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The Development of Meaning and Purpose in Life Among Adolescents in Germany and Maine

An Honors Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of Psychology and
Department of German & Russian Studies

Bates College

In partial fulfilment of the
requirement for the degree of the
Bachelors of Arts

By

Janika Ho

Lewiston, Maine

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Table of Contents

Abstract..... 5

Contextual overview..... 6

 The German Education System: General Features..... 6

 History of the German Education System..... 9

 Inequality and Bildungskrise after PISA..... 10

 School Environments and Academic Self-Concepts..... 18

 The German Schools in My Study..... 20

 Meaning and Purpose in the German Language..... 22

Thesis..... 30

 Intro..... 30

 Defining meaning..... 34

 The Many Sources of Meaning..... 37

 Benefits of Meaning in Life..... 39

 Measuring Meaning in Life..... 41

 Purpose..... 43

 Identity Formation..... 46

 Identity Formation and Culture..... 52

 Present Research..... 55

 Method..... 57

 Participants..... 57

 Materials..... 58

 Procedure..... 65

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Pre Data Collection Phase.....	65
Data Collection in Germany.....	66
Data Collection in Maine.....	68
Results.....	71
Quantitative Analyses.....	71
Meaning in life.....	71
Identity statuses.....	72
Qualitative Analyses.....	73
Discussion.....	74
Limitations	95
Implications.....	97
Future Research.....	99
References.....	102
Tables.....	114
Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the Meaning in Life Questionnaire.....	114
Table 2. Identity statuses.....	115
Table 3. Qualitative analysis for the American Sample.....	116
Table 4. Qualitative analysis for the German Sample.....	120
Appendix A: Identity Status Survey (English & German).....	125
Appendix B: MLQ (English & German).....	129
Appendix C: Interview Questions (English & German).....	131
Appendix D: Brainstorm for Interview questions.....	133

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the sources of meaning and purpose in life for adolescents, and to examine if and how cultural factors and the adolescent period of development might influence the sources from which meaning and purpose is derived. The presence of meaning in life has been shown to have physical and psychological health benefits (Steger, 2017); however, most research has only been conducted with adults. Due to this, the surveys that have traditionally been used to assess meaning in life seem to be more relevant to adults than youth. This study sought to discover sources of meaning and purpose in the lives of adolescents through semi-structured interviews with 6th through 8th grade students in Germany and Maine to learn what they found personally meaningful. This approach allowed the adolescents to share their own ideas and show their interpretation of those terms. The data was analyzed using Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to let themes emerge. The main aspects of culture investigated for this project were the school systems and the cultural ideas of meaning and purpose transmitted through popular culture media, such as magazines. This research is important to the field of psychology due to the lack of qualitative research and research done on meaning in life with non-adult participants. The study's results indicated that there were similarities in the developmental stage of the adolescents in both cultures, indicating that there may be some aspects of development that are present across these cultural contexts; however, some cultural differences, particularly pertaining to views on purpose, and the experience of life were found. These differences demonstrate that meaning and purpose are thought of in different ways in these two cultures, demonstrating that meaning in life may be culturally variable.

Key words: adolescents, meaning, purpose, identity, culture, Germany, qualitative, schools

Contextual Overview

The German Education System: General Features

The German public education system is unique in that it is a tripartite school system, a system that is only shared by Austria in a similar form (Odendahl, 2017). Other countries, such as Switzerland, have a multi-tiered school system but have pushed back the age of separation and made the system as a whole less strict and selective (Odendahl, 2017).

In Germany's tripartite system, after four years of primary school, students are sorted into different types of schools, each of which specifically prepares them for one of three levels of school leaving certificates, which then track them into different employment opportunities and a life that "fits their individual abilities and inclinations" (Beicht & Walden, 2014; Fidler, 2017, Odendahl, 2017). The system supposedly allows graduates from every tier of secondary schooling to be economically successful in their professional lives, as well as in their personal aspirations (Odendahl, 2017). The type of schools are *Hauptschule*, which is the lowest and least demanding vocational track and qualifies students for work in trades and industrial employment (Fidler, 2017; Trines, 2016). The *Realschule* is the higher and the most popular vocational track, which prepares for skilled blue-collar jobs and salaried white-collar jobs (Auernheimer, 2005; Fidler, 2017; Trines, 2016). The *Gymnasium* is the academic track, which leads to qualification for university with the completion of the *Abitur* (Fidler, 2017; Trines, 2016). The *Abitur* is a test that is taken at the end of the *Gymnasium* and the passing of this test enables students to formally study at the university (Fidler, 2017; Trines, 2016). Lastly, there is the *Gesamtschule*, which combines all three tracks. However, the *Gesamtschule* is only available in some of the 16 states of the Federal Republic of Germany. The tripartite system is accompanied by a vocational

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

training system in order to prepare the two lower tiers for work in specialized fields (Odendahl, 2017). This system involves a series of practicums usually taking place during and after the 8th grade. These practicums are often organized by the school, and provide students with the opportunity to try out some career options before settling on a place for their *Ausbildung* (job training). The decision to which school to send a student is made after the first four years of primary school and is usually made through a combination of the primary school teacher's recommendation and the parents' wishes, with certain constraints. (Fidler, 2017; Odendahl, 2017; Trines, 2016). Once students are assigned into a track, the switch from a lower track into a higher track is not very common and often quite difficult socially and academically. For these reasons, students tend to stay in the track that is recommended to them (Fidler, 2017). The transition to a lower secondary school from a higher level is more common and often easier, usually resulting in better academic achievement for the student (Fidler, 2017).

The distribution of students into the different types of schools has varied over time (Auernheimer, 2005). More students than ever before are attending *Gymnasien* and *Gesamtschulen* (Trines, 2016; Albert et al., 2015). The *Hauptschule* got its name because, in the past, the majority of students (almost 70%) attended this type of school (Auernheimer, 2005). Nowadays, the number of students who attend *Hauptschulen* has dwindled to a minority (Auernheimer, 2005). The *Hauptschule* is often referred to as "school for leftovers" or, in urban regions, "school for foreigners or migrants," as students with migration background make up the vast majority of students in this school type (Auernheimer, 2005; Ertl, 2006). Students from lower social strata are also overrepresented in *Hauptschulen* (Auernheimer, 2005). The number of students attending the *Hauptschule* had dwindled so much that some states, including Baden

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Württemberg, have begun phasing out the *Hauptschule* and instead creating a *Realschule-Hauptschule* combination school often referred to as a *Werkrealschule* (Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport, Baden Württemberg). At a *Werkrealschule*, students learn together until the 9th grade, when some students then get the *Hauptschule*-ending certificate, and some continue for another year to get the *Realschule*-ending certificate. The combination of these two types of schools often makes it easier for students to switch into getting the higher school-end certificate, even if that was not the recommendation at the beginning, but it can also be problematic in that the teachers at *Werkrealschulen* often find themselves having to cater to the lower achieving students, which in turn lowers the overall challenge level of the school (Auernheimer, 2005). Another problem in combining different types of schools is that teachers often find themselves unprepared for teaching to a more heterogeneous group, because teachers are trained for teaching in one specific type of school, leading them to be prepared to work with a more homogenous group of students. This can become problematic when school merging is done without adequate teacher retraining.

In Germany, each of the 16 states (*Bundesländer*) have sovereignty in all matters of culture, including education (*Bildung*) (Auernheimer, 2005). Each state has its own education system, which can vary considerably in structure, curriculum, and standards (Auernheimer, 2005; Fidler, 2017; Odendahl, 2017). However, some level of cooperation and mutual recognition of certificates is necessary to make moves from state to state possible (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). This fragmented system can make it difficult to implement structural changes at federal level, because the Conference of Ministers of Education can only issue recommendations

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

(Auernheimer, 2005). There is, however, a country-wide mandatory school attendance law (*Schulpflicht*) which requires all children to attend school from ages 6 to 15 (Fidler, 2017).

History of the German Education System

The German idea of *Gymnasium* can be traced back to the early nineteenth century; however, the German school system has not always looked the same. The types of schools that were offered often reflected the needs of the country's economy. For example after the Second World War, the number of *Realschulen* was increased substantially because this level of school was seen as the best option to prepare people for work in the economy of the time (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). Schools during this time also shifted from viewing teaching as “enlightenment” and “cultivating socially responsible citizens for a lifetime of learning” to teaching more job-applicable skills (Odendahl, 2017).

The German tripartite system has been in existence longer in the western part of Germany, because during the separation of east and west Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the west kept the existing tripartite system whereas the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the east did not. In the GDR, there existed only common schools (*Gesamtschule*) where all students received their education together, which was in line with the socialist ideals of the time (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). After the reunification of Germany in 1990, all the former states of the GDR assimilated into the existing education system of the FRG (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). The modern model of the tripartite system was established in 1955 in the Düsseldorf Agreement (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). After the reunification of east and west Germany, only a few of the new states elected to keep *Gesamtschulen* alongside the tripartite system (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). These *Gesamtschulen*, however, were often viewed as being progressive and

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

experimental, and in some ways going against the system that had worked so well for the (western) German people in the past (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). The reunification of east and west Germany provided the opportunity to reform the education system and start from scratch; however, they chose to stay with the tripartite system tradition which was developed to fill the roles needed in the emerging economy (Ertl & Phillips, 2000; Odendahl, 2017).

Inequality and *Bildungskrise* after PISA

The first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study was run in 2000. The PISA study is an international study of educational performance run by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (Ertl, 2006). The OECD created a testing program to “measure how schools around the world prepare their pupils to act as contributing participants in a globalized economy” (Odendahl, 2017). The results of the study were meant to predict a nation's economic success (Odendahl, 2017). The PISA test assesses exclusively 15-year olds who attend any form of school in reading skills, science, and mathematics (Odendahl, 2017). The assessment is meant to test the application of basic knowledge and not specific content (Odendahl, 2017). The study is conducted over three years, each year in turn emphasizing one of the three focus areas. In 2000, 32 countries participated in the study, and all but four countries were OECD countries (Odendahl, 2017). Every year the number of participating countries has risen, and the diversity of the economies being represented has also widened.

Some of the things that made the first PISA study so influential in Germany were the “sports-like” rankings, easy quotable language, and the claimed connection between the results of the test and the economic success of a country (Odendahl, 2017). The way that the test results

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

were ranked in a side-by-side comparison and the layman's language that was used to talk about the results of this test made it very easy for the media to pick it up, causing the results to gain massive media coverage across Germany (Odendahl, 2017). The emphasis on the economic ramifications of the study also hit particularly hard in Germany, due to the fact that the German education system was generally regarded as being effective and playing an important role in the country's economic achievements in the second half of the 20th century (Ertl, 2006; Ertl & Phillips, 2000). The German tripartite education system had also been structured in that way in order to maximize the economic benefits of education. This system had helped the Germans to build up their economy again after World War II (WWII) and played a role in the economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*) of the 1950s and 60s. Since the war, the German education system has emphasized the economic aspects of education rather than the other functions that education can have such as to convey personal, practical, political, and cultural information. Education also can, in a more holistic approach, serve to prepare learners for parenthood and political participation. It can also enhance social cohesion and tolerance, through the formation of a whole person (Odendahl, 2017).

This ongoing belief that the successful education system was one of the reasons for Germany's economic success, especially on the part of the more conservative political parties of the German government, has led to the tripartite system's endurance, despite some efforts to radically change it (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). Due to this belief, the results of the first PISA study in 2000 "caused shockwaves in the educational landscape of Germany" when the results were far below the expectations of the German population (Ertl, 2006). Germany placed below the average in all three categories that the PISA test assesses (DICE, 2002; Odendahl, 2017): The

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

country placed 21 out of 31 countries in reading proficiency, and 20th out of 31 countries in basic math and science skills (DICE, 2002). One of the most shocking findings was that 23% of 15-year-olds could read only at an elementary school level, and the majority of weak readers were not identified beforehand by their teachers (DICE, 2002). This was concerning because it showed that not only were there students who were substantially falling behind, but that they were also not being identified, making it difficult to provide them with the extra help and support that they may have required. The poor results of the education system could also not be explained by the diversity of Germany's school-age population, because out of the adolescents that "did not reach proficiency stage 1, nearly half (47%) were born in Germany, as were their parents, and they spoke German at home" (DICE, 2002). There were also many other countries with high immigrant populations that did much better than Germany in the PISA test, showing that the weakness of the German education system affected all types of students (DICE, 2002).

These results presented an unfavorable image of the German public education system and also highlighted some other major problems like inequality within the system due to separate schools and social stratification (Ertl, 2006). The PISA results showed that "the social separation of the schools is greater in Germany than in the US" (DICE, 2002). "The gap between top performers and weak performers is the widest in Germany" out of any of the PISA countries, meaning that the difference between students at the *Gymnasium* (582) (actually above the OECD mean of 500) had drastically higher scores than students at the other schools: *Realschule* (494) *Hauptschule* (394) *Gesamtschule* (459) (DICE, 2002). Germany is among the countries in which educational success is most closely related to pupils' socio-economic and migration backgrounds (Ertl, 2006). Students whose parents had attended *Gymnasium* sent their children to *Gymnasium*

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

61.3% of the time, compared to parents who had attended the *Hauptschule* and who sent their children to the *Gymnasium* only 13% of the time (“Schulbesuch nach höchstem allgemeinem Schulabschluss der Eltern”, 2014). The studies show that students are most likely to attend the same type of school as their parents. This is probably due to the parents’ ability and willingness to advocate on behalf of their child and put their child into the school that they prefer, since the parents and teachers jointly make the decision. It may also be due to the differing expectations of the families. This is problematic, because it creates a pattern of the reproduction of wealth and restriction of educational opportunities. On the whole, the chances of a working-class child attending an upper secondary school in Germany are four times smaller than those of a child from the upper class (Ertl, 2006). The PISA study exposed that students with low reading proficiency came mainly from the lower social strata, which is supported by and reproduced by the educational system due to the close connection between social strata and the type of school to which a student is assigned (DICE, 2002). Adolescents from nationally mixed families did not differ in their reading proficiency, but if both parents were immigrants, almost 50% of the students did not get beyond proficiency level 1, which shows that the German education system is particularly incapable of helping immigrant children to succeed and integrate (DICE, 2002, Ertl, 2006). In another study conducted by the German government, it was shown that 13.1% of people with immigrant background (meaning they or their parents had immigrated) did not finish any type of school, and that 20% of people who had immigrated themselves, did not complete school (“Bevölkerung ohne Schul- bzw. Berufsabschluss”, 2014). Immigrant children or children with immigration background are also the most likely to attend the *Hauptschule* rather than the *Realschule* or the *Gymnasium* (“Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund II”, 2018).

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Other structural characteristics of the German school system which makes it more challenging for children of lower social strata or immigrant children to succeed are the lack of mandatory preparatory kindergarten, the short primary school period, and the heavy burden of responsibility for student success placed on the family of the student. German kindergartens are not part of the public education system, but instead are usually run by churches or other social institutions. Churches take care of many social services in the communities (Auernheimer, 2005; Fidler, 2017). These kindergartens often have Christian accents to them and employ few bicultural, non-religious, educators, which could reduce the likelihood that non-Christian immigrant populations might utilize these services (Auernheimer, 2005). But even for the students who attend a kindergarten, the mission of kindergartens in Germany is not always centered around preparing students for school, like in other countries, such as France. Rather, the focus often lies on “social learning and processing the day-to-day experiences of childhood” (Auernheimer, 2005). This leaves a lot of the school preparation to the families of the students, and it means that students often start primary school at very different skill levels, especially children who may not speak German at home. In addition to the varied starting point of students, the primary school, where all students receive instruction together, is quite short (Auernheimer, 2005). The decision of school placement is made after the 4th grade, which is often too early to identify students who may need more assistance and to help them catch up (Auernheimer, 2005). In the 4th grade, there are also considerable differences in the maturity of students, oftentimes leading students who may be developing at a slower rate to be sorted into the lower levels of schools, especially children who have a hard time concentrating in class (Ertl & Phillips, 2000). The lack of preparatory kindergartens, and also the short primary school period puts a lot of the

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

responsibility of education and upbringing (*Erziehung*) on the families of the students. Therefore, students from lower strata backgrounds or students with parents who may not be able to provide that type of assistance and support are disadvantaged, making it inherently harder for immigrants or lower income students to succeed (Auernheimer, 2005; Ertl, 2006). This also makes it less likely for children of less educated parents to get into a higher level of secondary school due to lack of resources and information on how to adequately prepare for this track (Auernheimer, 2005; Beicht & Walden, 2014). Another factor which places a lot of the responsibility of education and upbringing on the families of the students is the short school day which has traditionally existed in Germany (Auernheimer, 2005). In recent years, there has been a push to extend the school day, but many schools continue with the tradition that schools end before noon (Auernheimer, 2005). Having longer school days would serve as an equalizer for students by giving them the same opportunities and put less responsibility on the families of students. It would also be particularly beneficial for immigrant children, because a longer school day would give them more time and opportunity to learn the second language and catch up through more interactions with their peers and teachers, through which they could receive extra support (Auernheimer, 2005). All of these factors lead to an above average correlation between academic success and social origin, making the system one based on inequality. The social background of a student seems to be disproportionately influential in determining a student's placement in secondary school, as opposed to their academic performance or personal ability or inclination (Odendahl, 2017; Beicht & Walden, 2014). The inequality in the system is even present in the vocational system which is meant to help the students from the lower two tracks learn specialized skills and transition into jobs within the workforce (Beicht & Walden, 2014).

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Students with a higher school ending (*Abschluss*) have better opportunities for successful placement in company-based or school-based vocational training (Beicht & Walden, 2014). This leaves the students with a *Hauptschul-Abschluss* with very few options, because they do not have the opportunity to study and, in addition, find it more difficult to get the vocational training that is meant to provide them with employment (Beicht & Walden, 2014).

After the shocking PISA results, there was a rapid effort to improve the education system. The state of the education system at that time was declared as a *Bildungskrise*; however, this was not the first time in German history that concern was voiced about the education system (Odendahl, 2017). In 1964, an educator named Georg Picht declared a *Bildungskatastrophe* for the first time (Odendahl, 2017). He voiced his concern about the low expenditure on education, the low number of students reaching *Abitur*, and the large performance gap between rural and urban schools (Odendahl, 2017). However, these worries were simplified by the media into the message that the German schools were not delivering the skills and knowledge necessary for their pupils to be economically successful in later life, thus endangering Germany's future prosperity (Odendahl, 2017). As a consequence of the media coverage of the *Bildungskatastrophe* of 1964, the governments concentrated the reforms on creating schools that teach practical skills for immediate use, instead of reforming the system to improve equality in schooling and to achieve higher quality of education, and less emphasis was put on subjects with less economic application (Odendahl, 2017). This moved the schools in the opposite direction than Picht had intended.. The perception of a *Bildungskrise* that followed the PISA results came out of the fear that the school system might not adequately provide proficiency in basic skills and that Germany could soon fall behind in the global rankings (Odendahl, 2017). After the shock of

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

the results, there was a conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, where the results were discussed and improvement in all major school subjects, but especially in language competence was demanded (Odendahl, 2017). The ministers also called for some other reforms, such as the integration of kindergartens within the primary school system, the establishment of national educational standards, focus on educationally disadvantaged students, and more allocation of funds for education (Odendahl, 2017). It was surprisingly easy to get all sixteen states to agree on the implementation of these educational reforms, which demonstrated how important the PISA results were in German culture and politics at that time (Odendahl, 2017). The results brought about a consensus and showed the need for educational reform within the system.

While there was a substantial increase in funding for education after 2000, most of the reforms did not have the effect of improving the educational system in the ways that they were intended (Odendahl, 2017). The implementation of national standards proved to be difficult because of Germany's constitutional federalism. Each state agreed to implement the national standards; however, it was up to each state to decide how to implement the standards, and, therefore, there was a wide range of interpretations of the broad standards (Odendahl, 2017). Implementing standards also inherently shifts the focus of curricula to being more content-based rather than being focused on learning processes (Odendahl, 2017). In the PISA 2003 test, Germany's general scores improved, but the difference between upper-class and lower-class students only marginally improved, which means that the better overall results in the 2003 PISA study were due to an improvement of the pupils from the upper class (Ertl, 2006). The scores of

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

the disadvantaged students improved only marginally. Germany's scores mainly improved due to the performance of *Gymnasium* students (Ertl, 2006).

After the PISA crisis, there was an effort to reform and improve the educational system, but mainly in superficial ways aimed at improving the PISA results for the next study (Odendahl, 2017). There was little to no attempt to address the other more substantial issues of inequality, like the link between socio-economic status and educational achievement or the controversial issue of early separation of pupils into different schools (Odendahl, 2017). Some of the reforms caused by the PISA results might even have had the effect of intensifying marginalization and inequality, through introducing more assessment pressure via national standards for even primary school students (Odendahl, 2017). Both the *Bildungskatastrophe* of 1964 and the *Bildungskrise* of 2000 put more emphasis on the economic role of schools and less on the other societal and cultural roles that schools play, such as conveying personal, practical, and political education by facilitating desirable attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Odendahl, 2017). The *Bildungskatastrophe* and the *Bildungskrise* both show the debate about the role of education (*Bildung*) in the society that has existed in Germany for some time.

