

Youth purpose and life goals of students engaged in community and social activities

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Resumo: O Projeto de Vida (purpose) oferece uma bússola moral aos jovens, auxiliando-os a usarem suas habilidades e virtudes em suas vidas. Aprofundar os estudos sobre os projetos de vida da juventude pode contribuir para o desenho de estratégias novas e mais eficientes de educação moral, visando o desenvolvimento de uma maior consciência de cidadania, justiça social e participação dos jovens na construção de uma sociedade baseada na democracia, na justiça e na solidariedade social. Neste artigo explora-se a identificação dos objetivos de vida, os projetos de vida auto-orientados ou que são orientados para além do *eu*, e o engajamento em atividades comunitárias, o bem-estar e a satisfação com a vida em jovens brasileiros envolvidos e não envolvidos em questões sociais e comunitárias.

Palavras chave: Projeto de vida (Purpose); educação moral; juventude; engajamento social e comunitário.

Abstract: Purpose provides a moral compass for young people to apply their strengths and virtues in their lives. Deepen the studies about youth purpose may contribute to the design of new and more efficient moral education strategies, aiming the development of greater citizenship awareness, social justice and youth engagement in the construction of a society based on democracy, justice and social solidarity. This research paper explores the identification of life goals, the beyond the self or self-oriented purpose in life, a meaningful engagement in purposeful activities and the well-being and satisfaction with life in Brazilian youth engaged and not engaged in social and community issues.

Keywords: purpose; moral education; youth; social and community engagement.

Introduction – The Brazilian context

Ranking fifth among the world's most populated countries, Brazil has approximately 183 million inhabitants. Although it has been improving its economic and social indicators (Brazil's GDP – Gross Domestic Product is the sixth in the World Bank ranking), it has high poverty and inequality rates. According to the World Bank, in 2007 the richest 10% of the population accounted for 43.2% of Brazil's income. To the United Nations Development Program, the Human Development Index (HDI) for Brazil is 0.807, which gives the country a rank of 70th out of 179 countries, and the country is placed in the 10th ranking as most unequal nation among 126 countries, using the Gini Index that measure the inequality of wealth distribution (UNDP, 2008). In this UN index, as closer to 100 more unequal is the country. Brazil's Index is 57 while Finland is 27, USA is 40, Uganda is 45, Ghana is 40, and Uruguay is 44 (Araujo & Arantes, 2009).

In terms of education, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Brazil invests approximately 4% of GDP in Education, a low percentage when compared to many countries like Denmark (6,7%), US (5,7%)

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and UK (5,3%). Although 83% of the population between 15 and 17 years of age are studying, only 33% of them are in their regular year of schooling: high school.

All of these categories of socioeconomic issues represent real challenges for the Brazilian society and its youth. In the specific context of this research paper, it is assumed as a general guideline that a better understanding of Brazilian youth's values and purpose may contribute to the design of new and more efficient moral education strategies, aiming the development of greater citizenship awareness, social justice and youth engagement in the construction of a society based on democracy, justice and social solidarity.

Purpose

According to Moran (2009), Purpose is a common word that is understood in many ways. Sometimes it is equivalent to meaning, in other context to reason and finally, what is more usual, to a goal.

In this study the reference is the Youth Purpose Project, developed by William Damon and his group of researchers at the Stanford Center on Adolescence. For them, Purpose is defined as a "stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of intended consequence beyond the self" (Damon, Menon & Bronk, 2003), and it provides a moral compass for young people to apply their strengths and virtues in their lives.

From this definition, some important aspects can be highlighted for a better understanding of Purpose in the youth's life. First of all, purpose is characterized by certain stability, what includes goals and objectives to be achieved in the long term. Although purpose can change over time it has to be stable enough to drive the planning of present and future actions in order to achieve the life goals. A second aspect include an "external" orientation, a subject's desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to issues that transcend his individuality, or that can be considered beyond the self.

Bundick (2009) brings another two relevant aspects to better conceptualize Purpose. The first one is the Psychological Well-Being (PWB), which is defined as people's self-evaluations of the degree to which they are both satisfied with their lives on the whole and believe they are fulfilling their potentials. The second is the meaningful engagement in purposeful activities, referring to the degree to which a person finds the activities in which is involved across the domains of life to be significant and worthwhile.

