

6-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Mueller, Erin A., "Views of Meaning in Life: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Francophone and American Cultures" (2016). *Faculty Research*. 19.

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Views of Meaning in Life: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Francophone & American Cultures

Erin A. Mueller ♦ Concordia University ♦ Portland, Oregon, U.S.A.

Introduction

The concept of meaning in life is existential in nature; essential to being human yet elusive at times. As Frankl (1959) wrote, “Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life...This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone” (p. 121). Grasping what, exactly, it is composed of can be challenging. Moreover, the question of the universality of what goes into each individual’s meaning in life likely connects with culture. Culture is an inherent part of being human, and it has considerable impact on development. Thus, could there be differences in what people experience as adding meaning in life, as well as the process of searching for and discovering this meaning?

Method

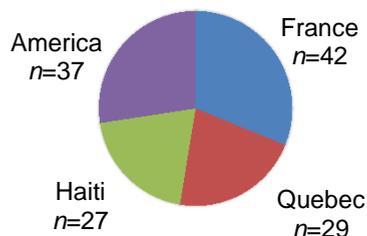
For this exploratory study, I hypothesized that there would be differences in views of meaning in life across three Francophone cultures: Angers, France; Montréal, Québec; and Carrefour, Haiti, as well as with an American sample in Portland, Oregon.



I administered the meaning of life questions on the World Health Organization Quality of Life Spirituality, Religiousness, and Personal Beliefs instrument (WHOQOL-SRPB; Mandhouj, Etter, Courvoisier, & Aubin; 2012). Also, I utilized the Schedule for Meaning in Life Evaluation (SMiLE; Fegg, Kramer, L’hoste, & Borasio, 2008) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). All surveys have been published in French by the authors; I used the English versions in the American sample.

Results

A total of 135 individuals across the four sites consented to participate in this study.



The average age was 26 years (range=18-67 years) with 86 women and 49 men. Additional demographics are available upon request. Results indicated that meaning in life was an important concept across all four cultures. Many significant group differences were found across the three measures. For example, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for independent samples, followed by post-hoc Tukey HSD tests of the WHOQOL-SRPB meaning in life items showed that the American sample had a significantly higher endorsement than the French and Haitian samples, and the Québécois sample had a significantly higher endorsement than the Haitian sample, $F(3,129) = 7.95, p < 0.001$. The effect size, estimated with η^2 , was 0.16. On the SMiLE, eight of the 13 themes identified by Fegg, Kramer, Bausewein, & Borasio (2007) showed significant cross-cultural differences: family, work, leisure, friends, health, partnership, spirituality, and altruism. Also, there were significant differences between the cultures on ratings of *importance* of these domains, $F(3,128) = 2.70, p = 0.049$. The effect size was 0.06. Tukey HSD post hoc tests showed that the French sample had significantly lower importance ratings than both the Haitian and American samples. On the MLQ, the Haitian sample had significantly higher *Search* for meaning scores than the other three groups, $F(3,123) = 11.34, p < 0.001$. The effect size was 0.22.

Discussion

In the Francophone and American cultures surveyed, meaning in life was universally regarded as an important concept. However, individual cultures impacted what was regarded as adding meaning, and the level of importance this search was given varied. The value placed on themes showed significant differences, including those related to family, work, leisure, friends, health, partnership, spirituality, and altruism. Further understanding these differences seems important, as it has implications for better global awareness.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to those who assisted in the survey process: Alain Gracianette, Tiffany Keeton, & Linda Rountree (Portland, Oregon); Sue Crust & Michael Price (Angers, France); Robert Vallerand & Ariane St-Louis (Montréal, Québec); and Michael Jeune & Dani Anderson (Carrefour, Haiti). A Concordia University faculty research grant, an AHA International (now GEO) mini-grant, and the Psychology Department at Concordia University provided some funding for this project.

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