School Environments and Academic Self-Concepts

The three different types of schools create and foster very different types of developmental environments, which differ in effectiveness for the students' success and attractiveness to the society (Auernheimer, 2005; Knigge & Hannover, 2011). There is evidence to suggest that the different types of schools have differing social reputations and associations which are part of the society and known to the students, which in turn affects the academic self concepts of the students. (Auernheimer, 2005; Knigge & Hannover, 2011). Based on the

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

structure of the school system, each of these schools provide different social and professional opportunities and “accordingly enjoy different images and degrees of attractiveness”

(Auernheimer, 2005). The learning environments created by the *Hauptschulen* and some *Werkrealschulen* lower the academic self concept of students through the low expectations of the teachers and the dismal outlook on future prospects in the job market (Auernheimer, 2005). A student’s academic self concept is mainly created through contrasting one's own abilities to the abilities of peers (Knigge & Hannover, 2011). If the teachers and society relay the message to the students that their schooling and education is not as important as that of their peers, then they will think that way also, which in turn affects their performance, fulfilling the low expectations set for them. This can create a Pygmalion effect between a student's self concept and their academic performance (Auernheimer, 2005). One piece of evidence that supports this hypothesis was the International Primary School Reading Study (IPERS). This study showed that the “gap” between the top and bottom proficiency at the end of primary school is not yet as wide as at the end of the first level of secondary school (Auernheimer, 2005). This shows that the gap in achievement widens after the separation into different schools. This could be due to the Pygmalion effect, but it could also be influenced by the learning environments in the schools through the kind of instruction the students receive. From personal experience observing in both *Gymnasium* and *Werkrealschule* classes, the difference in instruction is marked. Two of the classes I observed -- the first at the *Realschule*, the other at the *Gymnasium* -- were even taught by the same religion teacher, but the *Realschule* students had to fill out a worksheet and were asked to go outside to collect things to bring into class to discuss, whereas the *Gymnasium* students engaged in a debate about the topic and had student presentations on several subtopics.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

This difference in expectations coming from the teachers also might shape the students' academic self concepts.

The training that teachers must undergo to teach in the different types of schools also differs. Even though all teachers are required to have the *Abitur* and study at university, it takes longer and more training to become a teacher at a *Gymnasium* than it does to teach at a *Hauptschule* (Führ, 1997). This seems a bit odd since the students who need the most specialized teachers are underperforming students at the *Hauptschule* and *Realschule*. This, however, reaffirms the notion that German schools are not meant to give everyone a good education, but rather to give them an education that is fit to what career opportunities they will have later.

The German Schools in My Study

During my time in Germany, I worked and collected data in a *Werkrealschule*, a *Gymnasium*, and a *Gesamtschule* in Baden Württemberg. In this state, there are few *Hauptschulen*, due to the school system change (*Schulwandel*) that has taken place over the last few years. Therefore, I was unable to collect data in this type of school. The *Werkrealschule* that I was in was located in Ludwigsburg, which is a small town near Stuttgart with about 88,000 inhabitants. It was called the Gottlieb-Daimler-Realschule. The school itself is located in one of the most populated industrial parts of the city and it is one of the biggest *Realschulen* in the area serving about 500 students, and about 70% of them have immigration background. The student-teacher ratio is about 29:1 ("Gottlieb Daimler Realschule Ludwigsburg"). The school day is from 7:45- 12:55 with two twenty-minute breaks in between classes. There are also two class periods in the afternoon from 2:00- 3:30 which are mainly used for sport or semi-academic workgroups (AG), such as theater or chorus. These are marketed on the school website as

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

afternoon activities. There is also homework help offered as well. Most of the afternoon activities are offered free of charge, but a few of them have a small fee of up to 10 Euro. The students have a block schedule and don't have each class every day. The students have a main class teacher, but also change teachers for most of the subjects. The class teacher serves as a support person for the class and a go-to person for the students. This system also creates groups and cohorts which usually stay together throughout their school time.

The Otto-Hahn-Gymnasium was located in the same building as the Gottlieb-Daimler-Realschule; however, they are run as two separate schools. About 300 students attend this school. The two schools share one big open hallway, and you are in the *Gymnasium* when the floor becomes carpeted in the middle of the hallway. This is the only physical border between the two schools. The schools also share a school yard but have staggered breaks. The *Gymnasium* does, however, have its own sports facilities, separate from the *Realschule*. The *Gymnasium* has more open spaces and more art projects on the walls of the hallway. There is also an art installation in the main indoor “quad.” This installation is a car made by students out of recycled material in order to make a commentary about the environment. The *Gymnasium* also has an amphitheater space with a stage where the whole school can meet. Such a space was not present in the *Realschule*.

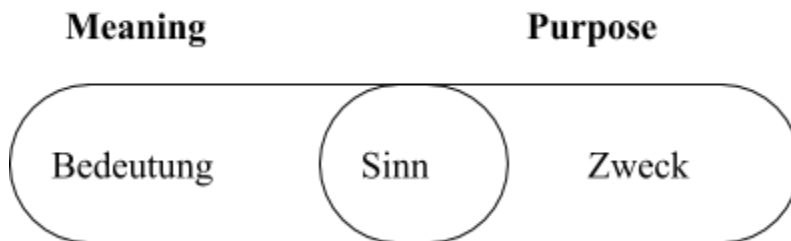
The third school where I collected data was a smaller religious private *Gesamtschule* called the Freie Evangelische Schule Hagen. There are 308 students who attend this school. Their typical class size is between 24 and 26 students. On their website, they advertise that they are a full-day school (*Ganztagsschule*), but their classes also go only till 1:10, and then there are AG classes offered in the afternoon till 3:30. This was the smallest of the three schools, and also

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

the only school with religious ties. There was also a student fee of 120 Euro per month to attend this school.

Meaning and Purpose in the German Language

The words “meaning” and “purpose” are difficult to discuss across the German and English languages because these words do not directly translate from one language into the other. The two top dictionary translations of the English term “meaning” into German are *Bedeutung* and *Sinn*. The top dictionary translation of the word “purpose” is *Zweck*. However, in everyday language, the German noun *Sinn* can be used to refer to both meaning and purpose, depending on context. For example, if you say “*Was gibt deinem Leben Sinn?*” that would mean “What makes your life meaningful?”. However, if you say “*Was ist der Sinn deines Jobs?*” it would mean “What is the purpose of your job?”. The words *Sinn* and *Zweck* are also often associated with statements like *ohne Sinn und Zweck* which translates to “without meaning and purpose.” The compound noun *Lebenssinn* translates to both “the meaning of life” and “the purpose in life,” making the subtle distinction between meaning and purpose even more difficult to render.



The adjective forms of the words *Bedeutung* and *Sinn* can help to clarify the difference between these two definitions of “meaning” and show the broader associations that are included in the word *Sinn*. The adjective *bedeutungsvoll* translates to “meaningful,” whereas the adjective

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

sinnvoll translates to “sensible.” This distinction is important, because it demonstrates what connotations the word *Sinn* carries in the German language. For example, another translation of *Sinn* is “sense,” giving the word *Sinn* a much more logical and holistic association than the word “meaning” in the English context. Essentially, when you are asking about *Sinn*, you are asking about what gives life sense, or what makes life make sense. This idea is similar to the cognitive component of “meaning” in the American context.

This more logical, sense-oriented connotation also includes purpose, not as something to strive for but as an intrinsic attribute of life itself which expresses itself in the way that life is organized and balanced. Some associated meanings to the word *Sinn* are *Erfüllung* (fulfilment), *Harmonie* (harmony), *Einklang* (unison, the state of being in accord with something) and *Zufriedenheit* (the state of being content, satisfaction). These terms are often used in addition to or as replacements of *Sinn*. This shows the more holistic view of meaning, and demonstrates that meaning is not derived from one individual thing in the German context, but instead derived more from leading a well-balanced, harmonious life. Sometimes the terms *Bedeutung* and *Zweck* are combined into a more holistic understanding of a meaningful and purposeful life that is referred to as “*eine erfüllte Existenz*” (a fulfilled existence). Again, this shows the more holistic view of meaning and purpose in life in the German context.

Sinn is something that you feel, that you experience through religion, art, nature, music, human interaction, etc. According to my sources, *Sinn* is not something that you can create. It exists as more of a byproduct of moments in life that fulfill what is needed to live one's best life; one leads a self-determined life, a life that fits the individual. One lives in deep fulfilling

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

relationships with others, and one does something that fits one's self and something that is important to others.

The sources that I have chosen in order to help me understand the ways in which these terms are used in the German context are special magazines on scientific and social science topics produced by the journal *Der Spiegel* and the newspaper *Die Zeit* called *Wissen* (knowledge or science). These magazines were selected because both are very popular in Germany and can be commonly found in high-traffic areas such as train stations and on most magazine stands. Both of these magazines cater to an educated audience and cover a wide range of topics in popular psychology. For each of these magazines, I have chosen a few editions which cover the topics which I am interested in. These magazines cover the topics at a great length and from a variety of angles.

The journal *Der Spiegel* is Germany's leading and largest magazine with a weekly circulation of 840,000 copies. It is also a very influential magazine across Europe and is known for its investigative journalism. It is an independent magazine and is not associated with any political party or business group. The issues on which I focused are titled "*Erfüllt leben*" which translates to "living fulfilled" and "*Einfach Leben*" which translates to "living simply" or "just living." *Spiegel Wissen* is a subsection of *Der Spiegel* which focuses on scientific and social science topics such as personality, health, memory, aging, and the digitalization of our society. The broad range of topics and the relatively accessible language makes this magazine interesting to read and attractive to the general population.

Die Zeit (time) is a German national weekly newspaper published in Hamburg, Germany. It is known for its long articles on a wide range of topics, such as politics, society, economics,

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

culture, science and sports. The paper is considered to be highbrow, but is also read widely. Its political direction is centrist and liberal, or left-liberal, but has oscillated a number of times between slightly left-leaning and slightly right-leaning. *Zeit Wissen* is a subsection of *Die Zeit* and is a bi-monthly popular science magazine. The name translates to “time-knowledge” which refers to the up-to-the-minute nature of the magazine's subject matter and focus. One of the magazines, on which I chose to focus was titled “*Der Sinn deines Lebens*” which translates to “the meaning of your life.” The other *Zeit Wissen* magazine was also a *Ratgeber* edition, meaning that it was focused on advice for its readers. The title of the magazine was “*Anleitung für ein besseres Leben*” which translates to “instructions for a better life.”

The way that these magazines cover the themes of meaning and purpose provide insight into how these topics are viewed and discussed in the German culture. The fact that only one of these magazines has the word *Sinn* in the title demonstrates that while *Sinn* is the most direct translation of the word “meaning” it may not be the most used word when talking about this topic in the German setting.

The issue of *Der Spiegel* called “Erfüllt leben” from June 2015 talks about *Sinn* and purpose and how to live a fulfilling life from the perspectives of philosophy, religion, psychological, social, art, and personal life experiences of individuals. The way that this issue covers “Sinn” and what it means to live a fulfilling life from various perspectives and aspects of the culture provides a good oversight of how the topics of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment are defined and talked about in the German culture. The major themes related to *Sinn*, meaning, and purpose are: “*Glauben und Spiritualität*” (faith and spirituality), “*Liebe*” (love), “*Ehe, Familie, und Kinder*” (marriage, family, and kids), “*Freunde*” (friends), “*Das Glück einer stimmigen*

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Berufswahl” (the happiness of a coherent career choice), *“Eine Lebensaufgabe gefunden zu haben”* (to have found a life purpose), *“Besinnung”* (reflection), *“Ruhe”* (quiet, calm, tranquility), *“Natur”* (nature), and the importance of *“Einfach zu leben”* (just living or living simply) and *“Spass zu haben am Leben”* (having fun in life). Some of the more philosophical articles in the issue, such as *“Die Welt wird sich weiterdrehen”* (the world will keep on turning), an interview with Bettina Muscall and Dietmar Pieper, also tackle what it takes *“um das bestmögliche Leben zu leben”* (to live the best life possible). The answer to this question is for the individual to achieve three life goals: “Er ist selbstbestimmt, führt also ein Leben, das zu ihm passt. Er lebt in tiefen, erfüllenden Beziehungen zu anderen, und tut etwas, das ihm liegt, und das für andere Menschen wichtig ist.” (“He is self-determined, so he leads a life that suits him. He lives in deep, fulfilling relationships with others and does something that suits him and that is important for other people.”) While this trio of *“Selbstbestimmung, Liebe, und Arbeit”* (self-determination, love and work) is the way to live the best possible life, the article also says that the way that one fulfills these categories is highly individual.

The issue of *Zeit Wissen* titled *Der Sinn deines Lebens*, from December 2015, implies that it would mainly be about the meaning of one’s own life. In reality, the content of the magazine is actually framed more broadly and covers various topics in health and psychology, environment and society, and research and engineering. On the cover of the magazine, the subtitle reads: *“Was er zu bieten hat. Und wo er sich versteckt.”* (what it (life) has to offer. And where it (meaning) is hiding.” This subtitle implies that the topics discussed in the magazine do have something to do with the meaning of life in general, and not only the meaning in one’s life. This magazine highlights the idea of “Sinn” as a byproduct of other areas of life. The magazine

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

highlights three articles as being directly related to the theme “*der Sinn deines Lebens*” (“the meaning of your life”). The articles talk about meaning from religious, scientific, psychological/social, and artistic perspectives. The articles cover topics such as; questions about contradictions between religion and research, the importance and necessity of empathy, and a report on how individuals find meaning in literature, art, music, and photography. These articles are all written for a mature, educated audience.

The article on empathy is titled “*Ich weiß, wie du dich fühlst*” (I know how you feel) and the sub-header of the article reads “only the ability to put yourself in the other's position gives life meaning.” The subtitle in the table of content also similarly reads “*die Fähigkeit zur Empathie verleiht der menschlichen Existenz einen Sinn*” (the ability to empathize gives meaning to human existence). The article talks about the unique ability of humans to feel empathy, and how that shapes our interactions within society and our feelings of belonging. The article talks about the scientific social research that has been done on empathy, and the real-world applications of empathy in the German context, especially in relation to the large migrant population in Europe. The article argues that empathy is the best way to feel “*Gleichklang*” (harmony) or “*Einfühlsamkeit*” (empathy) with other people and to relate to others on the basis of our common humanity (“*unsere gemeinsame Menschheit*”).

At the very end of the magazine there is also a section with some statistics. The topics covered in this small section, while not labeled explicitly by the magazine as being part of their “Sinn” topic, talk about some things that are related to the topic of a good life, for example how some readers of the magazine relax (*Entspannung*), where they spend their free time (*Freizeit*),

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

and how people get comfortable (*Gemütlichkeit*) through things like warmth (*Wärme*), serenity (*Gelassenheit*), and soul building (*Seelenbaumelei*).

In the *Zeit Wissen* issue *Anleitung für eine Besseres Leben*, which translates to “instructions for a better life,” the articles cover work, work-life balance, and especially what happens when this balance does not exist, namely burnout. In Germany, burn-out has become a growing concern, and many people have to stop working because they burn out from stress and the pressure of their work, or they feel that their work no longer brings them happiness or purpose. Another problem, which is referred to as “boreout,” comes when people cannot do their job because they do not find meaning and purpose in their work anymore. Since this is an advice edition of *Zeit Wissen*, many of the articles offer insight into how to battle these problems and gain more *Sinn* (meaning/purpose) and *Zufriedenheit* (satisfaction) in one's life.

This magazine also provides insight into how the concepts of work, purpose, and meaning are talked about in the German setting. In an article titled “Zufrieden im Job” (satisfaction in the workplace), the author talks about people who have changed their careers or jobs or have engaged in work outside of their careers in order to find more meaning or purpose in their work. In the article, the individuals talk about having a “*besser geregelten Berufsalltag*” (a better regulated workday), having “*Erfolgserlebnisse*” (success experiences) or receiving “*Anerkennung*” (recognition) in work outside of their daily jobs. Having success and recognition from sources outside of their careers, such as social work, provides them with other sources of meaning and purpose. Through this balance, their work life becomes less of a deciding factor in their overall happiness. This also represents an idea of creating a work-life balance and not over-relying on one thing as a source of meaning and purpose. Having no balance can lead to

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

burn-out and can lead to a feeling of meaninglessness in life in general. One major word that the article often uses is “Energie” (energy). The interviewees talk about how their new job gives them energy in a way that their old job did not. This idea of achieving a balance seems to be central to the idea of having a good life. The idea of taking some time off and the importance of “*Entspannung*” (relaxation) are also mentioned.

Some other articles in the magazine talk about ways to decrease stress and experience more *Sinn* from work mainly through working less, setting limits to allow for time to shut off, and attempting to work more independently in order to have a slower, calmer, and more self-determined workday. They also talk about how sometimes, if one really does not find meaning or purpose in their work, it may be better to find a job that fits one better, even if it is not the career they once imagined having. This can be a scary process, but the magazine provides the subjective perspectives of real people who have undergone this change through interviews to share their experiences of how this scary change actually benefited their lives in many aspects. Oftentimes, the changes made by the individuals, in order to bring about more “*Sinn*” in their work involved switching to a career that is more “*selbständig*” (independent) and more “*sozial*” (social) in its values. Making these changes in one's “*Alltag*” (everyday life) can bring more energy into one's life and a better relationship to work. As can be seen also in these interviews, the magazine places a lot of emphasis on finding a good work-life balance and on the importance of vacation and free time without work stress. This “*abschalten*” or turning off from work is a skill the magazines say that everyone can learn, and something that needs to be more accepted in the work world in order to keep workers healthy and happy.

The Development of and Meaning and Purpose in Life Among Adolescents in Germany and Maine

The presence of meaning in life is an important and fundamental aspect of our lives (Frankl, 1963). Philosophers throughout history such as Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche have contemplated the questions that have preoccupied humans for the majority of our history such as “why do we exist,” “what makes life worth living,” and what makes a “good life” or “good person.” These questions are also the basis of many books and ancient mythology. Historically, religion and governments have attempted to offer an answer to this plight through their own paths, structures and value systems. However, in our modern society through the growth of democracy, the simultaneous decline of the importance of religion in people’s lives, and the general trend towards valuing independence and individualism, figures of moral authority and collective value systems have become less and less central to the lives of individuals. This forces people to consider other sources of meaning and purpose in their lives (c). This increased freedom and simultaneous decrease in limitations of one’s choices has also made it increasingly challenging for young people to form stable and viable identities (Luyckx et al., 2011). Contemporary societies place increased pressure on the formation of an individual identity, while simultaneously offering less support or external help with this task (Luyckx et al., 2011). As a whole, modern society has been relatively unsuccessful in providing individuals with a reliable and convincing set of values that can work for everyone (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). As a consequence, a “values gap” is created, which makes it difficult for individuals to find meaning in life due to the absence of official sources of meaning (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Steger, 2018). The shift away from official sources such as religions, which had dictated the meaning of

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

life through their moral structures, created the space for meaning to become a more individual experience (Steger, 2018).

Frankl (1963) theorized that there is meaning in the world and that it was up to each individual to discover one's own meaning and personal purpose in their lives and see it through. Viewing meaning as an individually-determined variable also led to the ability to research meaning in a scientific way. Whereas the meaning *of* life can be, and has been, debated for many thousands of years without a conclusion, looking at the meaning *in* the lives of individuals subjectively, and analyzing the sources from which people derive meaning, is something that can be researched (Steger, 2016, 2018). Research on meaning *in* life looks at the subjective experiences of meaningfulness in life by looking into how we make sense of our lives, the sources from which we derive meaning, and the role of purpose in our lives from a scientific perspective (Martela & Steger, 2016). Through the start and continued growth of the field of positive psychology, a field that focuses on the positive aspects of life which allow individuals to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, the importance of developing meaning and purpose in life in order to achieve a sense of well-being has increasingly been recognized (Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003)., Previously, psychology was mainly focused on a disease model of psychology and on the deficits in human functioning and abnormal mental health, and also on the solutions of how to address and correct these impairments to bring functioning to a “normal” level (Peterson, 2008). Such an approach focuses on the negative aspects of mental health and does not address normative functioning, nor how some individuals are able to move past basic functioning into bettering oneself and attaining self-actualization. Positive psychology, on the

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

other hand, focuses on an individual's strengths, places an emphasis on building a good life, and enabling individuals to flourish (Peterson, 2008).

