

Chapter 1

Introduction: Orientation, Motivation and Aim of Study

*“Challenging the meaning of life is the truest expression of
the state of being human.”*

Viktor Emil Frankl

Viennese psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor

1.1. Orientation and Motivation

While in the past much research has been conducted on stress and coping (for example Causey & Dubow, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Strümpfer, 1995), a more recent debate among theorists highlighted the possibility that very little real progress has been made in stress and coping research (Coyne & Racioppo, 2000; Lazarus, 2000; Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). More research in the field is necessary, and this is especially the case where young people are concerned, because individuals in late adolescence/young adulthood need to successfully negotiate the transition between childhood and adulthood while being constantly faced with stressors as well as being required to make major life decisions.

Frydenberg and Lewis (1993) indicate that demands and stresses are increasingly placed on young individuals in terms of seeking employment and perhaps not finding it, in pursuing tertiary education, in relationships with others, in exposure to national and international occurrences, and in work and daily life where technology requires

constant adaptation. During certain life phases and during times of stress and crisis, the question of meaning in life comes to the fore for most individuals (Leider, 1997). This is especially true for young people, as more and more adolescents and young adults are experiencing life as hopeless and meaningless (Santrock, 2003). In this life phase individuals are free to make life choices, and are also becoming capable of contemplating the effect of present decisions on the rest of their adult lives. Thus existential concerns are especially prominent in late adolescence/young adulthood (Leath, 1999), and adolescents and young adults experience their lives as less meaningful than older adults (Reker, Peacock & Wong, 1987; Van Ranst & Marcoen, 1997).

The suggestion that individuals are motivated by a sense of meaning in their lives is a central idea in psychology, and Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) is well-known for his contribution in this area. He argues that life has meaning no matter what the circumstances and that everyone is capable of finding meaning in life, even in times of stress and crisis (Fabry, 1993). Frankl's (1946) concept of meaning embodies the humanistic-existential paradigm, which focuses on *being* and on the nature of human existence. Existentialism emphasises the importance of individual decision-making in a world where purpose and reason do not seem to exist (Honderich, 1995). The focus in existential psychology and therapy is on free will, individual choice and why this is necessary, as well as on action and judgement (Reber & Reber, 2001). The construct of meaning in life has influenced psychological models of stress and coping, by emphasising how an individual who perceives life as meaningful may alleviate stress and maintain coping (Lazarus, 2000; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Meaning is one

aspect of the sense of coherence, which is a central construct in the salutogenic approach (Antonovsky, 1987).

Aaron Antonovsky's (1923-1994) theory of salutogenesis emphasises the importance of what is known as sense of coherence, which is characterised by comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, and the construct refers to why some people function better under stressful situations than others and are better able to create meaning arising from complicated circumstances. While the pathogenic paradigm focuses on why and how illness occurs, the salutogenic paradigm focuses on the origins and development of health and there are a growing number of theorists and therapists who focus on wellness and what maintains wellness (for example Antonovsky, 1979; 1987; 1993; Strümpfer, 1995, 2003; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). The salutogenic paradigm looks at the functioning of the individual under stressful circumstances, and it is postulated that developing a strong sense of coherence facilitates coping (Antonovsky, 1979; 1987).

Meaning in life and sense of coherence are both aspects of psychological well-being, and these constructs influence an individual's experience of stress and coping. The extent to which an individual has found meaning in life and the extent to which he or she has developed a strong sense of coherence may have an impact on his or her functioning in terms of ability to cope with stressors. Individuals cope with stressors in many different ways, but the way individuals in late adolescence/young adulthood cope with stressors may establish patterns for adulthood (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). Individuals in the life stage of late adolescence/young adulthood are said to be in a turbulent, dynamic and restless phase of life in which many transitions occur

(Santrock, 2003). The changes adolescents and young adults must face and the role requirements of these individuals among peers, in the family and within themselves can lead to stress and this can have major consequences in developmental, emotional, social, academic, and general life spheres as they enter adulthood. In South Africa a changing political climate and issues such as crime, poverty and a high unemployment rate further exacerbate these stressors. It is essential that young people in South Africa find ways of coping adequately with stressors, and that researchers, health professionals and educators find ways of enhancing psychological well-being in these individuals.

