sample size of the first group was 40, the mean value was 4.728, and the standard deviation was 1.051. The sample size of the second group was 18, the mean was 4.982, and the standard deviation was 1.074. The mean difference between the two sets of data is -0.255.

Table 2: An independent sample T-test of different educational background on the meaning and purpose in life

| | | Education Background (Mean±SD) | | t | p |
|-----------------|----|--------------------------------|---------------------|--------|-------|
| | | Postgraduate(n=40) | Undergraduate(n=18) | | |
| Meaning in life | in | 5.196±1.21 | 5.217±1.584 | -0.055 | 0.956 |
| Purpose in life | in | 4.864±0.877 | 4.68±1.395 | 0.611 | 0.544 |

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$ *** $p<0.001$

T-test is used to study the differences of educational background in the meaning of life. As can be seen from Table 2: The T-value and P-value of group Postgraduate and group Undergraduate are -0.055 and 0.956, indicating that there are no significant differences between the two groups ($p>0.05$). The sample size of the first group is 40, the mean value is 5.196, and the standard deviation is 1.21. The sample size of the second group was 18, the mean was 5.217, and the standard deviation was 1.584. The mean difference between the two sets of data is -0.021.

T-test is used to study the difference of educational background in life purpose, as can be seen from Table 2: The T-value and P-value of group Postgraduate and group Undergraduate are 0.611 and 0.544, indicating that there are no significant differences between the two groups ($p>0.05$). The sample size of Group 1 is 40, the mean value is 4.864, and the standard deviation is 0.877. The sample size of the second group was 18, the mean was 4.68, and the standard deviation was 1.395. The mean difference between the two sets of data is 0.184.

Table 3: An independent sample T-test of religion on the meaning and purpose in life

| | | Religion (Mean±SD) | | t | p |
|-----------------|--|--------------------|------------------------|--------|-------|
| | | With Religion(n=8) | Without Religion(n=50) | | |
| Meaning in life | | 4.987±2.123 | 5.237±1.176 | -0.491 | 0.625 |
| Purpose in life | | 5.312±0.874 | 4.726±1.067 | 1.474 | 0.146 |

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$ *** $p<0.001$

T-test is used to study the difference of religious belief in the meaning of life. Table 3 shows: The t value and p value of groups With Religion and Without Religion were -0.491 and 0.625, indicating that there was no significant difference between the two groups ($p>0.05$). The sample size of the first group was 8, the mean value was 4.987, and the standard deviation was 2.123. The sample size of the second group was 50, the mean was 5.237, and

the standard deviation was 1.176. The mean difference between the two sets of data is - 0.249.

T-test is used to study the difference of religious belief in the purpose of life, as can be seen in Table 3: The t value of the group With Religion and the group Without Religion was 1.474 and the p value was 0.146, indicating that there was no significant difference between the two groups ($p > 0.05$). The sample size of the first group was 8, the mean was 5.312, and the standard deviation was 0.874. The sample size of the second group was 50, the mean was 4.726, and the standard deviation was 1.067. The mean difference between the two sets of data is 0.587.

Table 4: Anova results of different schools on meaning and purpose in life

| | UKM(n=2) (Mean±SD) | UM(n=15) (Mean±SD) | UPM(n=11) (Mean±SD) | USM(n=10) (Mean±SD) | UTM(n=20) (Mean±SD) | F | p |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------|-------|
| Meaning in life | 7±0 | 5.867±0.974 | 4.464±1.424 | 5.082±1.138 | 4.991±1.346 | 3.348 | 0.016 |
| Purpose in life | 6±1.414 | 4.99±1.073 | 4.372±1.344 | 4.61±0.801 | 4.888±0.906 | 1.37 | 0.257 |

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

According to one-way ANOVA, there is no significant difference between different schools in the purpose in life ($F = 1.37$, $p > 0.05$), but there is a significant difference between different schools in the meaning in life ($F = 3.348$, $p = 0.016 < 0.05$), among which UKM has the highest mean score, followed by UM, USM and UTM. UPM has the lowest average score.