These ideas related to meaning, such as the good life and flourishing, though not unified as a cohesive theory have been around for a long time. As early as 1906, psychologists such as William James began to ask questions about human motivation and why some individuals were able to succeed and others were not (Sandor, 2017; Steger, 2018). At the time, a focus on human potential and accomplishments was uncommon in psychology (Akerman, 2020). With the introduction of more humanistic theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a shift towards focusing on an individual's needs to live well and have the capacity to reach self-actualization began to take place. Maslow (1943) proposed a "theory of human motivation" in which he theorized that there are levels of needs that all humans strive to fulfill, and which build off each other, making it so that once one level is fulfilled, the next subsequent layer can be attained (Maslow, 1943). The needs begin as basic physiological needs, and build up through the needs for safety, love, esteem, and culminating in self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). He also hypothesized that humans are motivated to achieve or maintain the conditions that lead to the satisfaction of these needs, meaning that humans would strive for meaning in life in order to reach this final level (Maslow, 1943). Meaning as a driving force of motivation in human functioning was also hypothesized by Viktor Frankl (1963) and it is the basis of his logotherapy theory, which he created during his time in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. Frankl also theorized about the importance of perspective, and how shifting perspectives can have profound impacts on the ability to maximize meaning and happiness in life, even in the face of hardship and struggle (Frankl, 1963).

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

In 1998, Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman continued to contribute to this line of thought when he became president of the American Psychological Association. One of his key points was the promotion of “positive psychology,” a term that he coined, as a scientific field of study. In his book *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004), he wrote about virtues and individual character strengths that have been highly valued across cultures and time. This was an attempt to focus on the positive aspects of human psychology and to find out which character strengths were related to crafting “the good life.” This book follows the same structure as the DSM, and was meant to be a positive counterpart (Peterson & Seligman 2004). Positive psychology was meant to complement traditional psychology and provide a positive bias to balance out the negative focus that exists in traditional psychology (Akermann, 2020). For the last two decades, the field of positive psychology has steadily grown. As a consequence, meaning has begun to be recognized as an important motivator in human behavior and a force that can shape an individual's beliefs and actions (Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003).

One idea that is strongly linked to positive psychology is the idea of “the good life.” Finding meaning in life is meant to be a way to achieve living well, and having a rich, fulfilling life (Steger, 2018). While each stage of life may have meaning, it has been shown that feelings of meaning in life tend to increase as one moves through the lifespan (Steger, Oishi & Kashdan, 2009). Perhaps this is the case because individuals in the later years of life have the time to reflect on the meaning that exists in their lives (Erikson, 1968). Much of the feeling that life has meaning comes from the idea of coherence, or that one’s life has made sense (Erikson, 1968). People during their later years also usually spend time reflecting on their lives and coming up

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

with narrative identities, or stories of their lives (Belsky, 2019; McAdams, 1985). This process has been shown to aid in meaning making (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

When thinking of a good life, and considering what conditions humans require to flourish, the term “eudaimonia” often comes up. This phrase was first used by Aristotle when he theorized about what was needed to achieve the highest human state of being. Although this term is often translated as “happiness,” the term encompasses more than just hedonic feelings. It is perhaps better translated as “living well, successfully, and responsibly” (Martela & Steger, 2016). It is a term closely related to the idea of having “a life worth living” (Martela & Steger, 2016). Despite being related terms, happiness and meaning in life are not necessarily correlated. While leading a meaningful life may result in happiness, it is not always the case (Baumeister et al., 2012). Happiness is present-oriented, and is usually a state of comfort or ease, a kind of feeling good in the moment, whereas meaning is deeper, and more connected to things like belonging, and purpose (Baumeister et al., 2012; Smith, 2017). This distinction can be seen in the case of parents, who often experience a decline in happiness after the birth of their child due to increased stress, worry, lack of sleep and other factors, but who experience an increase in feelings of meaning because they experience the work of caring for their child as purposeful and rewarding (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

Defining meaning

Meaning is a term that is closely tied to the idea of something becoming comprehensible. (Martela & Steger, 2016). Meaning is about having the capability to connect mental representations we have about the world, and finding possible relationships between these representations (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Martela & Steger, 2016). The meaning of something

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

is then based on those connections. Meaning is about making sense of the world by incorporating knowledge about the self, others, and the world into meaning systems (Steger, 2018). These meaning systems provide stability to life, which may be ever changing (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

In psychology, it has been hypothesized that we have a “will for meaning,” and an innate drive for well-being (Frankl, 1963; Klinger, 1977). This seemingly fundamental aspect of life, however, is not easily defined. Meaning in life is quite subjective and idiosyncratic (Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). There is no formula for which character traits one must possess, or into which aspects of life one should invest their time, to achieve a meaningful life.

Researchers have defined meaning in life as “a sense of coherence or understanding of existence, a sense of purpose in one’s life, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and accompanying sense of fulfillment” (George & Park, 2013; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Ho, Cheng & Cheng, 2010, p. 2; Schwarz, 2016; Steger, 2012). These three components make up the trichotomy of meaning (Recker & Wong, 1988; 2012), suggesting that there are three components to meaning: a cognitive component about making sense of one's life, or coherence; a motivational component about the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals; and an affective component about the feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment that come with achieving one's goals (Recker & Wong, 1988, 2012). Similarly, Steger (2017) theorized that there are cognitive, evaluative, and purpose components that underlie meaning. The cognitive component of meaning making refers to the “understanding of the self and its place in the world, and achieving a coherent sense of self and life,” the evaluative component is related to feeling that “one's life is significant within the larger scheme of the universe” and the purpose component refers to having

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

a sense of purpose or mattering (Shoshani, Russo-Netzer, 2016). The affective component may be similar to the evaluative component in some ways. When an individual's life is meaningful, they feel that their lives are coherent, purposeful and significant (Steger, 2018). In order to feel that one has meaning in life, one must feel that their lives matter and make sense (Steger, 2018).

Although meaning has come to be recognized as an important factor of wellbeing, it is a relatively broad term that encompasses many aspects such as significance, purpose, coherence, and mattering (Heintzelman & King, 2014). There are also many kinds of meaning. *Situational meaning* refers to the meaning that one derives from or attributes to a specific life event which might include the way that people interpret or try to understand their experiences of trauma, tragedy, or adversity (Park, 2010; Steger, 2018). *Global meaning* refers to an “individual’s general orienting system, consisting of beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings” that together comprise broad views regarding justice, control, predictability, coherence and one's self views (Park, 2010; Steger, 2018). When life events happen, individuals use their global meaning systems to assess the event and assign meaning to it (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Park, 2010). If the appraised meaning of the event does not match with their global meaning, this can cause distress. This distress can be alleviated through meaning-making, wherein individuals attempt to reduce the discrepancy between global meaning and the appraised meaning of the situation. This meaning-making can lead to either an accommodation of their global meaning, or an assimilation, wherein one changes the appraised situational meaning to be more consistent with one’s global meaning (Park, 2010). Assimilation can occur by changing the appraised meaning of the situation, by focusing on selective positive attributes, or by identifying benefits of the situation (Park, 2010). Accommodation can occur through the process of making downward

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

comparisons with less fortunate people or groups, or imagining hypothetical worse situations to feel advantaged by comparison (Park, 2010). Through this accommodation or assimilation, the individual restores coherence and views the world as meaningful once again (Park, 2010). This process of meaning-making may help individuals to reestablish a sense of control (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Meaning-making is the process through which individuals actively “revise or re-appraise an event or series of events” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). This may involve benefit finding where an adversity is seen to have some positive aspect, or sense making, which involves looking for explanations in order to understand an event (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). This process of meaning-making can be either an unconscious process, or a deliberate process (Park, 2010). People who employ this type of meaning-making usually have the perspective that they have learned something, or something positive has come from even a bad event (Martela & Steger, 2016). Meaning-making is also associated with positive health outcomes (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). These ideas that individuals may be able to create meaning from adverse events is closely tied to the ideas of Frankl (1963), who theorized about the choice we have in our reaction to suffering.

The Many Sources of Meaning

The main reason why it is so difficult to define meaning in life is because meaning can be derived from many sources, and individuals can have differing perspectives on how to achieve meaning in life (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, 2018). Even if two individuals both feel that they have meaning in their lives, the sources from which they derive meaning may be very different (Steger, 2018). There is no universal meaning that can fit everyone (Frankl, 1963). Most people draw meaning from a variety of sources in their lives.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Some sources of meaning include relationships, activities (Steger, 2018), connection, purpose, values, efficacy, self worth (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002), identity (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016), transcendence, coherence (Costin & Vignoles, 2019), and even our reaction to suffering (Frankl, 1963). Some have also hypothesized that there are four pillars, or sources, which bring meaning into our lives: belonging, purpose, transcendence and storytelling (Smith, 2017). In addition to all these sources, meaning can also come from simple moments in our lives such as having an experience or encounter with someone, creating something, accomplishing a task, or being in a flow state (Bronk, 2008; Schwarz, 2016). Flow is the state of being when an individual feels a sense of “effortless action.” This feeling is achieved when an individual is faced with a high level of challenge, but also simultaneously possesses the skills needed for that challenge. This results in deep involvement with a task that usually leads to a sense of “being in the zone”, and this feeling sets apart flow moments from daily life (Bronk, 2008).

Having multiple sources from which to draw meaning helps to protect and buffer individuals from a sense of meaninglessness (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). This sense of meaninglessness can have negative outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, substance use, lack of purpose, hopelessness, and psychological distress (Schwarz, 2016; Steger, 2006, 2018). While individuals can draw meaning from almost any source that they find brings meaning into their lives, it has often been shown that people who derive their meaning from hedonic, more self-centered and materialistic sources, are less happy and generally have lower levels of meaning in their lives than people who derive their meaning from self-transcendent and altruistic sources (Steger, 2018). It is important to note that there are individual differences in how much individuals think about meaning, and the extent to which one consciously evaluates one’s life in

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

these terms (Steger, 2018). While there may be individuals who actively think about meaning and search for meaning, the presence of meaning in life is not contingent on this conscious search and evaluation of meaning (Steger, 2018).

Benefits of Meaning in Life

Having meaning present in one's life has been found to be a positive factor in predicting well-being and has been theorized to be a crucial aspect of life (Frankl, 1959; Steger, 2006). There are a variety of psychological and physical benefits to having a sense of meaning in one's life (Steger, 2017). In fact, meaning is closely related to many indicators of well-being (Steger, 2018). Generally a high sense of meaning has been associated with a higher level of life satisfaction (Steger, 2017, 2018). Those who feel they have meaning in their lives are also more likely to take care of themselves physically (Steger et al., 2016). They have been shown to have better health habits and even have been shown to utilize the health care system more than those with lower levels of meaning (Kim et al., 2014; Steger, 2017). The presence of meaning in life also seems particularly helpful in confronting highly stressful life experiences (Park, 2010). Steger (2018) organizes the well-being indicators that are closely linked to the presence of meaning in life into three categories: subjective (hedonic), psychological (eudaimonic), and general quality of life indicators. Individuals who have meaning in their lives are more likely to experience subjective well-being indicators, such as having positive affect and experiencing positive emotions (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988), experiencing more hope, happiness (Steger, 2018), psychological adjustment (O'Connor & Vallerand, 1998), and life satisfaction (Ryff, 1989, Steger, 2018). Some psychological well-being indicators that are linked to meaning in life are a positive self image, higher self esteem (Ryff, 1989; Steger, 2018), and feelings of self

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

worth (O'Connor & Vallerand, 1998). More general well-being indicators associated with the presence of meaning in life are lower levels of reported stress (Flannery & Flannery, 1990; Steger, 2018); more effective coping skills (Debats, Drost & Hansen, 1995), less depression, anxiety, and illnesses (Steger, 2018), and living longer (Boyle et al., 2009; Steger, 2018). It is also likely that positive health benefits may be associated with meaning in life because studies have shown that people who regard their lives as having high levels of meaning are less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking or abusing substances (Steger, 2018).

Those who feel that their lives have meaning are more likely to have an external locus of control, or feel that they have control and influence over their lives, rather than thinking that things merely happen to them by chance (Steger, 2017). While the presence of meaning in life is associated with many types of mental and physical well-being, the search for meaning, and meaning making through the restoration of meaning in the context of stressful events, is also important and necessary (Park, 2010; Steger, 2006, 2018). This is especially true for emerging and young adults, while they are trying to find their meaning and purpose during a period of life that is often stressful (Belsky, 2019). The search for meaning, as long as it is developmentally appropriate, is not associated with lower levels of meaning or well-being later in life (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Individuals who actively partake in the search for meaning often undergo a period of “rumination” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Rumination is a period often associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression (Steger et al., 2008). However individuals who have undergone this ruminative phase often experience benefits, such as being more likely to be open minded and curious about the world around them (Steger et al., 2008). However, if the search for meaning happens or continues to happen in later adulthood, which is abnormal

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

according to our social clock, it can negatively affect feelings of meaning and well-being (Lapsley & Hardy, 2017; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). If meaning in life is not found, it can lead to feelings of hopelessness, which in the worst cases can be associated with higher suicidality or stronger tendencies to want to end one's life (Henry et al., 2014; Steger, 2018). However, it is important to note that just because one is searching for meaning, it does not mean that meaning is not present (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Steger et al., 2006). It is possible to continue the search for meaning even after meaning has already been found (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Steger et al., 2006). It is hypothesized that similar to other basic human needs such as food, meaning in life can not be satisfied “once and for all”. The desire for the search for meaning might persist, even if levels of meaning are already quite high (Heintzelman & King, 2014). This lasting search for meaning is not associated with the negative outcomes of lacking meaning.

Measuring Meaning in Life

One of the most widely used measures of meaning in life is the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006). This survey is broad and presents the opportunity for participants to utilize their own interpretation of “meaning” in the survey (Steger & Shin, 2010). It also measures the search for meaning, which no other scales look into. This broad generic measure of meaning directly asks individuals if they feel that their lives are meaningful (Steger, 2018). This scale, however, does not take into account that some people may not think about meaning in their lives, and also that how one feels about their life’s meaning fluctuates.

It has been found in a study that people are more likely to rate their lives as meaningful when they are in a positive mood or after they have just experienced a meaningful event (King et

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

al., 2006; Ryff, 1989; Steger, 2018). It has been found that even a momentary exclusion or rejection, such as while playing an interactive ball tossing computer game (Cyberball), changed the way individuals rated the level of meaning in their lives (Stillman et al., 2009). Those who were excluded, even just momentarily, rated their lives as less meaningful than those who were not excluded in the experiment (Stillman et al., 2009, Williams et al., 2000). In other research, meaning in life ratings were higher on days when individuals felt more connected to others (Steger & Kashdan, 2009). All of these findings not only show how important relationships and social interactions are for meaning in life, but they also demonstrate the fluid nature of subjective meaning in life measurements.

Previous studies have suggested that the presence of positive affect may enhance the experience of life as being meaningful due to the heightened ability for cognitive flexibility, and the ability for a broad scope of attention in order to see the big picture (King et al., 2006). Therefore, positive affect may make it more likely that individuals feel, on a grand scale, life is comprehensible (King et al., 2006). Research has also shown that not only is a high level of meaning in life associated with a more positive affect, it is also a two way relationship where life feels more meaningful when we are in a good mood (Heintzelman & King, 2014).

Even though it has been shown that adolescents and even younger children are capable of engaging in conversation and thoughts about meaning and purpose (Damon, 2009; Malin et al., 2015; Moran, 2014; Reese et al., 2009), most of the research on this topic has been conducted only with adult participants (Erikson, 1968; Schwartz, 2016; Shoshani & Russo-Netzer, 2016). The small fraction of the literature that has used children or adolescents as participants has studied mainly purpose or has used scales based on the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ),

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

which was created by Steger (2006) for adult participants, the Purpose in Life Questionnaire (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), or the purpose subscale of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Measure (Ryff, 1989; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Moran, 2014; Yeager, 2009). Since children and adolescents do not usually spend time reflecting on meaning, they may not have the complex vocabulary to describe or understand some of the more abstract concepts of meaning; however, when asked more concrete questions about meaning, even quite young children are capable of providing "lucid, clear descriptions of the sources of meaning in their life" (Shoshani & Russo-Netzer, 2015). By adolescence, individuals are able to engage in hypothetical and deductive reasoning and in projecting a realistic image of what a good life would be (Bronk, 2008).

It has been hypothesized that the search for meaning and purpose often begins in adolescence; however, the cognitive development of children at this stage may also make the ways in which they think about meaning look different. According to Piaget (1952), children are still in the concrete operational stage until around eleven years of age. In this stage, they still struggle with abstractions, which may make some of the measures of meaning used with adult participants difficult for them to understand and grasp. It is important to learn the sources of meaning in life from their perspective. In the past, very little qualitative research has been done with this population on this topic. The present research is important in not only working with an age range that is under-represented in psychology research, but also in considering the students within their cultural context.

Purpose

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

One of the major sources of meaning in life is purpose (Damon, 2009; Martela & Steger, 2016). Purpose is often viewed as being central or definitional to meaning (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Frankl, 1963; Steger, 2018). Although purpose and meaning are related, and often used interchangeably in the literature, there have been attempts to define purpose in a way that highlights the differences between it and meaning. Damon, Menon and Bronk (2003) were the first to offer a definition that distinguishes the two concepts: “Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond self.” This definition highlights that purpose is not only of importance to the individual, but also has an impact beyond the self (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2010; Moran, 2014). The stable aspect of the definition that Damon et al. (2003) offers demonstrates that one's purpose may be rooted in one's identity, and remains constant over some time. The generalized aspect of the definition relates to the idea that a purpose might function in multiple domains of life all working together to achieve a goal.

This generalized aspect is also apparent in a definition offered by McKnight and Kashdan (2009) where they define purpose as a “central, self organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning.” This definition offers one important distinction between purpose and meaning concluding that a purpose is oriented towards a goal, or defined end, whereas meaning may be more of an ongoing process without an end (Martela & Steger, 2016). One can work towards achieving a purpose, whereas we rarely refer to meaning in that sense. Purpose is more associated with a sense of directedness (Bronk, 2011; Martela & Steger, 2016; Ryff, 1989). It is also important to note that intentions must be acted on in order to produce purpose, which implies that purpose requires an action component

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

(Malin et al., 2015). This distinction points to there perhaps being a will and a way for purpose, where the will focuses more on the identification of purposeful goals, and the way focuses more on the means for achieving those purposeful goals (Bronk et al., 2009).

Erikson (1968) theorized in his stages of psychosocial development that adolescence is the period of the lifespan when individuals start to dedicate themselves to “systems of belief that reflect compelling purposes” (Damon, 2009; Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003). It is usually during the adolescent period when people begin to find their values, dedicate themselves to a direction in life, and begin to think about the future, all of which are aspects of purpose (Damon, 2009; George & Park, 2013; Martela & Steger, 2016). During the adolescent phase, the primary domains of purpose include school, achievement, career, making money, family (spending time with or supporting current or future families), leisure, extracurricular activities, sports, and faith (Moran, 2014). Due to the theorized close proximity of the development of identity and the development of purpose during the adolescent period, it has been hypothesized that they may be closely related and may aid one another’s development (Bronk, 2011; Erikson 1968; Malin et al., 2015). The formation of a purpose may aid identity development by providing a goal to which one can dedicate one's energy and actions, while identity development may reinforce purposeful commitments (Bronk, 2011).

Purpose can be a motivator to one's actions and beliefs (Bronk, 2011). It can be reduced to the questions of “why do I exist” “what do I accomplish” or “what I feel is important” (Moran, 2014). Failure to find a sense of purpose can lead to feelings of “drift” and can make it increasingly harder to find motivating belief systems, as well as sources of meaning later in life (Bronk et al., 2009; Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003), whereas the formation of purpose in

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

adolescence has been recognized as an indicator of thriving (Bronk et al., 2009; Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003; Malin et al., 2015). It is important to note that one may have multiple purposes in the course of one's life (Martela & Steger, 2016). A sense of purpose, similar to the feeling of meaning in life, tends to increase with age, with a larger proportion of adults exhibiting purposes than younger adolescents and children (Moran, 2014).