The relationship between how individuals perceive meaning in life or to what extent these individuals believe they have found meaning, their development of a sense of coherence, and their experience of coping with stress needs to be investigated. Furthermore, meaning in life and sense of coherence as components of psychological well-being ought to be explored and studied in order to ascertain how people may become motivated to achieve all that they can achieve at school, university, work and also in day to day life experiences. Gaining clarity in regard to the relationship between an individual's perception of the meaning of life, the extent to which a person has developed a strong sense of coherence and how people, especially adolescents and young adults, cope could result in measures of an individual's perception of the meaning of life and development of sense of coherence being used in the construction of a preventative strategy for stress.

The central research question based on the above motivation is to investigate whether there are relationships between meaning in life, sense of coherence and level of

coping in young adulthood, and attempts to identify relationships between the variables. The researcher intends to investigate the possibility of predicting whether adolescents and young adults can cope effectively with stress based on the extent to which they have discovered meaning in life as well as being able to predict their coping abilities based on their measures of sense of coherence. The composite hypothesis can be formulated in the following manner: There are statistically significant relationships between scores in meaning in life, the dimensions of sense of coherence and the ability to cope in young adulthood. On this basis, the aims of the present study are explicated.

1.2. Aim of Study

The specific aim of this study is to investigate whether discovering meaning in life and developing a strong sense of coherence predicts coping with stressors in the late adolescence - young adulthood life span phase.

A more general aim is to assess the extent to which there are relationships between meaning in life, sense of coherence and the ability to cope in late adolescence/young adulthood, by critically evaluating previous literature in the various fields. This information will be analysed and integrated systematically on a component basis in order to expound the nature of these relationships.

Furthermore, this research aims to make a contribution to the integration and systematisation of information regarding the nature of the relationships among meaning in life, sense of coherence and coping in late adolescence/young adulthood.

The possible value of implementing the present study is that an understanding of these relationships may be advanced, thereby furthering an understanding of the factors surrounding stress and enhancing salutogenic strategies of addressing stress in various contexts, including creating preventative intervention strategies for individuals with mental illness, terminal illness, relatives of people with terminal illness such as those with HIV/AIDS, and various other applications. Importantly, investigating meaning in life, sense of coherence and coping with stress in young adults may result in specific intervention strategies aimed at young people that address the turbulence and transitional nature of this life stage (Santrock, 2003).

The following section focuses on the implementation of the study.

1.3. Implementation of Study

A literature review of relevant books, textbooks, research reports and scientific journal articles will be conducted in order to obtain information regarding meaning in life, salutogenesis and sense of coherence, and stress and coping in late adolescence/young adulthood.

A sample of approximately 250 individuals will be selected, in order to investigate whether or not it is possible to predict a young person's level of coping based on the extent to which they have found meaning in life and developed a sense of coherence. Selection of participants will be subject to certain criteria, namely age based on the

late adolescence/young adulthood life-stage, and participants should be in a transition phase of life.

Three measuring instruments will be utilised, namely the Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981), the Orientation to Life questionnaire which is also known as the Sense of Coherence Scale (Antonovsky, 1987), and the Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). The Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981) measures Frankl's (1992) formulation of the construct of meaning in life, and the single score obtained on this test indicates to what extent an individual has discovered meaning in life. The Orientation to Life questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1987) measures to what extent an individual has developed a sense of coherence. This questionnaire will be analysed in terms of one total score as well as separately by its three subscales, namely Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness. The Comprehensibility subscale is a measure of the extent to which an individual can understand life events and situations as clear, ordered, structured and consequential. The second subscale, Manageability, is defined as a measure of control which an individual exhibits in different situations. The Meaningfulness subscale measures the extent to which a person feels that events make sense in an emotional way (Antonovsky, 1987). The Adolescent Coping Scale is a self-report questionnaire that measures ability to cope in terms of level of coping or not coping based on choice of coping strategy (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993).

The questionnaires will be administered and the answer sheets will be hand scored and electronically captured on Microsoft Excel. Subsequently, the raw data will be submitted to a statistical consultation service for statistical analysis.

The terminology used in the current study will be described in the following section.

1.4. Definition of Constructs

The purpose of this section is to describe the terminology and to define the constructs of *meaning*, *salutogenic paradigm*, *sense of coherence*, *stress*, *coping*, *adolescence* and *young adulthood* utilised in this study.

