



# Sources of life meaning among South African university students

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 OPTENTIA RESEARCH PROGRAMME

Enabling optimal expression of individual, social and institutional potential

## A few questions...

- On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being the least, and 10 being the most, how meaningful do you consider your life to be?\*
- Where (i.e. from which sources) do the meaning you do experience mostly come from?
- \*Meaning in life, is defined by Steger et al. (2009, p.43) as “the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life”.

## Introduction

- Your answers to these questions matter – a lot!
- Research indicates that the amount of meaning you feel your life to have is a key variable in your psychological well-being: The **more meaning** you experience, the happier, more satisfied, more hopeful, and more resilient you are likely to be.

## Introduction

- However, the converse is also true – the **less meaning** you perceive your life to have, the more likely you are to languish, to have a predominance of negative emotions, to experience feelings of hopelessness and even depression.

• **Therefore – meaning matters!**

## Introduction

- Whilst meaning can be experienced in a **global** sense, most often our sense of life meaning is derived from **specific sources**.
- The **main sources** of meaning in life for people of all ages include personal relationships, personal growth, creativity, success and achievement, freedom from hardship, altruism, enjoyment or hedonism, religion, and leaving a legacy.
- **Relationships** constitute the most important source of meaning across cultures and age groups.
- We typically draw upon **4-6 different sources** of meaning.

## Motivation for the study

- Research on the sources of meaning are:
  - **generally scant**, and specifically so within an SA context, especially in relation to university students. This is a cause for concern as a) meaning sources exhibit cultural specificity and b) students' eudaimonic well-being has been shown to affect various academically-related constructs, such as study engagement and academic performance.
  - **mostly quantitative** - fail to identify the motives underlying meaning sources, which is essential in order to correctly categorize meaning sources.

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## Research objectives

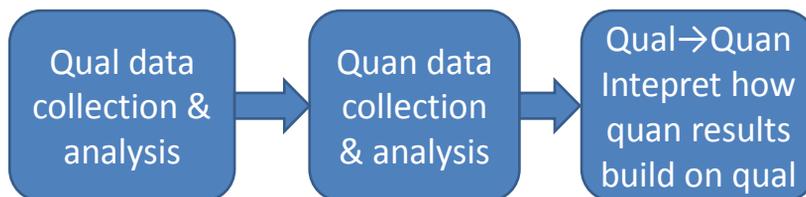
The present study aimed to:

- explore, describe and measure the sources of meaning, and
  - explain the motives underlying these sources,
- amongst a group of South African university students.



## Methodology

- A sequential exploratory mixed methods design as outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) was adopted as basis for the study.



## Methodology: Qualitative phase

### Participants

- 40 third-year social science students at the Vaal-Triangle campus of the NWU
- Participant characteristics:
  - African (n=22, mostly Sesotho, Setswana, isiZulu) and white (n=18)
  - male (n=10) and female (n=30)

### Data generation

- Semi-structured questionnaires
- Draw and write



## Methodology: Qualitative phase

### Data analysis

Thematic qualitative content analysis

1. Open coding, and grouping codes into categories and overarching themes.
2. Axial coding – identifying relationships between categories and themes.



## Methodology: Quantitative phase

### Participants

- 203 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year social science students
- African (n=180), predominantly Sesotho and to a lesser extent isiZulu and Setswana speaking) and white (n=13)
- Male (n=50) and female (n=153) students.
- 115 respondents mainly resided in urban areas, 32 in rural areas, and 47 spent a lot of time in both.



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## Methodology: Quantitative phase

### Data collection

1. Quantitative questionnaire was developed on the basis of qualitative findings. In vivo terms used.
2. Questionnaire consists of 27 items, which requests respondents to rank meaning sources on a 5 point scale ranging from 1 (no importance) to 5 (very important). A 'not applicable to me' option was also provided.

### Data analysis

Basic descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, comparisons of group means via independent t-tests in SPSS 21.



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## Findings: Qualitative phase

### Theme 1: Personal relationships

- Most significant source of meaning (along with hope) was relationships with **family**.
- **Friends** and **romantic partners** were also significant, but much less important.
- Reasons were because these relationships were seen to provide support, encouragement, love, caring and guidance. Where relationships did not provide these, they were not regarded as source of meaning.
- Relationships with **pets** were a significant source of meaning for white, but not African participants

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## Findings: Qualitative phase

### Theme 2: Hope, achievement, and goals

- Along with family, **hope** (anticipation of a good / better future) was the most important meaning source of all.
- Closely related to hope, (especially African) students also derived significant life meaning from their **goals and plans for the future**, from **achievement and success**, and from **personal growth and development**.
- Overall emphasis of students' meaning sources are *future*, rather than present focused.