Identity Formation

One of the important aspects of creating meaning in life is the formation of a strong identity (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). Healthy identity formation has been linked to searching for, and gradually acquiring, meaning in one's life (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). Additionally, finding a sense of purpose may be an important instrument that could lead to a stable identity and overall well-being (Bronk, 2011; Lapsley & Hardy, 2017). Identity is the basis of who we are, and relates to our values, goals, and the decisions we make (Steger, 2016). Our identity is also shaped by the people who are around us and the relationships we have with them, as well as transactions between a person and his or her context (Côte & Levine, 2015; Luyckx et al., 2011). Identity is the sum of many things such as physical characteristics, personality traits, behaviors, roles, relationships, attitudes, preferences, values, beliefs and goals (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006). It is a multidimensional construct which encompasses cognitive, moral, cultural, and social aspects within personal and social dimensions (Erikson, 1968; Luyckx et al., 2011). Our identity represents a feeling of sameness and continuity over time and across contexts (Luyckx et al., 2011). According to Erikson's theory, (1968), identity formation is the focus of one of the stages of youth development, usually taking place between 12 and 18. Erikson defines the psychosocial crisis of this stage as "identity vs. role confusion." This stage of adolescence

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

can be a time of difficult transition while adolescents figure out who they are and what defines them (Erikson, 1968). Areas of importance that arise during this life phase such as work, school, and family demands often provide areas that allow, or even require, meaning making (Schwarz, 2016). Identity development is considered as one of the most important tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Luyckx et al., 2011); however, it is important to note that identity continues to develop throughout the lifespan due to normative developmental changes and transactions with one's environment (Luyckx et al., 2011; Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006). The continued development of one's identity is sometimes referred to as identity revision (Belsky, 2019; Erikson, 1968; Luyckx et al., 2011). It is important to highlight that previous studies have conceptualized identity formation as a process that extends over time (Luyckx et al., 2011; Meeus et al., 2010)

During the adolescent stage, one develops a conscious sense of self that forms through social interactions with others and new experiences (Erikson, 1968). Exploration and commitment are important parts of the process of forming a strong identity and finding a direction in life (Erikson, 1968). During the period of identity formation, one may experiment with different roles, activities, and behaviors in order to establish a sense of self and determine how they fit into the society (Erikson, 1968). Through this exploration, adolescents develop a consistent sense of who they are and who they hope to become in the future (Bronk, 2011). This process of exploration has been hypothesized to have four dimensions: exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, commitment making, and identification with commitment (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006). When individuals explore their options broadly, that is referred to as exploration in breadth; when the exploration deepens in a certain area, that is referred to as

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

exploration in depth (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006). Commitment making refers to making choices within identity domains, as a result of exploration in breadth. Identification with commitment refers to the level of security and certainty that one feels with one's commitments and the degree to which these commitments line up with one's standards and wishes (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006). This process is dynamic and the steps do not necessarily have to go in this order, although on average there is a linear increase in exploration in depth and commitment making over time (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2011; Meeus et al., 1999). It is important to note that exploration in depth and exploration in breadth can occur separately from one another, and increases or decreases in one type of exploration are not necessarily related to increases or decreases in the other (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx et al., 2011). These periods of exploration are not usually associated with negative outcomes, but when identity exploration - especially exploration in breadth - occurs for a prolonged period it can be associated with depressive symptoms and lower self esteem (Luyckx et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2009). This difference in the psychosocial outcomes of searching may be indicative of a distinction between two types of exploration: Ruminative (maladaptive exploratory process) and reflective (adaptive exploration) (Burwell & Shirk, 2007; Luyckx et al., 2011; Meeus et al., 2012).

Building off of the ideas of Erikson's (1968) theory, James Marcia came up with an Identity Status Paradigm, with four identity statuses through which to describe the process of identity development. Based on an interaction between an individual's levels of exploration and commitment, Marcia developed a structure to determine identity statuses (Luyckx et al., 2011; Marcia, 1966). His status paradigm has been validated by other studies (Luyckx et al., 2011;

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Meeus et al., 2012). Each identity status represents the presence, levels, and combinations of exploration and commitment (Luyckx et al., 2011; Meeus et al., 2012). The four statuses of identity are: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and achievement (Marcia, 1966). Identity diffusion is characterized by a lack of commitment, in combination with a lack of exploration. This status is where a person has not found a path, and feels aimless and lost (Luyckx et al., 2011). Identity foreclosure is characterized by the presence of commitments, but the lack of exploration a person has undergone prior to these commitments. In foreclosure, a person has committed to an identity, or latched onto the values provided by others, with little to no exploration or consideration of alternatives (Luyckx et al., 2011). The stage of exploration wherein a person actively explores possibilities for their path to see what fits well with their identity is referred to as moratorium (Luyckx et al., 2011; Marcia, 1966). This period of low commitment and active exploration sometimes is associated with higher levels of stress and anxiety, but moratorium is a healthy, normal, and necessary aspect of attaining a sense of identity (Marcia, 1966; Meeus et al., 2012). Individuals in moratorium are typically open to new experiences as they explore various life alternatives (Meeus et al., 2012). Typically moratorium occurs at some point during adolescence or early adulthood, as an adult identity is formed (Belsky, 2019). If moratorium does not end, or if its timing conflicts with the societal clock of one's culture, the experience can cause distress or depressive feelings (Meeus et al., 2012). Identity achievement is characterized by the presence of commitment following a period of systematic exploration; where, after careful consideration and exploration a person chooses a satisfying life path (Luyckx et al., 2011). Individuals may move between the identity statuses throughout the lifespan, and it is also possible to have different identity statuses in different areas

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

of life (Belsky, 2019; Luyckx et al., 2011). For example, one may have reached identity achievement in terms of their future career, but still be in moratorium regarding the religion they would like to practice (Belsky, 2019). Longitudinal studies have found trends suggesting that identity tends to progress rather than regress, and that individuals tend to move towards achievement over time rather than diffusion (Meeus et al., 2012). Viewing identity development in terms of changes in the strength and levels of commitment and exploration places emphasis on the process of development rather than the outcome (Luyckx et al., 2011).

The formation of a strong identity and meaning in life have been positively correlated. The formation of a strong identity helps to create meaning, and finding things that are meaningful in life also strengthens one's identity (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). Exploring meaning in life during adolescence, this confusing and often challenging life phase, could have many positive outcomes such as making adolescents “more adaptive, positive and hopeful. It could also enable them to more effectively adjust to developmental challenges and difficult transitions (Schwartz, 2016). On the other hand, the lack of a sense of meaning in the adolescent population often is theorized to be an underlying cause of feelings of depression and suicidal ideation or attempts (Schwartz, 2016). In summary, the presence of meaning in life has been shown to have many positive outcomes that may be especially beneficial to adolescents, such as greater well-being, higher self esteem, self acceptance, and positive self-image. The presence of meaning can be useful in helping adolescents develop strong identities, which is a key component of developing a coherent sense of self in adolescence and is also linked to positive outcomes later in life (Steger, 2016). In addition to a positive correlation of well-being and a sense of purpose in adolescence, an inverse relationship has been found between having a sense

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

of meaning and social issues such as avoidance and rejection, which demonstrates the buffering effect of the presence of meaning in life (Schwarz, 2016).

A major part of adolescence and emerging adulthood is to “forge an identity that consolidates one's beliefs, values, and goals into a coherent story that can be used as a basis of making life decisions” (Yeager, 2009). The presence of personal goals, a future-oriented mindset, and engaging in thoughts about the possible selves they hope to become or avoid becoming are associated with academic success, lower levels of risky behavior and substance use, and other indicators of adolescent well-being (Yeager, 2009; Steger, 2017).

Many goals during this phase of life are “work goals” or goals that have to do with a future occupation or role (Yeager, 2009). The presence of these types of goals may contribute to positive outcomes, such as feelings of meaning due to the engagement in thinking about one's present and future selves and aiding in the formation of a strong identity. Through the process of thinking about their work goals as an opportunity to make a contribution to the larger world which may also lead them to feel a sense of meaning usually associated with beyond-the-self impact (Yeager, 2009). Settling on a “work goal”, or reaching “identity achievement” as outlined by Marcia (1966), is an important part of committing to an adult identity. The associated “rumination” or exploration is considered to be a normative and helpful part of the transition from adolescence through emerging adulthood and into adulthood (Yeager, 2009).

Even though adolescents in middle and high school are preparing for adult work, the length of time between school and a future career, at least in the American context, and the disconnect that often exists between schoolwork tasks and their future careers, can make it difficult for students to find meaning in their schoolwork. The presence of “work goals” may

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

help to frame schoolwork in a more meaningful way, offering a belief that “their schoolwork is done in the service of a larger, long term goal that matters to the world and provides a sense that their lives have meaning”. It could also provide motivation to learn skills in school so that they can be equipped to make a contribution (Yeager, 2009).

Forming a narrative identity is another aspect of identity formation (McAdams, 1996; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Reese et al., 2009). A narrative identity is an evolving story of the self that brings order and sensibility to one’s lived experiences (McAdams, 1996; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Reese et al., 2009). This story can also be useful in the recovery from adverse events. Incorporating even adverse events into the story can help to make sense of an event, or help to find a benefit in the experience (Martela & Steger, 2016). Reflecting on an event and incorporating it into one’s life narrative helps to bring a sense of consistency back to one’s life by making sense of the event in a way that had not previously been done (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). This often forces structure onto an event and can make it easier to assimilate into a life narrative (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). This story creates a sense of unity, purpose and meaning to one’s life (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Moral development is very closely related to identity formation, as it is considered to be an essential aspect of identity, along with personality traits, memories, and desires (Strohming & Nichols, 2014). Forming a moral identity is a crucial step in the process of having purpose, and choosing a path that may contribute to well-being, generativity, and integrity (Lapsley & Hardy, 2017).

Identity Formation and Culture

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

The formation of one's identity is strongly linked to culture and the cultural context in which one develops (Belsky, 2019; Heine & Ruby, 2010). Although culture is a broad term that is difficult to define fully (Altugan, 2015), culture has been defined in a classic article as “the set of ideas that coordinate the actions and construct the meanings of groups of people” (Snibbe, 2003). These cultural ideals are usually implicit and automatic. Our culture shapes our individual minds, behaviors, thoughts, feelings, goals, values and beliefs (Belsky, 2019; Snibbe, 2003; Triandis, Malpass & Davidson, 1973). Humans are “under the guidance of cultural patterns and historically created systems of meaning” that shape what we do, think and believe (Johnson, 2013). Meaning may also be a cultural artifact to some degree (Steger, 2018).

Culture is formed, reproduced, and transmitted through social interactions, and usually becomes more pronounced with age and socialization (Belsky, 2019; Heine & Ruby, 2010; Snibbe, 2003). It is important to understand that culture is not only present in people's lives, but that it fundamentally influences how one thinks and acts, and that it frames one's experiences (Heine & Ruby, 2010). Culture also affects the way that one views the self; either deriving identity from inner attributes, or deriving identity from relations with others (Heine & Ruby, 2010). In addition to views of the self, culture also influences worldview, and how malleable one views the world to be. Having a fixed view of the world, rather than viewing the world as flexible and responsive to one's efforts to change, can impact how a person views their goals, future, and role in a society (Heine & Ruby, 2010). Those with a more malleable view of the world are likely to feel as though they have more control and may strive to shape their reality to fit their perceptions and goals, whereas individuals with a more fixed view may try to align themselves with the existing realities (Heine & Ruby, 2010). Societal norms are also reflective of

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

culture; whether or not it is culturally acceptable to strive to stick out and be unique or if it is expected to fit in is one example of this (Heine & Ruby, 2010). Therefore it is important to think about the multitude of factors that influence an individual's behavior, thoughts, feelings, goals, values and beliefs when studying psychology. When research is conducted cross-culturally, it is important to keep in mind the assumptions we may have embedded in our research studies. Often in cross-cultural research the studies “consist of comparing means on self-reported scales across cultures.” These comparisons may not portray an accurate representation of reality if cultural differences in the populations have not been considered (Heine & Ruby, 2010). For this reason, in the current study I have chosen to collect qualitative data, in addition to using scales as a baseline to gain a more accurate and culturally variable understanding of the students in their specific cultural context. It is also important to be aware of the emphasis placed on finding the differences between cultures when culture is considered in psychological research (Poortinga, 2013).

Due to the fact that culture is transmitted through social interactions and learning, schools may be an important factor in both the development of identity and in transmitting cultural information and norms of a society. Erikson's stages of psychosocial development talk about how important school is during the adolescent stage in development (Erikson, 1968). Individuals in this stage are at the point of forming their identities, as outlined by Erikson's conflict at this stage: identity vs. role confusion. Schools play a large role in the formation of identity through the social interactions and exploration of different roles individuals experience there (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Not only do children in adolescence spend a lot of time at school, but their socializing agents have shifted from parents and family to teachers and peers, making those

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

social interactions especially influential (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Erikson, 1968). For this reason, I have chosen to focus on the school environment as the cultural sphere for this project.

Present Research

Meaning and purpose are important aspects of life. A number of research studies have attempted to look into the development of meaning and purpose in the adolescent population (Bronk, 2011; García-Alandete et al., 2019; Malin et al., 2015; Moran, 2014; Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2017; Shoshani & Russo-Netzer, 2016); however, most of these studies used surveys for collecting data from adolescents. In this present study, open-ended questions were used to explore the way that adolescents think about meaning and purpose and the sources from which meaning and purpose are derived. It was also of interest to see if adolescents thought about meaning and purpose in ways that differed from adult conceptions of these variables.

Based on the amount of research that has been done in the areas of meaning, purpose, and identity development, it is now of interest to see how these theories apply to specific cultures, ages, and settings. The present research aims to build on the previous literature and fills a gap in this area of research through the study of adolescents' sources of meaning and purpose within a cultural setting. This study aims to uncover themes that will provide information about the possible sources of meaning in life for children and adolescents and to see how culture and life phase could affect the sources from which they gain meaning. Our culture influences many aspects of development and what we view as being important (Belsky, 2019; Johnson, 2013; Snibbe, 2003). Therefore, it is interesting to investigate the extent to which the sources of meaning in life are a byproduct of our culture and to what extent they are an individually created experience. I hypothesized that the sources of meaning for adolescents will be influenced by the

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

cultural context, especially by the school systems, because schools play an important role in the development of adolescents (Belsky, 2019; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Erikson, 1968). I expected to find that schools and the cultural environment they create will have an impact on the ways in which adolescents understand both the idea of meaning and the sources of meaning and purpose in life. Due to the way the school system is structured in Germany, I hypothesized that the students in the *Realschule* and in the *Gymnasium* would have differing views on school and on school as a source of purpose and meaning in their lives. I predicted that the students from the *Realschule* would view school as less important than the *Gymnasium* students (i.e., mentioning less about academics or school in their answers). I hypothesized that because of the structure of the schooling system and the narrowing of opportunities that the students face, the German students in comparison to the American students would have a better idea of what they will do in the future and may be at a slightly different (later) stage in their identity development, despite being in the same age range as American students, since the “middle school” phase is closer to the end of their academic career for some of the German students than the American students. In addition to the cultural differences in identity development, I also predicted that the students’ sense of meaning calculated from a structured scale would be lower than revealed through their answers in the interviews. I expected to find that their scores on a meaning in life scale would not accurately represent the amount of meaning that is present in the lives of the students due to the fact that they may not be able to understand the measures that were created with an adult population in mind (Piaget, 1952; Shoshani & Russo Netzer, 2017).

Method

Participants

In total, data was collected from 66 students. Forty six of the students were interviewed from schools in Germany. The students from Germany were sampled from three schools: 22 students from the Gottlieb-Daimler-Realschule in Ludwigsburg, Germany (Baden Württemberg); nine students from the Otto-Hahn-Gymnasium, which exists in the same building as the Gottlieb-Daimler-Realschule; and 15 students from the Freie Evangelische Gesamtschule in Hagen (Nordrhein-Westfalen). These schools were selected to represent the broad range of school types that exist in Germany. Due to the lack of *Gesamtschulen* in the state of Baden Württemberg as a result of the *Schulwandel*, a school in the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen was selected. There were 19 males and 27 females in the sample collected from Germany. Nineteen students from the 6th grade, seven students from the 7th grade, and 20 students from the 8th grade were interviewed in total. Twenty of the students had a migration background (*Migrationshintergrund*), defined in this study as having one or more parents born outside of Germany, regardless of current citizenship status, and three of the students themselves had migrated to Germany at some point. Additionally, 10 of the students were the oldest children, 13 were the middle child, 15 were the youngest in their families, two were part of a twin pair, and six were only children. The schools in Germany were selected based on convenience sampling and due to the type of school that each was classified as (*Realschule, Gymnasium, Gesamtschule*) in order to get an accurate representation of German students. The participants from the German sample were not compensated in any way for their participation.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

In Maine, data was collected from 21 students. The students were selected from the Lewiston Middle School and the Robert V. Connors Elementary School (6th grade is considered part of elementary school in the state of Maine). There were 10 males and 11 females in the sample from Maine. There were 11 students from the 6th grade, eight students from 7th grade, and two students from the 8th grade. Four of the students had migration backgrounds, defined in this study as having one or more parents born outside of the USA, regardless of current citizenship status. Three of the students themselves had migrated to the USA at some point. Additionally, four of the students were the oldest children, 13 were the middle child, three were the youngest in their families and one was an only child. These schools were also selected out of convenience and their proximity to the Bates College campus. The participants were not compensated in any way for their participation, although some (6th grade students) received candy after participating in order to reward the students for returning their parental consent forms, due to the low return rates of permission forms for the American sample.

Materials

A modified version of the revised Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status survey, focusing only on the occupational and activity domains of identity, was utilized for this project (Bennion & Adams, 1986; see Appendix A). This survey was selected in order to gain information about the identity status of adolescents in order to make a comparison between the cultures. Based upon the differing school systems, it was of interest to see if the students in each country might have different identity statuses regarding their occupation, especially due to the shorter and more structured school system existing in Germany compared to the U.S.. The survey in its full length assesses the identity statuses of occupation, religion, politics, philosophical

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

lifestyle, friendship, dating, sex roles, and recreation. It is a revised form of other Ego-Identity status surveys and is based on the identity statuses theorized by Marcia (1966, 1980). The original survey had 64 questions and was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The identity statuses were scored by summing the questions from each category (diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement) and the category with the highest score indicates the participant's current identity status. For the purpose of this project, which focuses mainly on meaning, purpose and identity, only the questions pertaining to occupational and recreational activity were selected in order to get at identity and purpose development. These sections were selected in an attempt to make the survey shorter and to look into possible cultural differences in identity statuses related to occupation. These two categories were also selected to make it simpler to score due to focusing on only two related domains of life which were the most pertinent to meaning and purpose in the context of this research project. Occupation and recreation are often sources of meaning and purpose for adolescents, and therefore they were selected. In the current study, the identity statuses were determined by comparing the average of each of the categories (diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure, and achievement) because there were not as many questions that pertained to each category as there had been in the original full-length survey. Questions 1, 2, 7, and 8 were averaged to find the diffusion score; questions 3, 4, 14, and 15 were averaged to get the moratorium score; questions 5, 11, 16, and 10 were averaged to find the foreclosure score; and questions 9, 13, 6, and 12 were averaged to find the achievement score. The only change made to the original questions was in the first question: the wording was changed from "I haven't chosen the occupation I really want to get into, and I am just working at whatever is available until something better comes along" to "I haven't chosen the occupation I really want to get into,

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

and I am just working on what I am doing in school until something better comes along” in order to make the statement more applicable to the students. This change was made only for the surveys given to the students in the USA, after many of the German students had questions about that particular item.

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) was also utilized in order to make a comparison between the individual students’ scores of meaning on the survey and the meaning they discuss in the interview (Steger, 2006; See Appendix B). The MLQ has been widely used in meaning research. The 10-question survey is rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The MLQ measures both the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, making it unique among self reported meaning surveys. The presence of meaning is scored through the addition of questions 1, 4, 5, 6, and reverse scoring of question 9. The search for meaning is scored through the addition of questions 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10. The MLQ has been used across multiple cultures and populations in previous research and has relatively high reliability across different populations due to the survey’s open and broad structure and the ability for participants to provide their own subjective ratings according to their own definition of meaning, if they feel the presence or search for meaning in their lives, (Steger & Shin, 2010; Steger & Samman, 2012; Damásio & Koller, 2015; Schutte et al. 2016; Rose, Zask & Burton, 2017). Questions such as “I understand my life’s meaning” asks about meaning in a way that does not impose any definitions of that word. While this subjectiveness of meaning is important, the broadness of this survey means that it gives no insight into the areas of life that the person is thinking of when they are making an assessment of whether their life has meaning. For this reason, the survey was used in combination with the interview in this project. The purpose of this study was not only to find out *if* adolescents in

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Germany and Maine feel that their lives have meaning, or that they are searching for meaning, but also to find out in which areas of life they feel this, and also how they choose to understand the term meaning within the context of their culture and stage of life.

For the interview, the questions were created in order to best find out what is meaningful to students in their lives, without using complex terms that they might not understand. This was a concern when using the MLQ (Steger, 2006) with an adolescent population due to the hypothesis that adolescents may not understand the surveys based on the used vocabulary or because the existing tools may not be able to capture the nuances and level of understanding of children in the concrete operational stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1952; Shoshani & Russo Netzer, 2017). The language used in the MLQ is highly abstract and employs general formulations about meaning in life, which may be difficult for children and adolescents to understand (Shoshani & Russo Netzer, 2017). However, it has been shown that even young children are capable of articulating the things that are meaningful and important to them in their lives as long as they are asked in more concrete ways (Shoshani & Russo Netzer, 2017; Reese et al., 2009). This was kept in mind as the interview questions were created. The purpose of using the MLQ (Steger, 2006) was also to gather information in the aggregate in order to serve as one aspect of a more comprehensive methodology.