1.4.1. Meaning in Life

Meaning refers to the focus of the individual on the reason for one's existence and the importance of goal-directed behaviour and fulfillment in life. The concept of *meaning in life* in this study is based on Viktor Frankl's (1905-1997) conceptualization of meaning which holds that individuals are primarily motivated by meaning, and that life has meaning under all circumstances. According to Frankl (1946; 1992), "Meaning is experienced everyday by ordinary men and women in three principal ways: the first is what they give to the world in terms of their tasks, duties or creations; the second is what they receive or take from the world in terms of their encounters and experiences; and the third is in the stand they take in their predicaments and sufferings" (Shantall, 2002, p24).

1.4.2. The Salutogenic Paradigm and Sense of Coherence

A *paradigm* refers to a particular set of fundamental beliefs which have been researched, recognized and accepted by the scientific community, and thus serve as a basis for further research (Honderich, 1995). The *pathogenic paradigm* focuses on

factors that contribute to illness or dis-ease. The *salutogenic paradigm*, on the other hand, focuses on why some individuals stay well and others become ill when faced with the same stressors. *Salutogenesis* is a term formulated by Aaron Antonovsky (1979; 1987) to denote what enables some individuals to remain healthy in spite of stressors.

In line with the salutogenic paradigm, Antonovsky (1987) developed the *sense of coherence* construct, which refers to an individual's ability to perceive various environments and life situations as Meaningful, Comprehensible and Manageable.

1.4.3. Stress and Coping

An individual experiences stress when he/she is faced with demands to which there are no available or automatic adaptive responses (Antonovsky, 1987). A stressor is anything that is potentially threatening and that results in strain or changes for the system (Lazarus, 1993).

Coping refers to an individual's changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage external and internal demands that are perceived as challenging or exceeding his or her resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

1.4.4. Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Late adolescence and *young adulthood* are terms used interchangeably in this study. This life phase refers to the transitional period between childhood and adulthood, and is characterized by much turbulence as well as many stressors (Santrock, 2003). According to Levinson (1978), *early adult transition* occurs between the ages of 17

and 22. In this period individuals are becoming more financially and psychologically independent, and are beginning to explore the world and make important life decisions without the assistance of their parents (Levinson, 1978). Between the ages of 22 and 28, individuals are *entering the adult world* (Levinson, 1978). Erikson (1982) notes that the *identity versus identity confusion* stage occurs during adolescence, which is defined as being between approximately 10 to 20 years. In this phase, individuals must discover who they are and find direction for their lives, as they explore different roles. The early adulthood stage is defined as the 20s and 30s phase known as *intimacy versus isolation*, where individuals must form close intimate relationships and friendships and continue to explore different life roles. Super (1980) describes adolescence as occurring between the ages of 14 and 24, known as the *exploration* phase, and *establishment* is the early adulthood phase, which occurs between the ages of 25 and 44.

In all of the above theories, individuals in the late adolescence/young adulthood life phase are described as being in a state where negotiating the transition from childhood to adulthood, exploring life roles and becoming more independent are required, and this phase will be the focus of the present study.

The next section centers on what constitutes the components of subsequent chapters in the current study.

1.5. Chapter Delineation

Chapter 1 of this project serves to introduce the orientation, motivation and aim of the study and to define important constructs utilised throughout the study. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 form the theoretical framework of the study by providing relevant and recent literature on the main constructs in this study, namely, meaning in life in chapter 2, the salutogenic paradigm in chapter 3, and stress and coping during adolescence and young adulthood in chapter 4. Chapter 2 describes the important aspects of meaning in life by referring to the work of Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) and his concept of logotherapy. The philosophy of existentialism and contemporary approaches to understanding and researching meaning are also explored and an evaluation is provided. Chapter 3 provides a comparison of pathogenesis and salutogenesis, and also describes the salutogenic approach to health. Contemporary literature pertaining to salutogenesis and sense of coherence is discussed and evaluated. In chapter 4, the constructs of stress and coping are explored and a life-span approach to these constructs is discussed. Chapter 5 provides a description of the empirical investigation of the study in terms of the research methodology, participants, measuring instruments, hypotheses and statistical analyses utilised in this study. The focus of chapter 6 is on the statistical findings and results of the statistical analyses conducted which include factor analyses, distribution of data and norm of subscales, analysis of variance, correlation analysis and regression analyses. Finally, chapter 7 consists of a discussion of the results, an overall evaluation of the study including strengths and limitations, as well as recommendations for further research before concluding.