HOW PURPOSEFUL ARE SEMINARIANS IN LIFE?

Samuel E. Oladipo¹, Uchenna Onuoah²

¹Department of Population Research and Training Center, North-West University ((Mafikeng Campus) Mmabatho, Mafikeng, South Africa.

²Department of Psychology, Adekunle Ajasin, University, Akungba Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Aims: this study investigated purpose in life among seminarians. This was motivated by the evident and apparent dearth of literature on research on seminarians and particularly their purpose in life. The present study therefore extended what is known in existential psychology literature by exploring the extent to which seminarians are purposeful in life.

Study Design: The study was an ex-post facto survey.

Place and Duration: The study was conducted among seminarians in one of the major Catholic seminaries in Nigeria and it lasted for a period of two weeks.

Methodology: The entire population was sampled for the study. They were 63 seminarians from one of the Catholic Major Seminaries in Nigeria. Ryff’s purpose in life questionnaire was administered on respondents after obtaining their consent (this was a sub-scale of the psychological well-being scale developed by Ryff. Participants were all male, with ages ranging between 19-39 years (M=24.22; SD=2.915). Among the sample, 53 (84.1%) had low level of education, while 10 (15.9%) had higher level of education.

Results: The result of data analysis indicated that significantly high number of seminarians (57.1%) were less purposeful in life and educational level of seminarians did not significantly predict their purpose in life (p>.05). Although more studies need to be conducted on this particular population, however, it goes without saying that majority of seminarians are low on purpose in life irrespective of age or educational level.

Conclusion: It might be needful for seminarians to be re-orientated along being more purposeful in life. Cognitive restructuring may not be out of place for them also.

Key words: purpose in life, educational qualification, seminarians, catholic seminary.
1. INTRODUCTION

Existential psychology’s main focus has been the exploration of meaning in life and a way to seeking balance between the limits on human existence and one of the key assumptions of existential psychology is that life’s meaning is never fixed and is constantly being created and recreated (1). Existential psychology suggests that religiosity has salutary effects on the views individuals hold about life and may impact the extent to which they perceived life as purposeful. Research indicate that religious activities such as regular church attendance, high level of devotion and commitment to a life of religious service may play a role in helping an individual to discover a purpose in life (2). In other words, level of religiosity may help in defining whether an individual sees life as meaningful or not.

Purpose in life is defined as “having goals in life and a sense of directedness; a feeling that there is meaning to present and past life, harboring a belief that gives life purpose and having aims and objectives for living” (3). In other words, a purposeful life is one that is ordered, coherent, devoted to pursuit of a well-defined and worthwhile goal, with sense of accomplishment (4).

Religious individuals may have a perspective about life that enables them to see the brighter side of negative and undesirable situations. Purpose in life, though shown to be an important psychological construct has received sparse empirical attention from scholars, particularly and especially among seminarians who are undergoing training that would graduate them into a lifetime career. Thus, it is compelling to explore the extent to which would-be-priests perceive their career as having meaning for them and how they fare regarding purposeful living. More so, with the feelers received from personal chats and unstructured interviews held with some of the seminarians by one of the authors. This study thus set out to explore how purposeful seminarians are in life; this is with the aim of being able to provide informed and valued suggestions that will be beneficial to the seminarian in the long run.

Across a number of areas of interest, various measures of religiosity are typically associated with a variety of positive and desirable outcomes and past research have shown a positive association between having a purpose in life and desirable outcomes such as psychological well-being (5; 6; 7; 8; 9).

In a critical assessment of literature, which was aimed at explaining the positive influence of religion on happiness (a measure of subjective wellbeing), it was posited that: attendance at religious service (such as church service) expanded the quality and quantity of social support available to the individual; religion can impart variety into life making it more meaningful; being religious equips the individual with resources that help the individual to better deal with negative situations in life and this may invariably transform into being more purposeful in life (10).

In an exploration of the influence of religiosity on career choice, Constantine and colleagues found college students reported that their career choice was influenced by religion and spirituality (11). This finding implicates the role of spirituality in the career development of those who are spiritual and religious.

Oates, Hall, and Anderson (12) described the effects of sanctification in work on inter-role conflict among Christian mothers working in academia. The researchers concluded that participants who regarded their work as a calling tended to feel more competent managing conflicts associated with the dual role of motherhood and worker.