The purpose of the interview was to let the adolescents define what brought meaning and purpose into their lives. The questions attempted to encourage adolescents to talk about things that were meaningful in their lives, while not confusing them with terms with which they might be unfamiliar. The interview was meant to utilize concrete terms and questions that the adolescents would understand, and the semistructured format of the interview allowed for

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

follow-up questions in areas that seemed to bear more information. The questions of the interview were loosely structured around the four pillars/sources of meaning identified by Smith (2017), without explicitly using the words “belonging, purpose, transcendence, and storytelling” often, with which the students might not be familiar. While the questions attempt to get at certain general themes connected to meaning, the intention was also to leave the questions broad enough so that the adolescents could still talk about other things that might not fall into one of these pillars. The questions were created to be general and attempted not to impose themes, or ask leading questions.

Some of the questions attempted to get at general sources of meaning and the students' understanding of meaning. Questions such as “What stands out to you as important at the end of the day?” and “What do you look forward to the most during the day?” and “Do you feel like you have things that give you a sense of meaning in your life?” were asked to get at the general sources of meaning.

The question “What type of work do you want to do when you are older?” was asked, followed by questions going in more depth about what they had said to get at purpose and the cultural differences in the way that the school systems make the students think about the work they might do later. This was meant to specifically target the future-oriented purpose that usually develops during the adolescent period. Asking about the timing of these decisions “when did you decide you wanted to do _____” was also important for looking at the different effects which the school system structures might have had on decisions about future work. Due to the way that the school systems are set up, some of the students in Germany are much closer to the end of their schooling time when they are in the 6th- 8th grade, compared to the American students, and

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

therefore, it was of interest to learn how much the students had thought about their future type of work. The words “occupation” or “job” were not used explicitly in the question in order to leave the question open for a range of answers including more broad ideas of work. The follow-up question “Have you already done something to explore that occupational goal?” was also asked to gain insight into identity status regarding this domain of life.

In order to dig more deeply into cultural differences and students’ relationships to their school environments, the question “How do you feel about your school and your environment?” was asked. Follow-up questions included “What do you like about your school” and “What are some things that are hard for you?”

In order to get at a feeling of belongingness, questions such as “What or who couldn’t you imagine living without?”, “Who do you like to be with and spend your time around?” and “Do you ever feel left out?” were asked. In addition to asking who they liked to be around, a question about exclusion was asked because exclusion is an important aspect of whether or not they feel belonging. In her TEDx talk, qualitative researcher Brene Brown mentioned that when asked about belonging, people often talk about being excluded. Therefore, the opportunity to talk about this aspect of belonging was provided as well.

Looking at differences in culture and how it was related to identity, the questions “How would you spend your day if you had a choice of what to do for one day?” and “How would you describe yourself?” were asked. As it can sometimes feel awkward to describe oneself, especially during the adolescent stage due to adolescents’ sensitivity to what they think others around them may think about them, another question was added (Belsky, 2019): “How do you think other people would describe you?”. Due to the imaginary audience that is often experienced during the

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

adolescent years, the thoughts that the adolescents have about what others are thinking about them are in some cases reflections of what they think of themselves (Belsky, 2019). “How do you think you have changed in the past few years?” was asked in order to understand their identity development over time, and to encourage them to reflect on their identity narrative.

In order to evaluate their goals and priorities, “If you knew that you could not fail, what is one goal that you would accomplish?” was asked. The addition of not being able to fail was added so that the students would not be afraid to talk about some goals they had if they did not feel confident about their ability to achieve that goal. This also provided them with the opportunity to express what was really important to them, without the constraints of it being realistic. “What is something in the past that made you feel proud?” was asked in order to get them to talk about a moment in the past that was significant. After each of these questions, the follow-up question “Why did that moment make you feel proud?” or “Why was that moment so meaningful for you” were asked to get deeper into the story. This was meant to get them to reflect back a bit and not only find a moment in their personal narrative that stood out to them, but also to understand why that moment was significant. In order to avoid talking about a moment that was adverse or difficult and from which they might have gained meaning, a positive memory was elicited. This choice, to focus on positive aspects of life, was selected as to avoid situations that could cause distress to the participants by asking them to reflect on something, or force meaning making out of a moment that they may have not fully processed, or which they might not be ready to process at the time.

The order of the questions in the interview was also considered during the creation of the interview questions. The questions at the beginning were simple and easier to answer in order to

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

let the students get comfortable with the interview and to build rapport with the interviewer. Near the end of the interviews some questions about meaning using the word “meaning” were asked in order to assess their understanding of the term, and also their interpretation of what that term means. Since the interviewees came from a relatively broad age range, during a time when a lot of changes, both physically and cognitively, happen, it was important to gauge their understanding of the term (Brassai, Piko & Steger, 2010; Belsky, 2019). It was also of interest to find out if the cultural context had any effect on when or if these students would be able to understand the term “meaning.” The questions containing the word “meaning” were reserved until the end of the interview, so as not to discourage the flow of the conversation if they did not understand the question or did not have an answer. It is also important to note that since meaning is a complex and broad topic, many of the questions targeted multiple sources, or pillars, of meaning. The interview questions, in English and in German, can be found in the appendix (see Appendix C), as well as my drafts of my questions during the process (see Appendix D)

Other materials utilized were Qualtrix, an online program for administering surveys; a password-protected phone used to record the interviews with the students for transcription purposes; and TranscriptionPuppy, an online transcription software used for the transcription of the interviews that were conducted in English.

Procedure

Pre Data Collection Phase (USA):

Before beginning data collection, the qualitative questions were piloted and iterated with children of Bates faculty in order to create questions that are age appropriate and could be easily understood by adolescents within the age range targeted in this project. Three pilot interviews

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

with children aged ten, thirteen, and fourteen were conducted. After each pilot interview, the questions were adjusted based on the feedback that was received from the interviewees about what had been difficult to understand or answer. In the first iteration of the questions (see Appendix D, some of the questions asked too directly about the sources of meaning. Questions such as “When do you feel a sense of belonging in your life?” were hard for the participants to answer, and so the questions were shifted to be more broad, asking about belonging in other ways. The flow of the interviews was also considered and decisions about the order in which the questions would be asked was determined through piloting. The iteration process was also helpful for practicing how to interview adolescents, and to learn which questions felt odd to ask.

Peer review and suggestions during the construction phase of the questions were also received from a set of peers during the course “Advanced Topics in Developmental Psychology: *The Construction of Meaning Across the Lifespan.*” This feedback was helpful in constructing questions that were actually able to get at the concepts of meaning and purpose. Additionally, the insight received from peers who had worked with similarly-aged students was valuable in making decisions about the wording of the questions.

The interview questions and the two surveys were translated with the assistance of Raluca Cernahoschi-Condurateanu and Berit Kerner (a native German speaker) to ensure that the nuances of the questions were kept through the translation process and to make sure that the questions would be appropriate and relevant to ask in the cultural setting of Germany.

Data Collection in Germany:

Data was collected in Germany between May and July of 2019. A similar procedure was followed in each of the three schools. Information on the schools that were selected in Germany

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

and information on the German school system as a whole can be found in the pre-chapters of this thesis. The research project was introduced to each classroom in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades and the students were sent home with a consent form to be signed by the parents. The consent forms for the German students were translated into German with assistance from Raluca Cernahoschi-Condurateanu and Berit Kerner. The signed consent forms were then collected by the teachers of the students and returned to the experimenter. After talking with the teachers, an appropriate time to interview each of the students was found. All of the students gave verbal assent prior to participating in the survey and interview. They were reminded that there was no punishment for declining to participate and that there would be no compensation for their participation. The students were also told that all of their responses would be kept confidential, and that this project was to find out more about them and what was important to them in their lives, in order to minimize the students answering with socially desirable responses.

All of the students first took the two surveys, followed then by the short interview. All 15 of the 6th graders at the *Realschule* in Ludwigsburg took the survey on computers individually prior to their short interview. The computerized versions of the surveys were made using Qualtrics. All of the other German students took the surveys on paper with a pen due to school logistical difficulties. The online surveys and the printed paper surveys were identical. In the *Gesamtschule* and the *Gymnasium* the students took the two surveys in a room with other students all together before being pulled individually for their interviews. The students were monitored to ensure that the questions were answered individually and to answer any questions that arose while taking the surveys. This method was implemented in order to be more time efficient and in order to adapt to outside circumstances in the schools, such as testing days and

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

half days due to heat waves. After the students completed filling out the surveys, the surveys were marked with a number corresponding to each of the student interviews. This was done to ensure that the surveys and the interviews remained as a pair in case they were to be compared later in the analysis. The interviews with the students were conducted in quiet and minimally distracting rooms that were available in the schools, such as empty classrooms or meeting rooms. The average time of the interviews was 7:38 minutes. The shortest interview was 4:28 minutes, and the longest interview was 11:38 minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, in order to both keep consistency of the questions between participants and populations and also to allow for some flexibility in the interviews. All interviews were voice recorded for the sole purpose of transcription accuracy and the recordings were stored on a password protected phone. No names were associated with the surveys or recorded interviews to ensure anonymity of the students. After each interview the students were thanked for participating and asked if they had any questions about the project. After the data collection, all of the interviews were transcribed by hand. The analysis of the data was conducted in German and only the themes and direct quotes were translated with the help of Raluca Cernahoschi-Condurateanu and Berit Kerner (a native German speaker).

Data Collection in Maine:

Data was collected in Maine between October 2019 and January 2020 at the Lewiston Middle School and the Robert V. Connors Elementary School after gaining permission from each school to do so. The Lewiston Middle School is a school located in the former mill town of Lewiston, Maine. The city is the second largest city in Maine with an estimated population of 36,592 people. There is also a large immigrant population, mostly Somali and Bantu. There are

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

about 718 students who attend the school, and it is the fourth most diverse public school in Maine. The school only offers grades 7 and 8 and the student teacher ratio is 12:1 (“Lewiston Middle School”). The Robert V. Connors Elementary School is also located in Lewiston Maine. It is one of five elementary schools in the district. 721 students attend this school, which offers pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. It opened in 2019, making it the newest school in the district. The school itself is a merger of two older schools; Martel and James B. Longley elementary, which were torn down. The student teacher ratio for the 6th grade is 19:1. There are five 6th grade classrooms at Connors Elementary school.

In each of the schools in Maine, a similar procedure to in the schools in Germany was followed. The project was introduced to each classroom in the appropriate grades and parental consent forms were given out. After the parental permission forms were returned, an available homeroom period was found in order to conduct the interviews with minimal disruption to the student’s school day. As in Germany, all of the students gave verbal assent prior to participation in the survey and interview, and they were reminded that there was no punishment for declining to participate. The students were also told that all of their responses would be kept confidential, and that this project was to find out more about them and what was important to them in their lives, in order to minimize the students answering with socially desirable responses. All of the students from Maine took the two surveys with pen and paper individually before their short interview.

The average time of the interviews was 8:27 minutes. The shortest interview was 4:00 minutes, and the longest interview was 15:07 minutes. The same procedure was followed in regards to organizing and keeping track of the student interviews and surveys. No names were

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

connected with any of the responses, and a number system was created and implemented to track the data. After completion of the interview, the students were asked if they had any questions regarding the research project. The students in the 6th grade received candy at the conclusion of their interview. This was implemented in order to incentivise participation in the project after encountering difficulties getting participants for this age group. After the data had been collected, an online transcription software, TranscriptionPuppy, was used to transcribe the English interviews from the students in Maine. This was paid for using funds from the Bates Research Fund, and the psychology department of Bates college.

Results

Quantitative Analyses

Meaning in Life

Results of descriptive statistics for the MLQ (Steger, 2006) can be found in Table 1. Overall the mean score was 25.05 for presence of meaning, and 19.97 for the search for meaning. According to Steger's manual for the MLQ, this is indicative of feeling that one has found their life's meaning and that one is not actively searching or seeking for meaning in one's life. He writes "One might say that you are satisfied that you've grasped what makes your life meaningful, why you're here, and what you want to do with your life" (Steger, 2010). Two one sample t-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores for presence and search for meaning found in this study to the mean scores for presence and search for meaning in a study done by Rose et al. (2017), which found results consistent with other literature. The means for presence of meaning found in the study described here ($M = 25.05$, $SD = 6.21$) were significantly higher than the means found in the Rose et al. (2017) study ($M = 23.14$, $SD = 5.96$), $t(65) = 2.53$, $p = .014$. The means for the search for meaning found in this study ($M = 19.97$, $SD = 7.46$) were significantly lower than the means found in the Rose et al. (2017) study ($M = 24.41$, $SD = 6.17$), $t(65) = -4.84$, $p < .00$.

Two-sample t-tests for independent groups were conducted to compare the search and presence of meaning by country. The American sample ($M = 25.00$, $SD = 5.20$) had a significantly higher search for meaning score than the German sample ($M = 17.78$, $SD = 7.27$), $t(64) = 7.21$, $p < .001$. "There was no significant difference for the presence of meaning by country.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Another set of two-sample t-tests for independent groups were conducted to compare the mean scores on the MLQ by gender. No significant differences were found.

Two-sample t-tests for independent groups were conducted to compare the mean scores on the MLQ by grade level. For this analysis, grade level was grouped as 6th grade as their own group, and then 7th and 8th grade combined in order to avoid problems with power due to there being only a few 7th graders in the German sample and only a few 8th graders in the American sample. No significant differences were found in the means for presence and search between the grade levels. Even after breaking the samples down further by country, no significant differences were found based on grade level.

Identity Statuses

In looking at the identity status score from the modified version of the revised Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status survey (Bennion & Adams, 1986) the number of students who exhibited each of the identity statuses in each country can be found in Table 2. A chi-square analysis was run to see if there was a difference in the identity statuses of the students based on country; however, no significant differences were found. There were also no significant differences in the identity statuses of the students based on gender found through chi-square analyses.

Another set of one-way classification Chi-Square analyses were run to see if there were differences in the identity statuses of the students based on grades, either in the sample as a whole or by country. Again, the students were broken into two groups; 6th graders, and 7th and 8th graders, in order to avoid power problems. No significant differences were found among the students as a whole. When the sample was broken up by country, no significant differences were

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

found among the American sample. However in the German sample, there was a trend towards significance $\chi^2(3, N = 46) = 7.08, p = 0.69$. More students were identified as having a moratorium identity status in the 7th and 8th grade group compared to the 6th grade group.

Qualitative Analyses

Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to identify repeating themes in the transcribed German and English qualitative interviews. The findings can be seen in Table 3 (American sample) and Table 4 (German sample). Although I began my analysis looking at the responses of the participants by questions, the tables are based on general themes that were observed across all of the questions. The tables were generated according to the categories of purpose, belonging, and general sources of meaning. These categories were related to meaning and were talked about most by the participants. Within each table, the themes that were similar between the two countries were reported first, followed by the themes that differed by country. The quotations in the tables were edited for clarity and verbal tics have been removed for readability. The percentages reported in the table are the percentage of participants in the entire sample from each country who mentioned the theme or subtheme in their interview.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the sources of meaning in life for children and adolescents and to see how culture and life phase could affect the sources from which they gain meaning. It was hypothesized that the students' sense of meaning calculated from a structured scale would be lower than that revealed through answers in interviews. I expected to find that their scores on a meaning in life scale would not accurately represent the amount of meaning that is present in the lives of the students due to the fact that they may not have been able to understand the measures that were created with an adult population in mind (Piaget, 1952; Shoshani & Russo Netzer, 2017). It was also hypothesized that because of the structure of the schooling system and the narrowing of opportunities that the students face, the German students in comparison to the American students would have a better idea of what they would do in the future and might be at a slightly different (later) stage in their identity development, despite being in the same age range as American students, since the "middle school" phase is closer to the end of their academic career for some of the German students than the American students. Lastly it was hypothesized that the sources of meaning for adolescents would be influenced by the cultural context, especially by the school systems, because schools play an important role in the development of adolescents (Belsky, 2019; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Erikson, 1968). Due to the way the school system is structured in Germany, I additionally hypothesized that the students in the *Realschule* and in the *Gymnasium* would have differing views on school and on school as a source of purpose and meaning in their lives. I predicted that the students from the *Realschule* would view school as less important than the *Gymnasium* students (i.e., mentioning less about academics or school in their answers). As a whole, the data supported only the hypothesis that

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

the sources from which adolescents derive a sense of meaning and purpose is strongly influenced by culture. While most of the hypotheses were not supported, the present study still revealed interesting findings and provides questions for future research.

Taken together, the results of the quantitative data from this study were quite surprising and in most parts did not confirm the prior hypotheses. The results from the MLQ survey (Steger, 2006) actually indicated that the students seemed to have a high level of meaning in their lives, and a low level of search for meaning, whereas the interviews revealed a more varied picture. Similarly the results of this study did not indicate that cultural differences, especially school environments, had a profound influence on the identity statuses of the students.

Overall, there were two significant results in the quantitative data. First, it was found that the students in America had a higher score for search for meaning on the MLQ (Steger, 2006) than did the German students. This finding indicated that perhaps the students in America searched more actively for meaning than the German students did. When considering that “Sinn,” or meaning, in the German context is viewed more as a byproduct of living a well-rounded and balanced life rather than something that you can create (Lebert, 2016; Brinkenbäumer, 2015), this might explain some of the results. Perhaps the German students did not feel that they were in a stage in life during which they had to search for meaning. While they may have considered different job options and contemplated the type of life they may have wanted for themselves when they are older (a good job, a family, to still have fun and enjoy life), they may have assumed that these were things that would happen to them naturally, and therefore, they did not see the need to actively search for “Sinn” at this time in their lives (Lebert, 2016; Brinkenbäumer, 2015). In the American setting, the students may have

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

internalized meaning as being a goal within itself, and something that can be created. This goal-oriented aspect of meaning may have resulted in more active search.

Second, it was found in this study that the mean scores for search and presence of meaning differed significantly from the mean scores for search and presence of meaning in previous studies such as the study done by Rose et al. (2017). The students as a whole, across both countries, scored higher on the presence of meaning and lower on the search for meaning than would be expected from the previous literature (Rose et al., 2017). The Rose et al., (2017) study used the MLQ (Steger, 2006) with participants ages 12 to 18 in order to validate the use of this scale with this population. It is important to highlight that the Rose et al., (2017) study was conducted in Australia, which may have offered a different cultural context than the American or German cultures. While it is not what we would expect to see, the students in the present study may have reported a high sense of meaning in the survey because they actually felt this way. Adolescents often have things in their lives that are really important to them, even though they may not seem to be important to adults (Belsky, 2019). Perhaps this could have translated into a higher score for the presence of meaning than expected. The interviews with the students revealed that the students most often had things in their lives that felt important to them. Even though not every student understood the term “meaning” in the questions, they easily talked about things that felt important to them.

An unexpectedly low search for meaning compared to the Rose et al., (2017) study was also found. This could be explained by the fact that the participating students in this study had already found things that felt meaningful or important to them and, therefore, were not actively searching for things to bring meaning to their lives. Alternatively the low amount of search could

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

be due to the students' age. They may not yet have fully grasped the nuances of meaning in life in a way that adults do. Due to this potential lack of understanding, it is possible that they may not have fully understood the idea of the search for meaning, or what it means to feel that one's life does not have meaning. One might search for meaning because they feel that meaning is missing in their lives, feel that they have not fully grasped the meaning of an event, or feel that their appraised meaning of a situation does not match their global beliefs (Park, 2010; Steger, 2006, 2018). However if the adolescents do not understand what it is that they are missing, or if they have not encountered events that force them to make meaning out of a situation, they may not feel the need to actively search for meaning. It is also important to note that the search for meaning is not always a conscious process, which could offer a possible explanation for why there was a low level of search for meaning found in the current study (Steger, 2018).

It is important to note that in this study, the standard deviations for the means were quite large, even larger than the standard deviations found in Rose et al. (2017), which implied that the responses were quite varied and had a large spread. This could be reflective of the broad age range of the students and their range of developmental stages (Belsky, 2019) or it could be reflective of the subjective nature of the MLQ (Steger, 2006), which allows for the use of one's personal definition of meaning (Steger & Shin, 2010). There was no way of knowing what interpretation of the word "meaning" the students had used, and how much interpretation may have influenced the varied scores that were found. Alternatively, the large spread could indicate that perhaps the students had trouble understanding the survey, which was not designed with their age group in mind (Moran, 2014). No other significant differences on the MLQ (Steger, 2006) were found in this study between the two countries, or between gender or class year.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

The results of the modified version of the revised Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status survey (Bennion & Adams, 1986) were similarly surprising. They indicated that the majority of the students had reached an achieved identity status, something which we do not normally expect to see in adolescent populations (Meeus et al., 2012). According to Erikson's theory (1968), identity formation is the focus of one of the stages of youth development, usually taking place between 12 and 18. The students in this study were at the lower end of this age range. While it was not expected, it is possible that the students had already undergone a period of exploration or moratorium and had reached identity achievement, which would mean that after careful consideration and exploration they had found and settled on a satisfying life path (Bronk, 2011; Luyckx et al., 2011). The results of this study only represent a snapshot of the students at one moment in time. Previous research conducted by Meeus et al. (2010) and Crocetti et al. (2008) indicated that individuals do not enter adolescence as a "blank slate" (Meeus et al., 2012). As a result of the previous resolution of earlier Eriksonian psychosocial crises (Erikson, 1968), individuals enter adolescence with a set of commitments that hold at least minimal strength in interpersonal identity domains and provide a basis for new commitments to form (Meeus et al., 2012). This suggests that strong identity commitments can be present in early adolescence, which has also been found in previous studies (Adams and Jones 1983; Archer 1982; Meeus et al., 1999). The high level of meaning that the students exhibited on the MLQ (Steger, 2006) may also help to support the explanation that the adolescents may have formed strong identities. After all, one of the important aspects of creating meaning in life is the formation of a strong identity (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). Similarly, the presence of meaning can be useful in helping adolescents to develop strong identities, which is a key component of the development of a

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

coherent sense of self in adolescence and it is also linked to positive outcomes later in life (Steger, 2016).