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## Findings: Qualitative phase

### Theme 3: Education

- **Education** was 3<sup>rd</sup> most important source of meaning.
- In most cases, education appears to have extrinsic, instrumental value as a source of meaning, which lay in the perceived promise of a meaningful and fulfilling career and its attendant material benefits.
- However, four of the participants considered education to be intrinsically meaningful in that it provided understanding and broadened their minds.

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## Findings: Qualitative phase

### Theme 4: God and religion

- **God and religion** was an important source of meaning because this was seen to be a source of support and care, as well as '*security, love, peace and direction*' and '*a purpose in life*'.
- Religion was more important to rural than urban students.

### Theme 5: Service to others

- **Helping others** or doing things that **made a difference in others' lives** (especially that of friends and family) was regarded as meaning source due to the positive feelings it evoked in the helper.

## Findings: Qualitative phase

### Theme 6: Creative Self-expression, Hobbies, Recreation and Leisure, and Sport

- These were regarded as significant meaning sources, especially among healthier and rural-dwelling participants, due to the enjoyment, pleasure and fun derived from these activities.

### Theme 7: Health

- While **health** was regarded as significant meaning source (especially for African and older students), it is correlated positively with most other meaning sources, suggesting it might be a (partial) precondition in this regard.

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## Findings: Quantitative phase

- Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating that greater meaning is derived from a given source.
- All sources were correlated with overall level of religiosity and self-reported health.
- All mean scores were compared across gender, race and whether students spent most of their lives in an urban or rural setting (not reported in table).

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Meaning sources	Mean	SD	Correlation with self-reported health	Correlation with religiosity
Hope for a better/good future life	4.85	.413	.06	.01
My family	4.84	.442	.16*	.02
My studies/education	4.77	.491	.12	.03
My goals and plans	4.74	.503	.19**	.07
Achievement/success	4.73	.546	.18*	-.01
Personal growth & development	4.71	.548	.15*	.1
My health	4.56	.744	.20**	.09
My religion/spirituality	4.50	.808	.09	.45**
Learning new things/knowledge	4.46	.738	.15*	.03
Making a difference in others' lives	4.40	.734	.16*	.35**
My work/job	4.27	1.046	-.02	-.16
Helping/doing something for other people	4.21	.807	.15*	.12

Meaning sources	Mean	SD	Correlation with health	Correlation with religiosity
Having free will	4.09	.920	.09	.04
Creative self-expression	4.07	.870	.14*	.24**
Recreation and leisure/having fun	3.98	.930	.09	-.02
Eating and drinking	3.88	1.048	.14	.10
My social life/socializing with others	3.85	.885	.11	.02
My friends	3.77	1.013	-.01	.00
My hobbies (excluding sport)	3.77	.925	.13	.07
My romantic partner (e.g. girlfriend / boyfriend / husband / wife)	3.72	1.090	.04	.12
Nature	3.65	1.109	.17**	.13
Money	3.57	1.116	.04	-.07
My material possessions/things I own	3.39	1.106	.10	.06
Sport	3.20	1.314	.23**	.06
My pet	2.90	1.264	.08	.01

## Implications

- The findings underline the importance of first exploring constructs in poorly understood contexts qualitatively, before engaging in quantitative analyses.
- Results imply that existing approaches conflate separate meaning sources (e.g. family and friends / education and learning).
- Understanding *why* meaning sources are regarded as such is very important.

## Implications

- The primary importance of **family** (rather than friends or peers) as most significant meaning source is noteworthy.
- Along with family, **hope for a better future** appears to be where most students find most of their life meaning.
- Often this hope is tied to the perceived instrumental benefits of **education** – university studies become a ‘ticket to a better life’. Will these hopes be realized?
- Promoting **physical health** is important, as it appears to be correlated with students’ ability to derive meaning from many other meaning sources.

## Implications

- A strong theme emerging from the data is that there is **an instrumental rather than an intrinsic quality to most of the sources of meaning** – meaning is not innate to most sources - what seems important is the extent to which a source is able to provide valued qualities such as love, support, encouragement, achievement, beauty, positive emotion and deployment of own strengths and skills.
- Finding meaning seems to be **a relational process** that is constellated in the process of exchange between the individual and the source of meaning.

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# THANK YOU!

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