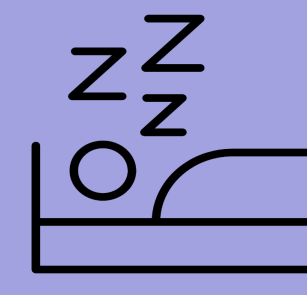


“There’s Obviously Something Wrong. Let’s Fix It.”

Meaning Making Narratives among College Students from Underrepresented Groups



Sleep & Psychosocial Adjustment Lab

Authors: Jocelyn Maeyama and Danielle Greene

Faculty Research supervisors: Royette T. Dubar, Ph.D. and Nicole K. Watkins, Ph.D.

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UNIVERSITY

Introduction

- The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected people with marginalized identities, adding to the challenges that students from underrepresented groups face during the transition to college (Devakumar et al., 2020; Syed, 2010).
- The process of creating meaning from ‘turning point’ life events (Pillemer, 2001) facilitates identity development (McAdams, 2001) and predicts positive adjustment (Yang et al., 2021).
- **Research Goal:** The goal of this project was to explore the presence of meaning-making within turning point narratives during the transition to college, among a sample of emerging adults, who identify as a member of an underrepresented socio-demographic group in the U.S.

Methods

Participants

- N = 24 emerging adults (*Mean age* = 18.98, *SD* = 0.47 years old), who identified as a member of at least one underrepresented socio-demographic group

Prevalence of Underrepresented Groups:

- **LGBTQ+** (*n* = 12), **Racial-ethnic minority** (*n* = 17), **First-generation** (*n* = 10), **Low-income** (*n* = 11), **Religious minority** (*n* = 3)

Study Design and Procedure

- **Qualitative:** 50-minute online interviews (audio-recorded through Zoom)
- **Interview question:** “Think back on your entire 1st year at Wesleyan. Please describe an experience that stands out as a turning point. This is an event or experience that marked an important CHANGE in your life. It could be an experience from any area of your life — academics, relationships, work, family, extracurricular activities etc.”

Data Analysis: Narrative coding

- Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.
- Responses were coded for: ‘**Event type**’, and ‘**Meaning-making**’.

Results

Event Category	Example narrative	Frequency n (%)
Relationships Experiences or conflicts with family, friends, or mentors; restructurings of personal relationships.	“I mean I started dating someone and I never had ever done that before. So that was like completely new to me. I didn't date anyone in high school, um, at all. And like it became a serious relationship”	11 (45.8%)
Academics Educational events prompting changes in approaches to school work or general mental health.	“So I kind of, I got like a midterm back or something and was just like screwed <laugh> and it just kind of like was the straw that broke the camel's back sort of thing.”	4 (16.7%)
Identity Explorations Reflections about the self; renegotiations of boundaries, self-image, etc.	“I can get comfortable with situations no matter like how bad or good they are. Um, but I remember there was, there was one point where I decided that I did not like the situation with it- I was in, so I was not gonna get comfortable with it.”	4 (16.7%)
Health/lifestyle Events related to physical/mental health and lifestyle behaviors.	“I like made a decision to like start essentially like getting healthy. Cause like that point I was like, oh man, I was like overweight and stuff. I was like, okay, well make a decision, get healthy.”	3 (12.5%)

Meaning-Making	Example narrative	Frequency n (%)
Lesson Learning something valuable that is a direct result of the event that the individual experienced. The lesson learned does not apply to other events beyond the turning point event.	“Cause then like you realized that like, I don't know, it was more of an attachment versus then like actually at that point, at least like it was more of just being attached versus then like actually having romantic feelings.”	12 (50.0%)
Insight The ability to learn something valuable that transcends the turning point event. Individuals report applying “life lessons” beyond the turning point event.	“And what actually told me is that I have to value and appreciate the moments that I have with people currently, live the present life.”	8 (33.3%)

Discussion

- Emerging adults typically nominate relationship experiences as turning point events (McLean & Thorne, 2002).
- Emerging adults reported gleaning both lessons and insights from a variety of turning point events as they reflected on their first year of college.
- Future research should examine how meaning-making relates to indices of psychological well-being.

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