It is possible that the adolescents may have undergone exploration in depth or exploration in breadth prior to the time of the survey resulting in the achieved identity status. However, even if they had not undergone a phase of exploration, this finding of high levels of achievement could still be supported by previous theory, because the process of identity formation is a dynamic one. Although on average there is a linear increase in exploration in depth and commitment-making over time, the steps do not necessarily have to go in this order; therefore, it is not so unusual that we would see adolescents who seem to have made strong commitments in their identity formation (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006; Luyckx et al., 2008; Luyckx et al., 2011; Meeus et al., 1999). The nature of this study is such that it only represents a snapshot in the lives of these adolescents, and therefore, it is difficult to draw conclusions about their past or future identity formation, or the amount of exploration that the students had or had not partaken in up to the point of the study. The data from this survey revealed that these students had found things that were meaningful and purposeful to them, which is a positive finding. Meaning and purpose have both been found to serve as buffers against negative factors during the turbulent period of adolescence and have been identified as an indicator of thriving (Bronk et al., 2009; Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003; Malin et al., 2015).

Because achievement and foreclosure could look very similar, the main difference being in the level of exploration prior to a commitment (Luyckx et al., 2011), another possible explanation for the findings of this survey could be that there were actually a large number of foreclosure cases that showed up as achievement on this survey. In other words, the nuanced

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

difference between foreclosure and achievement statuses may perhaps explain why there were so many individuals found to be in the achieved stage in this study. It is notable that there were no cases of identity foreclosure found in the present study, which seems odd since adolescents tend to lack cognitive flexibility (Belsky, 2019), which tends to be more related to foreclosure than achievement (Luyckx et al., 2011). Information gained in the interviews with the students support this argument, as the majority of students, when pushed about what they had done to explore their chosen career further, said that they had engaged in little, if any, exploration. Therefore, this finding might indicate that the individuals had found a will for purpose, but had not yet found a way in which to act on these identified purposes in the domain of their future career (Bronk et al., 2009; Malin et al., 2015). That being said, since the survey and interview only focused on the domains of careers and recreational activities, there is no way to know how much exploration the students had partaken in other domains of identity development such as friendships, religion, and relationships. The idea of what it means to have engaged in exploration of a particular path is also subjective, and due to the self-reported nature of this survey, the students may have had different ideas of what it means to engage in exploration. Foreclosure and achievement also differ in the level to which individuals feel immersed, involved, and enthusiastic about the commitments that they have made. Individuals in the foreclosure identity status tend to feel less immersed, involved, and enthusiastic about the commitments that they have made. They also feel that the commitments are less personally expressive in comparison to achieved individuals (Luyckx et al., 2011). While surprising, the low finding of foreclosed individuals in the present study could actually be positive, indicating that perhaps these students felt that their commitments were personally expressive. It could also indicate that they had an

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

open outlook on life and possessed exploratory strategies, which are things that an individual with a foreclosed identity status often lacks (Luyckx et al., 2011).

The results of the modified version of the revised Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status survey (Bennion & Adams, 1986) indicated that there were no significant differences in identity status scores between country, gender, or class year. It was surprising that there was no difference in identity statuses based on class year in either study. Generally, we tend to see adolescents moving into a moratorium stage at some point during adolescence, and we tend to see commitment making and exploration in depth increase linearly over time (Belsky, 2019; Luyckx et al., 2011). In general, individuals tend to move from less mature identity statuses to more mature identity statuses. In the German sample, however, there was a trend toward significance found in the differences of the identity status across different grade levels. This trend indicated that more students in the German sample identified as having a moratorium identity status in the 7th and 8th grades than in the 6th grade. Originally, I had hypothesized that the German students in comparison to the American students would have a better idea of what they would do in the future and may be at a slightly different (higher) phase in their development than Americans, despite being in the same age range as American students, due to the rigid structure of the schooling system that greatly reduces the opportunities that are available to many students. Despite the structure of the schooling system and the narrowing of opportunities that the students face, the observed trend did not fit my hypothesis. Instead, the trend fit the expectation for this age range based on previous literature (Belsky, 2019; Meesus et al., 2012). In a study done by Meesus et al (2012), they found that the prevalence of achievement was higher in middle-to-late adolescence and that diffusion was lower during later adolescence than in the

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

early phase of adolescence. This implies that, as adolescents move towards later adolescence, defined in the study as ages 16 to 20, they go through a period of moratorium on their way out of the diffusion or foreclosure identity status (Meeus et al., 2012). As some of the German students (*Realschule*) are nearing the end of their schooling, they tend to take part in school-mandated internships (practicums), usually during the 7th or 8th grade, in order to explore some future occupational options. This forced exploration might explain the trend towards significance that was found in the German sample. As the students explored different career options, their previous ideas of future jobs may have been questioned. In the American school system, and the two other types of schools in Germany (*Gymnasium*, *Gesamtschule*), the students in the 6th through 8th grade are quite early in their academic careers, and may only begin to engage in this type of exploration as they move toward the end of their high school/ secondary school experience.

Another factor that could possibly account for the cultural differences found through the revised Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status survey (Bennion & Adams, 1986) is that one question on the survey was modified between the time that the German students took the survey and the American students took the survey. The wording of the question was altered in order to make it more clear and more relevant to the lives of the students, based on the feedback gained during the data collection with the German students. The question that was edited was attempting to get at the diffusion identity status. The wording was changed from “I haven't chosen the occupation I really want to get into, and I am just working at whatever is available until something better comes along” to “I haven't chosen the occupation I really want to get into, and I am just working on what I am doing in school until something better comes along.” This change

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

in wording could perhaps have affected the data, and may have influenced any trends that were found. The confusion and questions that arose from the German phrasing could also hint at some confusion and lack of understanding of the survey as a whole. It is also important to mention that students from both countries may have had trouble with this survey, both due to the number of items and the length of the questions. The students often asked questions about the survey items, and it was also observed that the students struggled with reading each question carefully until the end of the survey. This possibility was hypothesized after watching the students take less time to answer the questions on the second page of the survey than on the first page.

The qualitative aspect of this study did partially support the hypotheses. From the interview results, strong cultural differences were found in regard to how adolescents viewed meaning and purpose. However, these cultural differences were not a result of the different school systems in the two countries as hypothesized, but rather reflected an internalization of societal values and norms learned elsewhere. It is interesting to see that all the themes that the German and American adolescents shared were themes that fit well into the way that we think of development and what we would expect to see in the adolescent stage according to American/western theory (Belsky, 2019; Erikson, 1968; Moran, 2014). The findings of this study make sense and fit in with the previous literature, which states that the most common sources from which individuals derive meaning are relationships and engaging in activities that are meaningful to the individual (Steger et al., 2013; Steger, 2018). Many of the themes that were found in this project also reflected the primary domains of purpose during the adolescence phase, including school, achievement, career, making money, family (spending time with or supporting current or future families), leisure, extracurricular activities, and sports (Moran,

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

2014). The only domain of adolescent purpose hypothesized by Moran (2014) that was not found in the present study was faith, which could provide evidence for the decline of religion as an important source of meaning or purpose in the lives of present-day youth (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Steger, 2018).

Two main sources of meaning that the students talked about in the present study were purpose and belonging, which provides evidence for two of the four pillars of meaning as outlined by Smith (2017). Transcendence and storytelling did not show up in this study as prevalent sources of meaning. This could very well be due to the questions that were asked. For the majority of the interview the questions were quite directed, and with the exception of the last question in the interview, they were not asked to reflect on meaning in a more general way or self-directed way. Therefore, the themes that were found may simply reflect the questions that were asked.

Notably there were some aspects of meaning that the students mentioned that do not directly fall under any of the previous pillars of meaning as outlined by Smith (2017). These sources of meaning, which have been compiled into the category labeled “other sources of meaning,” were largely different in the two cultures. The only common theme was “Relaxing,” which was seen as a source of meaning in both the American and German culture. It makes some sense that students in this age group would want to relax and take some leisure time for themselves. A lot of the comments in this category were talking about having free time and relaxing in the ways that they wanted to, which seems natural for students to want. A sub-theme that came up notably only in the American sample was not having to worry about things such as school. This could be due to the stress and pressure that the students feel about their school work.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

This presence of this finding only in the America sample implied that perhaps they feel more pressure related to their school work in comparison to the German students. One possible explanation for this increased pressure could be the differing structures of the school systems present in the two countries. In the American system, due to the theoretical possibility for every student to achieve a higher degree, the pressure to perform well in school may be higher than in Germany, where the rigid structure of the school system makes one's educational trajectory seem more predetermined.

In the German sample, besides relaxing, the students talked about a variety of subtopics that I have grouped into a theme called “life experience and wellness.” In this theme, the students talked about their life experiences and their hopes for their future life. In many aspects, the ways that the students talked about living meaningful and purposeful lives reflected German cultural ideals. The themes of being happy, life being fun, and just living demonstrate the culture’s well-balanced outlook on meaning and purpose and imply that the students were aware of the cultural message that meaning and purpose come from the experience of leading a well-rounded life, rather than from only one aspect of life (Brinkbäumer, 2015). It also shows that meaning in the German culture truly is seen as a byproduct of living well, rather than something to be created or sought after (Brinkbäumer, 2015). The emphasis on having fun and enjoying one's life has also been found as a theme in the *Shell Jugendstudie* (Albert et. al., 2019). The ideas of being concerned about one’s health and the health of one’s family, having time for oneself, and going outside all demonstrate the more well-rounded and balanced view of life and holistic approach to meaning as a byproduct of living well (Brinkbäumer, 2015; Schweizer, 2011). It is notable that the way the American students talked about their life did not have the same holistic view and

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

emphasis on balance in life that the German students demonstrated, but rather was more achievement and goal-oriented.

Under the category of purpose, learning and thoughts about a future career or job were common themes in both the American and the German samples. Based on the age range of the students and also the context in which this project was conducted, it makes a lot of sense that learning and future careers would be on the minds of the students at school. This finding is also consistent with previous research that has shown that the most frequently named personal goals during adolescence are ones that are about future occupations or work goals (Yeager, 2009). One of the questions in the interview also directly prompted “what type of work do you want to do when you are older,” forcing them to consider future work. It is interesting, however, that while both German and American students talked about future jobs as a source of purpose, the way that they talked about these jobs differed. In the American sample, most of the students who had an idea of what they wanted to do later named their interest in the subject or field as their reason for wanting to pursue this career; however, a number of the American students also talked about the financial motivations that they had for being interested in a particular job, whereas this was notably absent in the German sample. Lewiston, Maine’s median annual household income is well under both the national average, as well as the average for the state (\$39,890) (Lewiston, 2017). It is not unreasonable to think that perhaps the students may have been interested in the financial prospects of a job in order to secure a financially stable future for themselves and their future families. One student said that they want to “Make money. Because I don't wanna be living in the streets, homeless.” On a larger scale, the immense financial pressure that the American capitalist system places on many American households is not as prevalent in Germany,

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

where the social democratic system of the country makes financial stability for one's self and one's future family less of a concern. The present study demonstrates that this pressure and stress to achieve financial stability in order to be able to afford basic things in America, such as a place to live, health care, and education is clearly felt, even by young children. In Germany, where a larger safety net exists, some financial stress may be alleviated, which causes the students not to feel the same pressure to secure a high paying job. The income inequality in Germany is also smaller than in America, making it easier for Germans to live a middle-class life than for Americans. Therefore, German students may be more able to choose a career based on other culturally important factors, such as finding a job that fits one's interests and skills, one that is social in nature, one that provides the ability to work more independently, achieve a work life balance, and have a more calm and self-determined workday (Schweizer, 2011).

Instead of focusing on the financial prospects of a job, the German students named interests, finding aspects of the work fun, and looking to their parents for career examples as the reasons for choosing a particular career path. Due to the fact that most students attend the same type of school that their parents attended, and that the type of school one attends restricts the career opportunities that are available to an individual, it seems natural that the students would look to their parents for examples of what their future could look like.

When looking at the ways that students from each country talked about meaning and purpose, distinct differences can be seen. These differences are indicative of a strong cultural influence on the students. The American students talked about working hard for something, going to college (for the experience, or in order to have a better life), sports, and their various accomplishments as sources for purpose and meaning in their lives. From an American cultural

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

standpoint, these are all themes that are perpetuated within the society. The idea that if you work hard for something then it will pay off is a cultural ideal that exists within the American context and is also the basis for the idea of the American Dream. This can be seen in the way that one student talked about the value he sees in working for something; “I think that's what I was proud of, that I kept on trying it and I got better.” Due to the way that the American school system is set up, where all students theoretically have the opportunity to attend college or university, the attainment of higher education is a goal that many schools try to instill in their students. It is also commonly understood that people who attain a college degree make more money and generally have more financial stability than those who attain only a high school diploma, and there is a significant income difference between these two groups (U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). This relationship seems to be understood by the students as can be seen when one student said: “I really want to get a better education than my parents 'cause they basically didn't have education. I want to be able to provide for them and anything they need and the rest of my family too.” The close relationship between Bates College and the two public schools selected for this study also may have caused the students to aspire to be like Bates students with whom they often have contact and to whom they may look up. All of these factors may have influenced the students to talk about going to college as a major goal and purpose in their lives. The students also talked a lot about participating in sports as being a source of meaning for them in their lives. Previous studies on purpose in youth had identified leisure; focusing on extra curricular activities, hobbies, and non-work based pursuits, as a domain of youth purpose (Moran, 2014). Due to this previous study, participating in sports was identified as falling under the purpose category. It is important to note that while adolescents may find purpose through the participation in sports as a

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

recreational activity, sports in the American society also serves as an activity that bonds many families, as it is often an activity that families can partake in together, either watching or participating in the sport. This aspect of belongingness related to sports, either to a fan base or a sports team, may also increase the meaning that sports brings to one's life. It is also notable that some students used their participation in sports as a key aspect in explaining their identity. This makes sense since one's purpose may be rooted in one's identity, and may remain constant over some time (Damon et al., 2003). This multidimensional view of sports as being a source of purpose, belonging, and a key component of one's identity highlights how important sports may be in the lives of the American students.

In the American sample there was a strong emphasis on external accomplishments such as “winning a medal” or “winning my dance competition.” This may be reflective of the idea of purpose in the American cultural context. The idea that purpose is related to setting goals and accomplishing them is reflected in one definition of meaning in life, which states that meaning in life is achieved through “a sense of coherence or understanding of existence, a sense of purpose in one's life, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals and accompanying sense of fulfillment” (George & Park, 2013; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Ho, Cheng & Cheng, 2010, p. 2; Schwarz, 2016; Steger, 2012). These three components make up the trichotomy of meaning in the American context (Recker & Wong, 1988; 2012). The way that American students talked about their accomplishments may be indicative of the sense of fulfillment that they feel after the attainment of worthwhile goals. This emphasis on accomplishments of worthwhile goals is not present in the German trichotomy of meaning, which states that in order to live meaningfully one should be “self-determined, so he leads a life that suits him. He lives in deep, fulfilling

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

relationships with others and does something that suits him and that is important for other people” (Brinkenbäumer, 2015). It is also possible that in the American culture, external accomplishments, even small ones, are more often praised and recognized than in the German culture. One piece of information that points to the relative importance of accomplishments and pride in the American context in comparison to the German one is that in response to the question “What is something in the past that has made you proud?” The majority of the American students could easily name an instance during which they felt pride, whereas the most common answer to this question in Germany was “I don't know” or “I don't have a moment that comes to mind.” This fascinating cultural difference also has ties to previous literature and studies that have looked into the idea of pride across culture, and have attempted to figure out if pride is a common human emotion like happiness, sadness and disgust (Azar, 2006; Shi et al., 2015). In the current study it is difficult to draw conclusions about pride because this question may not have been culturally appropriate to ask in the German setting, which was reflected in the difficulty that the German students had with this question. After the data had been collected, during the analysis phase, it was discussed that the idea of pride (*Stolz*) is not one that is commonly used in the German culture, and may not have been the appropriate word to use in order to get at the topic of interest. *Stolz* in the German context is reserved for significant (milestone) achievements in contrast to how the word “proud” is used in the American context. In order to feel *Stolz*, one would need to have done something extraordinary, whereas in the American culture, pride is something that is felt more often (Azar, 2006). *Stolz* in the German culture can also sometimes carry a somewhat negative connotation. Perhaps a better way to have gotten at an idea comparable to pride in English, the question should have been “*War da ein*

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Moment in deinem Leben mit dem du sehr zufrieden warst?” (Was there a moment in your life that you were very happy with?). This finding still leaves room for a more in depth look at the way that pride is viewed and experienced in these two cultures.

Although the majority of German students said “I don't know” when asked about pride, the second most common answer was that they felt pride over personal development, such as changing their personality, character, or skills in a positive way; for example, one student talked about how *“Ich hab gelernt mit gewissen Probleme besser umzugehen und es hat mich so in dem Weg geholfen”* (“I learned to deal with certain problems better and it helped me in this way.”) This may be indicative of valuing an internal sense of validation, as opposed to an external sense of validation that comes with being recognized for an accomplishment. The German adolescents seem to be working on their identity, which is the sum of many things such as physical characteristics, personality traits, behaviors, roles, relationships, attitudes, preferences, values, beliefs and goals (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006). This finding also fits in well with previous literature that states that identity development is considered to be one of the most important tasks of the adolescence phase (Erikson, 1968; Luyckx et al., 2011)

Besides naming personal development as a source of purpose and meaning in their lives, the German students also mentioned having a family in the future. Thoughts about future family life, aside from the pressure of securing financial stability, were not mentioned by the American students. The German students may be more actively thinking about their families in the future, due to the strong ideal of a work-life balance that can be seen in the German culture (Brinkbäumer, 2015; Schweizer, 2011). When the students thought about their future, the family life aspect may have seemed just as important to them as their future career. Having a family in

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

the future seemed to be particularly related to meaning as can be seen in a quote from one student who said “*einfach eine Familie zu haben, glücklich zu sein, Sängerin zu werden, einfach schon zu leben dass ist des Sinn des Lebens für mich.*” (Just having a family, being happy, becoming a singer, just living is the meaning of life). This balance of family life and career is beneficial, because it has been shown that having multiple sources of meaning in life alleviates the pressure on one source to fulfill all the needs for meaning, and having multiple sources of meaning may protect against a sense of meaninglessness in life (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). This balance in the sources used to fulfill purpose, values, efficacy, and self worth can be seen in the way that work is talked about in the German context (Schweizer, 2011). It has been shown in a previous study called the *Shell Jugendstudie* (Albert et. al., 2019) that a good arrangement of family life and career is something that is very important to German youth. This study is repeated every four years in order to gauge the up-to-date values, habits, and social behavior of young people in Germany (Albert et. al., 2019). According to this study, German youths tend to enjoy close family relationships and view having a good home life as being important. These ideals may carry over into what they hope to one day share with their future families (Albert et. al., 2019). The importance of family and having a good relationship to one's family are also things that have been found to be important to youths in Germany (Albert et. al., 2019).

Notably, within the category of belonging, the themes for the German and American samples were extremely similar. These themes fit in with and support the previous literature that states that family, friends and school play important roles in the development of adolescents during this stage (Belsky, 2019). Belonging has also been hypothesized to be the most essential source of meaning for many people (Smith, 2017). Regardless of culture, the adolescents viewed

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

their family, friends, and their schools as their primary sources of belonging, which is developmentally appropriate, and demonstrates the importance of connection to others (Belsky, 2019; Smith, 2017). One student mentioned that the things she could not imagine living without were, “things that make me happy like my family and my friends.” One noticeable difference was that the students in Germany specifically mentioned their class cohort (the group of students in their classroom) as being a source of belonging. The specific emphasis on their class as a source of belonging may come from the way that the German schools are organized. In the German schools included in this study, the students stayed together with their class in one room for the majority of the day, while different teachers came to their classroom to teach lessons on specific topics. The students only switched classrooms or separated into different groups for elective classes. This was different from the schools in Maine where the students tended to move between the classrooms, while the teachers stayed in one room in order to teach. This difference in the organization of the schools may lead the students in the German schools to view their class cohort as a bigger source of belonging than the American students.