3.2 The level and relationship between meaning in life and purpose in life.

Table 5: The level of meaning in life.

| Level | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Low (1-2) | 2 | 3.40% |
| Medium (3-5) | 23 | 39.70% |
| High (6-7) | 33 | 56.90% |
| Total | 58 | 100% |

M=5.202 SD=1.323

This 10-item version of the MLQ test score was divided into 3 levels, which is (1-2) as low that suggest a lack of life meaning, (3-5) reflect moderate levels of meaning and (6-7) as high meaning in life.

As shown in the Table 5: Level of MLQ, for the MLQ test's score, the mean was 5.202 with its Standard Deviation (SD) was 1.323. This finding depicted that majority (56.9%) with the frequency distribution was 33 students, are typically interpreted as high degree of meaning in high life. Only 3.4% (2 students) shared the low level of meanings of life and 39.7% (23 students) were at the medium level of meaning. The MLQ showed a good internal consistency ($\text{Alpha} = 0.926$).

Table 6: The level of purpose in life.

| Level | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Low (1-2) | 2 | 3.40% |
| Medium (3-5) | 32 | 55.20% |
| High (6-7) | 24 | 41.40% |
| Total | 58 | 100% |

M=4.807 SD=1.056

This 20-item version of the PIL test score was divided into 3 levels, which is (1-2) as low that suggest a lack of life purpose, (3-5) reflect moderate levels of purpose and (5-7) as high purpose in life. (Crumbaugh and Maholick 1964).

As shown in the Table 6: Level of PIL, for the PIL test's score, the mean was 4.807 with its Standard Deviation (SD) was 1.056. This finding depicted that majority (55.2%) with the frequency distribution was 32 students, are typically interpreted as medium level of purpose in life. Only 3.4% (2 students) shared the low level of purpose in life and 41.4% (24 students) were at the high degree of purpose. The PIL showed a good internal consistency (Alpha=0.933) and factor analysis revealed three factors which were categorized as Excitement of Life, Contentedness with life and Purpose and Goals in Life.

Table 7: Pearson correlation analysis

| | | Meaning in life | Purpose in life |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Meaning in life | Correlation coefficient | 1.0 | 0.577*** |
| | p-value | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Purpose in life | Correlation coefficient | 0.577*** | 1.0 |
| | p-value | 0.0 | 0.0 |

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

According to Pearson correlation analysis, there was a significant positive correlation between the meaning of life and the purpose of life ($r=0.577$, $p=0.000<0.05$).

4. DISCUSSION

This study provided an initial investigation of meaning, purpose and value in life of international Chinese university students, using the MLQ and PIL Test based on Frankl's conception of purpose in life. The results of this study indicated that international Chinese university students have a high level of sense of meaning, purpose and value in life, and there was a significant positive correlation between the meaning of life and the purpose of life among International Chinese students. as measured by MLQ and PIL. However, the survey found that these four demographic variables (gender, education background, religion, different university) had no significant difference on the meaning and purpose of life of international Chinese students. Then, are the living environment and activities of international students related to their sense of meaning and purpose in life? More demographic variables (such as whether the student's tuition is self-funded or from the government, whether the student has a disability, whether the student has a single parent, etc.) need to be added to the study and further research is needed.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on these findings, it is fair to conclude that how university students ultimately view their lives will largely depend on their level of meaning in life. Therefore, meaning in life is vital for a general evaluation of one's life (Çivitci & Çivitci, 2009). Hence, there exists an alignment between the current findings with that of earlier research, which stipulated that meaning in life remains constantly a correlate of purpose in life (Diener & Diener, 1995). Hence, international university students with low meaning, purpose and value in life could

experience less satisfaction towards life. The same would also be true of university students who would experience favorable life outcomes because of their positive mental state.

This study suggests that meaning in life should be recognized as a critical resource of purpose in life. It is essential to develop one's meaning in life since it determines the level of one's satisfaction in life and will be a good buffer against negative emotions. Increased meaning in life results in attainment of higher levels of well-being (Ji et al., 2019) and a better quality of life. Thus, meaning in life will always be regarded as an important mediator in the various aspects of life such as social support, self-efficacy, self-confidence, resiliencies, and happiness. It is crucial that the future pillars of the nation, our university students, possess good mental health, so that they can contribute to the nation and society.

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