In a study conducted by Steger, Pickering, Shin, and Dik, (13), it was reported that those who viewed religion as a system for deriving meaning in life reported positive outcomes in terms of better mental health, self-concept clarity, life satisfaction, job satisfaction. In other words, religiosity was more or less a ‘purpose giver’

Ishida and Okada (14) investigated the relationship between purpose in life and response to stress and found that purpose in life was significantly related to emotional response and autonomic nervous system response during periods of psychological stress. Individuals whose life is patterned around a goal may experience positive emotions and these may have behavioral consequences. Indeed, this findings
suggests that individuals experiencing positive emotions have a higher tendency to evaluate themselves and others positively; ascribe to moderate attributions and generally tend to act confidently; are optimistic and considerate in interpersonal situations (15, 16; 17).

Rampey (18) investigated the relationship among religiosity, purpose in life, personal values and characteristics with family success and found that purpose in life was a more robust predictor of family success. In a related research, (19) reported that religion was associated with lower levels of depression and hopelessness, which suggests it can have an indirect positive effect on the meaningfulness of life. Research by Varon & Riley (20) suggests that adolescents who regularly attend church were more satisfied with their lives and had effective coping skills.

Education is essential in helping an individual understand himself, navigate the world find meaning and purpose in life, by being able to relate with his immediate environment and surrounding. Past studies have reported mixed finding on the role of educational attainment on psychological functioning such as well-being (21). In another study, Chevalier and Feinstein (22) found a negative association between education and depression such that possession of higher educational qualification increased depressive symptoms. They concluded that acquiring higher degrees is not a guarantee for improved well-being. In other words, having higher degrees per se can not on its own guarantee satisfaction in life since it might raise one's level of expectation from a present situation such as job.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted an ex-post facto survey design. The setting thus was one of the Catholic seminaries in Nigeria and the participants were seminary students. Because of the peculiar nature and smallness of the population of study, the entire population was accessed; they were only 63 of them.

In the long run a total of 63 seminarians participated in the study and the data was analyzed using appropriate test statistics. All participants were men, with ages ranging between 19-39 years, a mean age of 24.22 and a standard deviation of 2.915. Distribution according to educational qualification revealed that 53 (84.1%) had low level of education, while 10 (15.9%) had higher level of education.

2.1. INSTRUMENT

Instrument of data collection was the purpose in life questionnaire which was a sub-scale of psychological wellbeing by Ryff (3). It was a 14 item Likert format scale with the author reporting an Alpha reliability co-efficient of .88, however, for the present study, revalidation of the scale showed that only items 1,8,9,10,12 are statistically strong enough to be retained on the scale, while the factor loadings for the other 9 items were less than .3 and were therefore expunged because they were statistically weak for retaining them on the scale. The five items therefore yielded an Alpha reliability co-efficient of .51 for this present study. Sample of Items on the questionnaire included: 'Lower scores (i.e. scores below the mean) are interpreted as a lacks a sense of meaning in life; having few goals or aims, lacks sense of direction; does not see purpose of past life; has no outlook or beliefs that give life meaning (3). While higher scores (i.e. mean score and scores above the mean) are interpreted as having goals in life and a sense of directedness; feeling of meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living.

2.2. PROCEDURE:

Permission was obtained from the authorities of the seminary and the questionnaires were administered to and collected from the respondents on an agreed date in their classroom. This was possible because the estimated time for the completion of the research instrument was 12 minutes.

2.3. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

First and foremost, the descriptive statistic was done to establish the level of purpose in life among seminarians; this has been represented with a graph in figure 1. Two hypotheses were tested in this study: the first hypothesis which stated that age and educational level will significantly positively correlate with purpose in life was analyzed with correlational statistic.
The second hypothesis stated that seminarians with higher educational qualification will be significantly more purposeful in life compared to seminarians with lower educational qualification. This was analyzed using a t-test of independent sample statistic.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows the distribution of seminarians on purpose in life. The descriptive analysis down to find out the distribution of the seminarians based on whether they were purposeful in life or not showed that there were more seminarians (57.1%) who were shown as not being purposeful in their lives than there were those (42.9%) who are purposeful.

Figure 1. Distribution of seminarians on purpose in life measure

Result of analysis of the first hypothesis showed that age and educational level of participants did not significantly correlate with purpose in life among seminarians this is shown in table 1. In other words, it implies that an individual’s age does not significantly relate with whether he is purposeful in life or not. In the same vein, the level of education of the individual does not have any significant relationship with whether such an individual is purposeful in life or not. Thus, some other variables might account for whether seminarians are purposeful in their lives or not.

Table 1. Summary of correlation analysis among age, education and purpose in life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>age</th>
<th>Educational qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational qualification</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in life</td>
<td>.390</td>
<td>.987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of the second hypothesis showed that educational level did not significantly predict purpose in life among seminarians. There was no significant difference between seminarians with higher educational qualification and those with lower educational qualification. This is presented in table 2.
Table 1. Summary of t-test comparing means based on educational qualification on purpose in life of seminarians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in Life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower education</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>16.19</td>
<td>1.840</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td>P &gt; .05 not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.20</td>
<td>2.700</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>-0.016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other words, the level of education of seminarians did not significantly impact on their purpose in life.