While a sense of belonging at school is important, it had been hypothesized that the type of school would have some influence on the extent to which students viewed school as a source of meaning and purpose in their lives. However, it was not found that the *Gymnasium* students viewed school as being more important than other German students. There were no differences in the ways students from different types of school in the German context talked about the importance of school in their lives. Rather, most of the students viewed their schools and schoolwork as being important, regardless of their school type. This seems to be a positive finding, implying that the students find value and purpose in education. This also is replicated in

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

what had been found in the *Shell Jugendstudie* which states that while education still has close ties to one's social background, more students than ever view education as important, and that educational ambitions continue to rise (Albert et al., 2019). This can also be seen in the current study when students talked about wanting to get better in school, for example “*also ich will es unbedingt erreichen besser in der Schule zu sein*” (“I really want to be able to do better at school”) or “*in den Sommerferien zu der vierten Klasse hab ich damals mit meine Mutter gesprochen weil ich schon damals sehr unglücklich war mit meine Leistung in der Schule und es hat mir Halt gegeben und seit dem hab ich mich auch sehr gut verbessert in der Schule.*” (“I spoke to my mother during the summer vacation before the fourth grade because I was already very unhappy with my performance at school at the time and she gave me support and since then I have improved a lot in school.”). This last quote also demonstrates that perhaps since the decision for which level of education a student will study is made so early in the German system (4th grade), perhaps the students feel higher levels of stress related to school earlier on before a decision is made, rather than in the middle school age range. While the students from either culture viewed education as important, most students highlighted the social aspects of school, which is why school was grouped in the belonging category of meaning. When asked what they liked about their schools, or what they looked forward to about going to school, most students said “seeing my friends.” This highlights the importance of peers as fundamental in the lives of adolescents, which has also been theorized in the previous literature (Belsky, 2019;; Erikson, 1968).

In conclusion, while many of the hypotheses were not supported, there were interesting findings that were discovered. First, the adolescents in this study from both cultures seemed to

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

exhibit a strong sense of meaning in their lives, as well as strong identities. These results imply that these students may be doing well since these are both indicators of thriving. Second, there were similarities that were found between the American and German sample. These similarities fit in well with developmental theories and previous literature, demonstrating that there may be aspects of development that are not culturally variable. When conducting cross-cultural research, the discovery of similarities can also be as important as the discovery of differences (Snibbe, 2003). These similarities were mainly in the areas of belonging and purpose. Last, there were also strong cultural differences discovered in the way that individuals think about meaning in life. These differences in the way that the students talked about aspects of their lives that brought them meaning revealed two different approaches to achieving meaning in life. The American students found meaning in life more through the active search, and creation of meaning, whereas the German students viewed meaning as more of a natural byproduct of living a well-balanced and fulfilling life.

Limitations

One major limitation for the quantitative portion of this study is the sample size, and the difference in the number of students from each grade or school in each country. There was also not an equal number of participants from each country, which could be a limitation when making cross-cultural comparisons with the quantitative data due to statistical power issues.

As with any research, but especially with cross-cultural research, what is learned is a representation of what was asked. The students responded to the questions that were asked of them. While the questions that were asked in this project seemed to have been relevant in both cultures, one possible limitation could be the questions that were selected for the interview.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

These questions might not have fully encompassed what meaning and purpose means in the German setting. Additionally, as can be seen with the question about pride (*Stolz*), the word choice may not always have been culturally appropriate in order to get at the topics that were of interest.

Another limitation of the study could be the measures that were used. The students often had questions about the survey items, which indicates that perhaps they did not fully understand the questions. Though the surveys have been validated, and are commonly used in meaning and identity development research, to the best of my knowledge, they have not been validated specifically with American and German adolescents. The administration of the surveys also demonstrated some difficulties. Even though the Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status survey (Bennion & Adams, 1986) was modified for length, it was still quite long, and many of the students had a hard time with the length of the survey and remaining focused and reading carefully until the end. One item in this survey was also modified between the time of data collection in Germany and in the USA. The wording of one question was altered, which may have accounted for slightly different interpretations of the question in the two cultures. This could therefore have influenced the cultural differences that were found in the results of this survey.

The times at which students were interviewed also may be a limitation of the study. It has been shown in previous literature that the mood of an individual, their assessments of their connectedness to others, and the presence or absence of positive affect can all have influences on the rating of how meaningful one finds one's life to be (King, Hicks, Krull & DelGaiso, 2006, Ryff, 1989; Stillman et.al., 2009, Williams et al., 2000; Steger & Kashdan, 2009; Heintzelman &

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

King, 2014). Because I interviewed the students at different times during the day, and different times of the year (Germany during the early summer, and Maine in the fall and winter) this represents a possible limitation of this study. This study represents only a snapshot in time of these students' lives and does not offer any longitudinal information in order to capture the shifts or changes that may happen over time.

Another limitation of the study was the types of students who volunteered to participate. While the study was introduced to all students in the appropriate grades, only a small percentage of the students who received the parental consent form returned them. This step of gaining parental permission, while always a limitation in gaining adolescent participants, seemed to be a notable limitation in this study because I did not directly have access to the parents. The students who returned the signed form had to have been interested and invested enough in the study to bring home the form to their parents and ask them to sign it. This could have led to a self-selected population, which could have led the sample to be less diverse than anticipated. This would limit the generalizability of the findings of this study.

Similarly, the geographic areas of the study in both Germany and the United States were chosen out of convenience and are specific regions of each country that may not be representative of the population of Germany or the United States as a whole. Therefore, this creates limitations in generalizability, as well.

Implications

This study was important because it built on previous literature and attempted to fill a gap in the research of adolescents' sources of meaning and purpose within unique cultural settings. The results from both of the surveys were surprising because they differed from what we would

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

expect to see during the adolescent phase, and also differed from what had been found in previous literature (Belsky, 2019; Luyckx et al., 2011; Rose et al., 2017). While the current study's survey outcomes paint an optimistic picture of the adolescents' development, the surprising results may hint at some limitations of the application of these surveys to adolescent populations. There may be limitations in terms of the language used, both in regards to the age of the participants, but also the meaning of specific words in a cultural context. This consideration is not meant to invalidate the results that were found; however, due to the profound difference between the way that the students from each culture talked about meaning, and the varied levels of understanding of the term "meaning" or "*Sinn*" found in the interviews, it may be important to look further into whether the surveys were appropriate for the age range and the cultural setting.

The findings of this study replicate some previous literature on development during adolescence such as providing evidence for Eriksonian (1968) stages including identity formation vs. role confusion, the domains of adolescent purpose theorized by Moran (2014), and replicating the finding that peers and families are the key socializing figures during the adolescent phase (Belsky, 2019; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Erikson, 1968). These findings are important because they demonstrate that these developmental theories may be valid in the German context as well as the American one, indicating that there may be aspects of development that are shared among humans in Western cultures, even in differing cultural settings.

This study indicated that German and American adolescents seem to be at similar stages of their development because no significant differences between levels of their identity development were found in the domain of future career. Therefore, it seemed that the school

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

systems did not impact the development of the adolescents' thoughts about their career in a profound way. There was no evidence to support that the rigid school structure in Germany caused the students to develop faster than the American students. The students in Germany did not seem to be any more sure about what they wanted to do in the future than the students in America did. For this reason one might question the structure of the system where some of these students will be done with their schooling in the 8th or 9th grade and will have to make decisions about their future, for which they may not be developmentally ready.

In the interviews, notable differences in the language and discourse that surround meaning and purpose in life were found between the two cultures. This indicates that there are cultural differences in how individuals think about and conceptualize meaning. The words used to talk about meaning and purpose, as well as the general discourse about these ideas, demonstrated that culture may play a large role in the development of meaning and purpose in life. Understanding meaning as a culturally-determined variable may have impacts on how meaning in life is studied across cultures other than the United States.

Future Research

The findings in the present study provide an interesting snapshot of the ideas of meaning in life in adolescents from two cultures and the sources from which they gain meaning. This research can be used as a starting point for future research on this topic. Because the scope of this project was quite large, some of the data gathered exceeded what could be analyzed for this thesis. Future research could look into the demographic information that was collected, such as migration background and sibling status, to further analyze how these factors play a role in the way that students talk about or conceptualize meaning and purpose. In addition, identity did not

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

end up being a large part of my qualitative analyses due to the overwhelming amount of data related to the themes of meaning and purpose; however, some interesting data was gathered, which may provide paths for future research. In particular, some interesting cultural patterns seemed to be emerging in terms of how the students chose to describe themselves, and how they thought others would describe them. While the majority of the students in both cultures did describe themselves in a positive manner, there seemed to be a larger tendency for German students to describe themselves in a negative way. Whereas only three American students mentioned any negative adjective when describing themselves, or while reporting how they felt others saw them, 15 of the German students used negative descriptors. While this was not fully analyzed, it was an interesting cultural difference that could be looked into in further depth at another time. The way that these adolescents describe themselves could offer important information into personality development, self esteem, social relationships, and also offer information about societal expectations and values related to personality and identity.

Future research could also be dedicated to looking at the students in a more individual way, to see how their individual scores on the MLQ (Steger, 2006) and the modified version of the revised Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status survey (Bennion & Adams, 1986) compared to their responses in the interview. This may be interesting to look into because the results of the surveys did not line up completely with the way that the students talked about the topics of meaning and purpose in the interview; the students in the interview seemed less sure about whether their lives had a clear sense of meaning than was demonstrated in the survey responses. It may also be important to look more closely into the discourses and the language that adolescents in each culture use to talk about meaning to determine the age and culture

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

appropriate questions to ask in order to get a more clear picture of meaning and purpose in these two cultures. This may be especially important to look into in the German setting, due to the strong cultural differences that were found in the ways that they conceptualized meaning in life, and the wide variety of words that are used to talk about this concept. Perhaps getting at words that better encompass the way the meaning is talked about in the German culture, for example, *Erfüllung* (fulfilment), *Harmonie* (harmony), *Einklang* (unison, the state of being in accord with something) or *Zufriedenheit* (the state of being content, satisfaction) might be useful. These terms are often used in addition to or as replacements of *Sinn*, and therefore may get at some more nuanced concepts within meaning in the German context.

Building on the findings of this study, which represents only one moment in the adolescent phase, it could also be interesting to look into how the feelings of meaning, purpose, and identity development might change and develop over time. To do this, it might be interesting to either look into three different age groups, or one group of students in a longitudinal study in order to see how meaning and purpose develop over the span of the adolescent period. It would be interesting to see if the sources from which they derive meaning change. Since there seem to be strong cultural influences on meaning, it would also be of interest to see at what age the cultural differences in meaning and purpose begin to emerge, and if there is a time where the way that individuals talk about meaning looks similar in the American and German youth. Looking into how an individual conceptualizes and talks about meaning in life over the course of time would provide important insight into the development of meaning and how it interacts with outside influences such as culture over time.

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School websites:

Lewiston Middle school: <https://lms.lewistonpublicschools.org>

Otto-Hahn-Gymnasium: <https://www.ohg-lb.de/wp/>

Gottlieb Daimler Realschule: <https://www.gdr-lb.de>

FESH Gesamtschule Hagen: <https://fesh-hagen.de>

Lewiston Middle School: <https://lms.lewistonpublicschools.org>

Robert V. Connors Elementary School: <https://connors.lewistonpublicschools.org>

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Tables

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for the Meaning in Life Questionnaire for the entire sample (n = 66)

Subscale	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Median
Presence of Meaning	25.05	6.12	9	35	26.00
Search for Meaning	19.97	7.46	5	35	21.00

Note: Higher scores indicate higher levels of presence and search

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Table 2

Number of students in each of the identity statuses for the German and American sample based on the revised Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status survey (Bennion & Adams, 1986)

	Diffusion	Foreclosure	Moratorium	Achievement	Tied-score	Total
America	0	0	7	9	4	20
Germany	4	0	13	26	3	46
Total	4	0	20	35	7	66

Note: The questions pertaining to each identity status on the survey were averaged and the identity status with the highest score was assigned to the student. For the tied-score students, there were two statuses that were equally high.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Table 3

Qualitative analysis for the American Sample using Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)

Purpose- America

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
Learning (76%)*		Q: <i>“What do you look forward to most during the day?”</i> A: <i>“Learning new stuff.”</i> <i>“I’m doing something that, like, benefits me, like, helps me learn more.”</i>
Job/ Career (100 % - prompted)	Money-driven (28%) Based on interests (42%)	<i>“Being a doctor, because doctors make a lot of money.”</i> <i>“I wanna be a lawyer. They get paid a lot, so.”</i> <i>“I thought about it for a while but I still don't know. But I've thought about maybe like programming and like game things but I'm still unsure. I mean I like playing games and stuff and I think it'd be cool if I could make my own game.”</i> <i>“I wanna be either a singer or music composer or geologist. For a geologist, I've always liked, like rocks and like science and stuff. So I like that. For a singer, I've always liked singing and stuff. And a music composer, I've always just liked music and art and stuff.”</i>
Sports as a recreational activity (85%)		<i>“Football is probably like one of the things-- its kind of like when I'm mad or something I, grab a football and I go outside and I'll play pass with my dad or something. And it calms me down a lot because that's just-- that's always been there....in my whole life.”</i> <i>“I would describe myself as, I think very energetic because I like sports.”</i>
Working hard for something (76%)		<i>“There was one year in football, I didn't make the team, and so, like that whole summer when my friends asked me to sleep over and stuff like that I would always -- it was fifth grade -- I would always say, "No." And I would be working</i>

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

		<p>on football and stuff like that. And then, the next year I ended up starting.”</p> <p>“I always try to reflect on stuff that I did and, and I try to find one thing or if I felt I could have done better at something. And then I try to fix it for the practices in the next game.”</p>
<p>Going to college (42%)</p>	<p>For the experience of college (23%)</p> <p>In order to have a better life (19%)</p>	<p>“Be a Pediatrician when I'm older and to go Vanderbilt.”</p> <p>“Like I said, I have--well, I think I said, I have plans to go to college.”</p> <p>“Going to a good college. Try my hardest.”</p> <p>“Get past high school and get through college and get good grades and stuff so I can not work in a fastfood restaurant place.”</p> <p>“Because it's like I would get a better life if I go to college. A better job.”</p>
<p>Accomplishments (74%)</p>	<p>General (28%)</p> <p>Sports (23%)</p> <p>School-related (23%)</p>	<p>“When I was in kindergarten I think. I wrote this paper and actually there's a funny ending to that story. I wrote this essay, and they don't do it anymore but they used to do it, it was called, “one moment in time” And they would pick people with the best writing prompts. I was only in kindergarten. Then they'd go to somewhere and they're standing and we get called up on stage and then get handed a bunch of stuff.”</p> <p>“In sixth grade I scored the game winning touchdown to win the championship.”</p> <p>“Two years ago, my hockey team won states and this year, well, this season, my baseball team won the championship.”</p> <p>“I'm proud of getting into Spark. Spark is this thing where if you got really good grades, you have to take this test. And if you take the test and you get in, then you're in this group, to like try and add a new goal on your certain day. And then they challenged you to readings that are extra hard and math. They do a bunch of science experiments and everything, and they challenge you more, and they make it so-- it's like it's just getting harder, learning material.”</p>

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

		“Last year, when I passed 6th grade.”
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Belonging- America

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
Friends (95%)		<p>“I feel happy. Like I have someone to talk to that has the same interests as me and stuff, like no one at home really-- like nerdy things.”</p> <p>“I always have fun when I'm around them, I enjoy it a lot because they like the same things that I do and we have a lot of things in common.”</p>
Family (95%)		<p>“Yeah, so, there's this time that I wasn't really feeling the greatest about myself, I went to friends and family, and they were just there for me, and they were able to sit by my side and help me out and said that I have, like, a meaning. They're like a stand in my life, so I'm able to speak out and say things.”</p> <p>“Probably my entire family because I don't know how I would live without them.”</p>
School (76%)		<p>“I like that we're a community. We're always there for each other even though we don't know each other. Like, if someone is crying, someone is just going to come in-- come up and ask if you're okay, even if they don't know you.”</p> <p>“At times the school can have drama but it's actually a really good place and like most people all get along and it's like a fun place to be.”</p>

Other sources of meaning - America

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
Relaxing (71%)	Not having to worry about school (19%)	<p>“Not having to worry about all the stuff that happens in the day and like getting to go home and not think about school.”</p> <p>“Always be able to do or always be able to spend time with the people I love and like not have to worry about a lot like... Like school and getting stuff done on time.”</p>

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

	Doing activities that are relaxing (52%)	“I would probably either spend it reading, spending time with my parents or maybe just like relaxing in my room.” “Probably doing a sport somewhere outside. If not, probably just like inside relaxing for the entire day.”
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Note: the quotes in these tables have been edited for clarity and verbal tics have been removed for readability.

The percentages reported in this table represent the proportion of the American sample who mentioned a particular theme or sub-theme in their interviews.

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Table 4

Qualitative analysis for the German Sample using Grounded Theory Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)

Purpose - Germany

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
Learning (64%)*		<p><i>“Ich würde viel Zeit draußen verbringen und aber trotzdem was für die Schule machen, weil mir die Schule wirklich wichtig ist.”</i></p> <p>“I would spend a lot of time outside but also still do something for school because school is really important to me.”</p> <p><i>“Also für mich ist Schule sehr sehr wichtig. Ich tue alles dafür, ich gebe mein Bestes und ich bin stolz auf wie ich bin.”</i></p> <p>“So, for me school is very important. I do everything for it and try my best and I am proud of how I am.”</p>
Job/ career (100%) - prompted	<p>Based on interests and find aspects of the work fun (44%)</p> <p>Example from parents (15%)</p>	<p><i>“Also ich möchte weiter meinen Sport betreiben, also Handball, und einen schönen Beruf ausüben, zum Beispiel Lehrer oder so, weil es Spaß macht mit den Kindern zu arbeiten. Also mir macht es Spaß denen Sachen beizubringen.”</i></p> <p>“So, I want to continue with my sport, handball, and have a nice job, for example a teacher or something, because it's fun for me to work with kids. It is fun for me to teach them things.”</p> <p><i>“Meeresbiologie würde ich gerne machen, weil ich einfach ein totaler Fan vom Meer bin und ich gehe auch tauchen als Hobby.”</i></p> <p>“Ocean biology is what I would like to do, because I am a total fan of the ocean and I also go diving as a hobby.”</p> <p><i>“Ich will Apotheker sein wie mein Vater. Also eigentlich wollte ich das schon immer machen, auch als ich klein war. Die Warenannahme ist ganz cool und so Cremes machen oder so Kapseln abfüllen ist auch cool.”</i></p> <p>“I want to be a pharmacist like my father. So, actually I have always wanted to do that, even when I was younger. When the products come it's really cool and mixing the creams or filling the capsules is also cool.”</p>

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

		<p><i>“Ich dachte in der letzten Zeit so in die Richtung Technikerin. Also die Richtung interessiert mich schon lange, weil mein Vater auch in so eine Richtung arbeitet.”</i></p> <p>“I’ve been thinking about the direction of a technician lately. I’ve been interested in this area for a long time, because my father also works in this area.”</p>
Future Family (28%)		<p><i>“Also ich möchte schon wenn ich erwachsen bin eine Frau haben. Ich will auch später Kinder haben, weil ich find das ist was ganz besonderes.”</i></p> <p>“So, I do want to have a wife when I’m older. I also want to have kids later because I think that’s a really special thing.”</p> <p><i>“Dass ich später eine gesunde und glückliche Familie mit Frau und Kindern hab ist mir wichtig.”</i></p> <p>“That I have a healthy and happy family with a wife and children later is important to me.”</p>
Personal development (48%)		<p><i>“Darüber, daß ich meine Persönlichkeit so verändert hab, da bin ich stolz drauf.”</i></p> <p>“I’m proud that I’ve changed my personality so much.”</p> <p><i>“Ich bin selbstbewusster geworden.”</i></p> <p>“I became more self-confident.”</p> <p><i>“Ich bin jetzt mehr zufrieden mit mir selber, mit meinem Character.”</i></p> <p>“I am now more satisfied with myself, with my character.”</p>

Belonging- Germany

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
Friends (95%)		<p><i>“Mit meinen Freunden fühle ich mich sehr glücklich. Also ich könnte jahrelang nur mit denen auf einem Punkt sein und einfach reden, erzählen, alles.”</i></p> <p>“With my friends I’m very happy. So, I could just sit with them for years in one spot and just talk and tell stories and everything.”</p>