3.1. DISCUSSION

Owing to evident and apparent dearth of literature on research on seminarians and particularly their purpose in life, the present study extended what is known in existential psychology literature by exploring the extent to which seminarians are purposeful in life. The result as presented in the result section indicated that majority of the seminarians were low on purpose in life. Without bias, the assumption of many people would be that this set of population would be high on purpose in life; an assumption that most probably would be based on the demands that being a catholic priest places on the priest (this demand includes such restriction as living a celibate life; a life that is almost completely devoid of socialization in its entire ramification; access to global information via the internet is almost a forbidden thing among them). Therefore, it is believed that whoever would venture into such a ‘vow’ must have definite purpose or purposes that must be motivating him to make such a decision. The finding of this study has however revealed otherwise and this is at variance with previous research findings that religiosity or commitment to religious service influence purpose in life and happiness (5, 6, 7, 8).

The pertinent question arising from this finding is: ‘what then could be responsible for the result got’?. Generally speaking, there are two main schools of thought about why people become priests or attend seminaries (this is not to say that there are no other schools of thought). The first school of thought posits that: priests and seminarians are ‘sacred people’, whom God has called to be ‘set apart’ for his (God’s) work or, whose parents have ‘given’ to God and his (God’s) service, in fulfillment of a ‘vow’. In this case, the individual is not expected to pursue any personal goal or ambition in life anymore. He is expected to be ‘lost’ in the service of his master; submitting his ‘all’ to the will of the master. Such an individual is not expected to ‘lay-up treasures for himself on the earth, where moth or rust doth corrupt…rather, treasures are to be laid up in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt…’ (Matthew6:20-21). In other words, the priests are not expected to have any personal ambition in life (or so it seems from the presentation of this school of thought, except it is proved otherwise). Priests are to be lost in the service of their ‘master’ who will reward them at the end of the world, based on the assessment of their service on earth. This probably might have accounted for how they fared on purpose in life measure. The criticism of this thought is the fact that no matter how spiritual an individual is, he has basic physical, emotional, social, economic and psychological needs that must be met. Failure to meet these needs (or some of the needs) can lead to frustration aggression for the individuals and this will negatively impact on the well-being of the individual as well as the parishioners.

The second school of thoughts described priests and seminarians as a bunch of never-do-well; those who have failed in life and have resulted to the seminary as a leeway out of shame and humiliation in the society. If this is the case, then it will not be out of place for them to be without purpose, since they may not have had any hope of survival or making any headway in life. On the contrary, one would also want to argue that, if an individual gets into the seminary without purpose in life, by the time he finishes from the seminary, he must have been reoriented and changed cognitively for a better perception and understanding of life such that he should then be more purposeful in life. No matter what the case is, it may be too early to draw a conclusion on this, because it is very needful to research further and investigate more on other specific variables such as dispositional and contextual factors that may predict purpose in life among seminarians. The unavailability of previous research in this area has been a major
limitation on the discussion of this finding (since it is a novel area), therefore, future research is essential for a better understanding of the psychological construct of purpose in life, particularly among seminarians.

Result of analysis of the second hypothesis showed that educational qualification did not significantly predict purpose in life among seminarians. Although education is essential in helping an individual understand himself, navigate the world find meaning and purpose in life, by being able to relate with his immediate environment and surrounding, yet its significance was not seen among seminarians. This might have been the case among the population of study because the highest educational qualification among study participants was the first degree i.e. bachelor’s degree. Although there may not be previous studies along this line, yet, the few that are relevant have reported mixed finding on the role of educational attainment on psychological functioning such as well-being (21). In another study, a negative association was found between education and depression such that possession of higher educational qualification increased depressive symptoms (22). Education is an ‘eye opener’ and it is believed that an educated mind is enlightened and this may be the reason why the high educated seminarians appeared to be more purposeful than their counterparts.

Conclusion

We have dared to venture into a supposedly ‘no-go-area’ to examine how purposeful seminarians are in life. We found that majority of seminarians scored low on purpose in life and educational qualification did not significantly predict purpose in life among seminarians. Although, a conclusion may not be drawn based on the findings of this study yet, it is an eye opener and it is recommended that further studies be conducted to ascertain the specific variables that may predict purpose in life among seminarians. It goes without saying that the a major limitation of this study is the small sample size as well as the dearth of literature on the subject.

References