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

		<p><i>“Ich weiß, das sind meine Freunde und die sind immer bei mir und wenn ich irgendein Problem hab oder die Probleme haben, dann helfen wir uns gegenseitig.”</i></p> <p>“I know that these are my friends and they are always with me and when I have a problem or they have a problem then we help each other.”</p>
Family (97%)		<p><i>“Also mit meiner Familie, man kann der halt alles erzählen und da ist man halt glücklich.”</i></p> <p>“So, with my family you can tell them everything and you are happy there.”</p> <p><i>“Meine Freunde geben mir Bedeutung, und meine Familie auch und einfach auch, dass man weiß, dass man auch gebraucht wird irgendwo im Leben, dass man weiß, dass man nicht umsonst auf der Erde ist.”</i></p> <p>“My friends give me meaning, and my family also and just that you know that you are needed somewhere in life, and that you know that you are not on the earth for nothing.”</p>
School (100% - Prompted)	<p>As a whole (46%)</p> <p>Classroom community (28%)</p>	<p><i>“Ich find meine Schule sehr sozial. Ich bin eigentlich total zufrieden mit den Lehrern und, ja, es ist halt schön, dass wir so eine Gemeinschaft sind und dass man halt wirklich jeden kennt. Meine Schwester ist auf der Gesamtschule Haspe und das ist nicht wirklich so, da kennst du kaum jemanden.”</i></p> <p>“I find my school very social, I’m actually totally satisfied with the teachers and, yeah, it’s really nice that we are such a community and that you really know everyone. My sister is in a <i>Gesamtschule</i> in <i>Haspe</i> and there it’s not really like that, there you don’t really know anyone.”</p> <p><i>“Ich finde meine Schule eigentlich ganz cool, weil hier sind alle eigentlich ganz sozial, an manchen Schulen ist es nicht so, da hassen sich irgendwie alle und manche sind so wirklich asozial, aber hier ist es nicht so.”</i></p> <p>“I think my school is really cool, because everyone here is actually really social. At some schools it’s not like that, there everyone hates each other somehow and some people are really antisocial, but here it’s not like that.”</p> <p><i>“Ich fand die Klasse voll als Familie und jetzt bin ich auch eingeschlossen und das ist toll, ja.”</i></p> <p>“I found the class fully as a family and now I’m also included and, yeah, that is great.”</p>

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

		<p><i>“Ich find die Schule ist sehr schön und die ist auch sehr familiär gestaltet und deshalb gefällt es mir auch und die Klasse halt auch so.”</i></p> <p>“I think that the school is really nice, and it’s also very much like a family, and that’s why I like it, and the classroom is also like that.”</p>
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Other sources of meaning- Germany

Themes	Sub-themes	Quotes
Relaxing (44%)		<p><i>“Spaß ist mir sehr wichtig, Urlaub zum Beispiel, damit man mal abschalten kann von der Schule und alles mögliche.”</i></p> <p>“Fun is really important to me, for example vacation, so that you can switch off from school and all sorts of things.”</p> <p><i>“Abends meine Auszeit zu haben, bisschen raus gehen, einfach abzuschalten.”</i></p> <p>“In the evening to have my time off, go outside a bit, just to switch off.”</p>
Life experience and wellness	Health (22%)	<p><i>“Also mir erscheint es wichtig, dass es jedem einfach gut geht bei mir in meiner Familie und, ja, ich will nur, dass meine Familie halt gesund ist und mehr will ich eigentlich nicht.”</i></p> <p>“For me it’s important that everything is fine with everyone in my family and, yeah, I just want my family to be healthy, and I don’t really want anything more.”</p> <p><i>“Dass ich gesund bin und halt, dass ich Essen hab, und was zu Trinken und Geschwister habe, die gesund sind.”</i></p> <p>“That I am healthy and that I have food and something to drink and siblings that are healthy.”</p>
	Having time for oneself (33%)	<p><i>“Also, dass ich halt auch meine Freizeit habe ist mir wichtig.”</i></p> <p>“So, that I have my free time is important to me.”</p> <p><i>“Dass ich alle meine Ziele vom Alltag erledigt habe und aber trotzdem auch Freizeit für mich hatte ist wichtig.”</i></p> <p>“That I accomplished all of my tasks from the day but still had free time for myself.”</p>
	Being happy (62%)	<p><i>“Ja, einfach glücklich zu sein, jede Sekunde, jede Minute, alles zu genießen, jeden Atemzug, alles einfach zu geniessen.”</i></p>

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

	<p>Life should be fun (75%)</p>	<p>“Yeah, just to be happy, every second, every minute, to enjoy everything, every breath, just to enjoy everything.”</p> <p><i>“Ein schönes Leben, also einfach glücklich erwachsen zu sein, eine Familie zu haben, einen guten Job zu haben.”</i></p> <p>“A good life, meaning just to be happy as an adult, to have a family and a good job.”</p> <p><i>“Es ist irgendwie schwer zu sagen, ich hab aber einen Sinn in meinem Leben, ja, dass man im Leben halt glücklich ist, dass man sein Leben lebt und dass man es so lebt wie man es selber möchte und dass man einfach Spaß hat.”</i></p> <p>“It's hard to say, I have a meaning in my life but yeah, that you are happy in life and that you live your life, and live in the way you want and that you simply have fun in life.”</p> <p><i>“Dass ich glücklich bin und dass mir alles noch Spaß macht.”</i></p> <p>“That I'm happy and that everything is still fun for me.”</p> <p><i>“Der Sinn des Lebens? Spaß am Leben zu haben.”</i></p> <p>“The meaning of life? To enjoy life.”</p>
	<p>Just live (53%)</p>	<p><i>Eigentlich ist der Sinn des Lebens, daß man einfach lebt.”</i></p> <p>“Actually, the meaning of life is that one just lives life.”</p> <p><i>“Für mich ist es wichtig einfach glücklich zu sein und jede Sekunde im Leben zu genießen, man lebt ja nur einmal.”</i></p> <p>“For me it's important to just be happy and to enjoy every second in life, you only live once.”</p>
	<p>Going outside (46%)</p>	<p><i>“Ich würde irgendwo raus gehen mit Freunden und den ganzen Tag draußen bleiben.”</i></p> <p>“I would go outside with friends and stay outside all day.”</p> <p><i>“Ich würde mit meinen Freunden raus gehen, vielleicht wenn's schönes Wetter ist ins Freibad gehen.”</i></p> <p>“I would go outside with my friends, maybe go to the swimming pool if the weather is nice.”</p>

Note: the quotes in these tables have been edited for clarity and verbal tics have been removed for readability.

The percentages reported in this table represent the proportion of the German sample who mentioned a particular theme or sub-theme in their interviews.

The German quotes have been left in the table as well for clarity

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Appendix A

Modified Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status - James Marcia Questionnaire

Use the following 5-point scale to indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the items on this questionnaire.

1 Strongly Disagree

2 Disagree

3 Neutral

4 Agree

5 Strongly Agree

1. I haven't chosen the occupation I really want to get into, and I'm just working on what I am doing in school until something better comes along.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I sometimes join in recreational activities when asked, but I rarely try anything on my own.

1 2 3 4 5

3. I'm still trying to decide how capable I am as a person and what jobs will be right for me.

1 2 3 4 5

4. While I don't have one recreational activity I'm really committed to, I'm experiencing numerous leisure outlets to identify one I can really get involved in.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I might have thought about a lot of different jobs, but there's never really any question since my parents said what they wanted.

1 2 3 4 5

6. I've chosen one or more recreational activities to engage in regularly from lots of things and I'm satisfied with those choices.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I'm really not interested in finding the right job; any job will do. I just seem to flow with what is available.

1 2 3 4 5

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

8. Sometimes I join in leisure activities, but I really don't see a need to look for a particular activity to do regularly.

1 2 3 4 5

9. It took me a while to figure it out, but now I really know what I want for a career.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I've always liked doing the same recreational activities my parents do and haven't ever seriously considered anything else.

1 2 3 4 5

11. My parents decided a long time ago what I should go into for employment and I'm following through on their plans.

1 2 3 4 5

12. After trying a lot of different recreational activities, I've found one or more I really enjoy doing by myself or with friends.

1 2 3 4 5

13. It took me a long time to decide but now I know for sure what direction to move in for a career.

1 2 3 4 5

14. I've been experiencing a variety of recreational activities in hopes of finding one or more I can enjoy for some time to come.

1 2 3 4 5

15. I just can't decide what to do for an occupation. There are so many that have possibilities.

1 2 3 4 5

16. All of my recreational preferences I got from my parents and I haven't really tried anything else.

1 2 3 4 5

German Version

Benutze die folgende 5-Punkte Skala um zu dokumentieren, wie weit Du mit den Aussagen in den folgenden Sätzen übereinstimmst:

1 stark ablehnend

2 eher ablehnend

3 neutral

4 übereinstimmend

5 stark übereinstimmend

1. Ich habe nicht den Beruf gewählt, den ich wirklich gerne gelernt hätte, und ich gehe der Beschäftigung nach, die sich gerade anbietet, bis ich etwas Besseres finde.
1 2 3 4 5
2. Ich mache manchmal bei Freizeitbeschäftigungen mit, wenn ich gefragt werde, aber ich probiere selten etwas aus eigener Initiative aus.
1 2 3 4 5
3. Ich versuche noch herauszufinden, wo meine persönlichen Stärken sind und welcher Beruf für mich der richtige wäre.
1 2 3 4 5
4. Obwohl ich keine Freizeitbeschäftigung oder kein Hobby habe, für das ich mich voll engagiere, probiere ich zahlreiche Freizeitbeschäftigungen aus, um herauszufinden, wofür ich mich begeistern könnte.
1 2 3 4 5
5. Ich habe mir Gedanken über viele verschiedene Berufe gemacht, aber meine Eltern haben feste Vorstellungen über meinen Beruf, und ich werde nicht gefragt.
1 2 3 4 5
6. Ich habe mir aus einer Vielzahl von Möglichkeiten eine oder auch mehrere Freizeitbeschäftigungen (Hobbies) ausgesucht, denen ich regelmäßig nachgehe und ich bin mit meiner Wahl zufrieden.
1 2 3 4 5
7. Ich bin nicht so sehr daran interessiert, den richtigen Beruf zu finden; jeder Beruf ist gut genug. Ich nehme eher Möglichkeiten wahr, die sich anbieten.
1 2 3 4 5

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

8. Manchmal nehme ich an Freizeitbeschäftigungen teil, aber für mich ist es nicht wichtig, einem bestimmten Hobby regelmäßig nachzugehen.

1 2 3 4 5

9. Ich habe eine lange Zeit für diese Entscheidung gebraucht, aber jetzt weiß ich genau, welche Berufslaufbahn ich verfolgen möchte.

1 2 3 4 5

10. Ich habe es immer gemocht, denselben Freizeitbeschäftigungen (Hobbies) nachzugehen, wie meine Eltern und habe mir nie ernsthafte Gedanken über andere Möglichkeiten gemacht.

1 2 3 4 5

11. Meine Eltern haben vor langer Zeit entschieden, welchen Beruf ich ausüben soll und ich folge ihren Plänen

1 2 3 4 5

12. Nachdem ich viele verschiedene Freizeitbeschäftigungen (Hobbies) ausprobiert habe, habe ich schließlich eine oder mehrere gefunden, die mir allein oder mit Freunden wirklich Spaß machen.

1 2 3 4 5

13. Ich habe eine lange Zeit gebraucht, um mich zu entscheiden, aber jetzt weiß ich genau in welche Richtung ich mich beruflich weiterentwickeln möchte.

1 2 3 4 5

14. Ich habe verschiedene Freizeitbeschäftigungen ausprobiert in der Hoffnung eine oder mehrere zu finden, die mir jetzt und auch in Zukunft Freude machen werden.

1 2 3 4 5

15. Ich kann mich einfach nicht entscheiden, welchen Beruf ich ausüben möchte. Es gibt so viele, die Zukunftsperspektiven (Entwicklungsmöglichkeiten) haben.

1 2 3 4 5

16. Alle meine Vorlieben bezüglich meiner Freizeitgestaltung habe ich von meinen Eltern übernommen und ich habe nichts anderes ernsthaft ausprobiert.

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire

Please take a moment to think about what makes your life feel important to you. Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can and also please remember that these are very subjective questions and that there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer according to the scale below:

Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Somewhat Untrue	Can't Say True or False	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Absolutely True
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. _____ I understand my life's meaning.
2. _____ I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful.
3. _____ I am always looking to find my life's purpose.
4. _____ My life has a clear sense of purpose.
5. _____ I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.
6. _____ I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.
7. _____ I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.
8. _____ I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.
9. _____ My life has no clear purpose.
10. _____ I am searching for meaning in my life.

German Version

Bitte nimm dir einen Augenblick Zeit, um darüber nachzudenken, was deinem Leben Sinn oder Bedeutung gibt. Bitte bewerte die folgenden Aussagen so wahrheitsgemäß und genau wie möglich und bedenke auch, dass diese Fragen sehr persönlich sind, und es daher keine generell richtigen oder falschen Antworten gibt. Bitte benutze bei deinen Bewertungen die folgende Bewertungsskala:

1: absolut (sicherlich, vollständig) falsch

2: überwiegend falsch

3. in mancher Hinsicht (eher) falsch

4. Kann nicht entscheiden, ob falsch oder richtig

5. eher richtig

6. überwiegend richtig

7. absolut richtig

1. _____ Ich kenne den Sinn meines Lebens.
2. _____ Ich suche nach etwas, das meinem Leben Sinn verleiht.
3. _____ Ich bin immer auf der Suche nach etwas, das mein Leben bedeutungsvoll macht
4. _____ Mein Leben hat einen deutlichen Sinn.
5. _____ Mir ist bewusst, was mein Leben sinnvoll macht.
6. _____ Ich habe einen erfüllenden Lebenssinn gefunden.
7. _____ Ich bin auf der Suche nach meinem Lebenssinn.
8. _____ Ich suche nach einem Lebenssinn oder einer Lebensaufgabe.
9. _____ Mein Leben hat keinen mir ersichtlichen Sinn.
10. _____ Ich suche nach einem Sinn in meinem Leben.

Appendix C

Interview Questions (English)

1. How would you spend your day if you had a choice of what to do for one day?
 - a. Who would be there?
 - b. Where would you be?
 - c. Why would you want to spend your day like that?
2. What type of work do you want to do when you are older?
 - a. why did you choose that you wanted to do _____
 - b. what about doing ___ is interesting to you?
 - c. when did this start to become interesting to you?
3. How do you feel about your school and your environment?
 - a. What aspects of your school do you like?
 - b. What are some things that are hard for you?
4. What do you look forward to the most during the day?
 - a. If they don't mention anything about school... what makes you excited to go to school?
 - b. Anything else?
5. How would you describe yourself?
 - a. How do you think others would describe you?
 - b. How do you think you have changed in the past few years?
6. Who do you like to be with and spend your time around?
 - a. How does it make you feel when you are with them?
 - b. Do you ever feel left out?
 - i. When do you feel this?
 - ii. How does that make you feel?
7. What or who couldn't you imagine living without?
8. If you knew that you could not fail, what is one goal that you would accomplish?
 - a. Why did you choose that as your goal?
9. What stands out to you as important at the end of the day?
10. What is something in the past that made you feel proud?
11. Can you tell me about a moment in your life that had a lot of meaning for you?
12. Do you feel like you have things that give you a sense of meaning in your life?
 - a. Sort of things that feel significant to you in your life
 - b. What are some of those things?

Interview Questions (German)

1. Wie würdest Du Deinen Tag verbringen, wenn Du selbst entscheiden könntest?
 - a. Mit wem würdest Du diesen Tag verbringen?
 - b. Wo würdest Du an diesem Tag am liebsten sein?
 - c. Warum würdest Du Deinen Tag so verbringen?
2. Was möchtest Du einmal machen, wenn Du erwachsen bist?
 - a. Warum möchtest Du diese Tätigkeit tun?
 - b. Was interessiert Dich an dieser Tätigkeit?
 - c. Seit wann interessiert Dich diese Tätigkeit?
3. Was denkst Du über Deine Schule und Deine Umgebung?
 - a. Was gefällt Dir an Deiner Schule?
 - b. Kannst Du einige Dinge nennen, die Du schwierig findest?
4. Worauf freust Du Dich täglich am meisten?
 - a. Freust Du Dich auf etwas in der Schule?
 - b. Worauf freust Du Dich sonst noch
5. Wie würdest Du Dich beschreiben?
 - a. Wie würden andere Dich Deiner Meinung nach beschreiben?
 - b. Wie hast Du Dich Deiner Meinung nach in den letzten Jahren verändert?
6. Mit wem bist Du gerne zusammen und mit wem verbringst Du gerne Deine Zeit?
 - a. Wie fühlst Du Dich, wenn Du mit Ihnen zusammen bist?
 - b. Fühlst Du Dich manchmal ausgeschlossen?
 - i. Wann fühlst Du Dich so?
 - ii. Was macht das mit Dir?
7. Ohne wen oder was könntest Du Dir nicht vorstellen zu leben?
8. Wenn Du sicher wüsstest, dass Du das Ziel erreichen könntest, welches Ziel würdest Du gerne erreichen?
 - a. Warum würdest Du Dir dieses Ziel setzen?
9. Was erscheint Dir wichtig am Ende des Tages?
10. Gibt es etwas in Deiner Vergangenheit, auf das Du stolz bist?
11. Kannst du mir von einem Moment in deinem Leben erzählen das für dich eine grosse Bedeutung hatte?
12. Meinst Du, dass es etwas gibt, dass Deinem Leben Sinn und Bedeutung gibt?
 - a. Gibt es Dinge in Deinem Leben, die für Dich eine große Bedeutung haben?
 - b. Kann Du einige dieser Dinge nennen?

Appendix D

Brainstorm for interview questions

Meaning:

What do you think it means to have meaning in your life?

What are some activities that you enjoy doing even if they are not the most fun?

What is something that you do now that you feel is worthwhile?

What do you think is the most meaningful thing to you in your life at the moment?

In what ways do you think your life has meaning?

Belonging:

When do you feel a sense of belonging?

Do you feel like you fit in?

Do you feel accepted? ge

Do you feel included?

Worldview:

Do you feel like your life makes sense? (worldview/ coherence)

External/ beyond self (not sure how much this applies, egocentrism)

Do you feel like you do things that are beneficial to others? How does that make you feel?

Purpose/ goals

What are your goals?

Do you feel like you have found a direction that interests you?

What have you done to explore this interest?

Identity

What are your greatest talents?

What are the 3 most important things in your life?

What are some values that you hold

How do you think others view you? - belonging?

Meaning from suffering

Have you ever had something positive come out of a negative experience?

Religion

What effect has religion had on your life if any?

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Potential questions: Draft 1

To get at general sources of meaning and their understanding of meaning:

- when you wake up in the morning what makes you excited to get up?
 - If they don't mention anything about school... what makes you excited to go to school?
 - Anything else?
- Do you feel like you have things that give you a sense of meaning in your life?
 - Sort of things that feel significant to you in your life
 - What are some of those things?

To get at purpose/ Cultural differences in the way that the school systems make the children think about the work they might do later:

- What type of work do you want to do when you are older?
 - why did you chose that you wanted to do _____
 - what about doing ___ is interesting to you?
 - when did you decide you wanted to do _____

Getting at cultural differences, and also within german school differences:

- How do you feel about your school and your environment?
 - What aspects of your school do you like?
 - What are some challenges that you feel?

Getting at belongingness:

- What or who couldn't you imagine living without?
- Who do you like to be with and spend your time around?
 - How does it make you feel when you are with them?
 - Do you ever feel left out?
 - When do you feel this?
 - How does that make you feel?

Cultural differences and identity (?):

- How would you spend your day if you had a choice of what to do for one day?
 - Who would be there?
 - Where would you be?
 - Why would you want to spend your day like that?

Looking into their goals and priorities

- What would you do if you were confident you would achieve your goal?

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS

Draft 2

- How would you spend your day if you had a choice of what to do for one day?
 - Who would be there?
 - Where would you be?
 - Why would you want to spend your day like that?

- What type of work do you want to do when you are older?
 - why did you chose that you wanted to do _____
 - what about doing ___ is interesting to you?
 - when did this start to become interesting to you?

- How do you feel about your school and your environment?
 - What aspects of your school do you like?
 - What are some things that are hard for you?

- What do you look forward to the most during the day?
 - If they don't mention anything about school... what makes you excited to go to school?
 - Anything else?

- How would you describe yourself?
 - How do you think others would describe you?
 - How do you think you have changed in the past few years?

- Who do you like to be with and spend your time around?
 - How does it make you feel when you are with them?
 - Do you ever feel left out?
 - When do you feel this?
 - How does that make you feel?

- What or who couldn't you imagine living without?

- If you knew that you could not fail, what is one goal that you would accomplish?
 - Why did you choose that as your goal?

- What stands out to you as important at the end of the day?

- What is something in the past that made you feel proud?

- Do you feel like you have things that give you a sense of meaning in your life?
 - Sort of things that feel significant to you in your life
 - What are some of those things?

DEVELOPMENT OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN ADOLESCENTS