Summarizing, a broader comprehension of a youth purpose should consider, in a complementary perspective, different psychological aspects of one's life, such as the identification of life goals, the beyond the self or self-oriented purpose in life, a meaningful engagement in purposeful activities and the well-being and satisfaction with life. In this way, willing to design educational tools that might help the development of the youth purpose, a study about the complexity inherent to this psychological quality, might take into consideration different elements that influence human purpose.

Youth, Purpose and social participation

In another perspective, according to Damon (2008) modern cultures expect youth to become more active and participative in their life paths and to have well-articulated reasons for their decisions and actions. They are expected to know who they are, why they are here, and how they can participate fruitfully in their communities through careers, civic engagement, and other positive pursuits.

According to Monteiro & Castro (2008), youth's participation in social activities has been investigated by different researchers in different countries. These studies suggest that young people can have a social and community participation in many different ways, such as political parties, professional associations, social programs ran by churches and NGOs.

Crocetti et al. (2012), studying the Italian youth, found that youth with achieved identities are more likely to endorse the attitude of social responsibility and to be civically engaged. Concluded the research pointing that to increase civic engagement might attend to identity development and promote in-depth exploration characterized by reflective thinking and mindfulness.

Damon (2008) in a study with more than two hundred young Americans, found a low significance for political and social participation in the subjects. In the interpretation of this data the author points out that this is a trend for nearly a decade in the United States.

In Brazil, the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analyses (IBASE) and the Polis Institute developed a study named "The Brazilian youth and Democracy: Participation and public policies spheres (Ribeiro, Lanes & Carrano, 2005). Conducted in seven metropolitan areas of Brazil, the aim of the study was to investigate youth's participation processes (15-24 years old). The survey found that most of the young people said they want to participate actively in society, however, does not find opportunities to do so. The research also examined whether the young respondents participates or not in groups of any kind, and the positive answer was given by 28.1% of them. An interesting data was that the higher percentage of participation was found in people from a higher socio-economic class (33.5%), followed by the middle class (28.2%) and lower socio-economic classes (24.0%). The main group activities mentioned were those of a religious nature (42.5%), sports (32.5%) and the arts - music, dance and theater - (26.9%). Activities more socially oriented had lower responses, like student gatherings (11.7%), those related to improvements in the neighborhood (5.8%), environmental issues (4.5%); Politics (4.3%) and voluntary work (1.3%). In the same research, when asked if "Have you ever participated in any movement or meeting to improve the life of your neighborhood or your city?", 18.5% of (the) respondents (as) answered yes and 80.6% said no.

The low involvement of the Brazilian youth with civic affairs and community was also studied by Nazzari (2006). She investigated the frequency of youth's participation in associative activities and found that most of the subjects (61%) mentioned going out with friends and to parties as the activities they are more involved, while activities such as participating in student associations, NGOs, community associations and unions were mentioned by only 17% of subjects. Nazzari also calls on UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund) figures on youthful dreams to find out that only 5% of the young respondents have dreams linked to the collectivity and the well-being of the population (Nazzari, 2006).

The research and method

Understanding the importance to study the Brazilian youth's Purpose and deepen the comprehension of the role that civic engagement might have on this psychological process, a research was designed to identify possible differences between the Purpose of those engaged and those not engaged in social and communitarian activities.

In a non-probabilistic study, 2.060 High School (1030) and College students (1030), ranging 15 to 25 years old, composed the sample. Females were 59% (1.215) and males 41% (845) of the sample. They were from 10 different cities, representing the five geo-political Brazilian regions. In each region we chose two urban areas: a big

city with over 1.000.000 inhabitants; and a medium city, with over 200.000 inhabitants, considering that over 75% of the Brazilian population live in these type of communities. The size of the sample followed the proportionality of the Brazilian students population in each geo-political region.

The Survey was created in the SurveyMonkey platform. To answer it the High School students were invited to a computer lab where they had access to the electronic survey, and to the college students a link with an invitation was sent to their personal email.

As a form to differentiate those engaged or not engaged in social and communitarian activities, subjects had to respond to an initial questionnaire, in a 5 items Likert type scale, about the frequency of engagement (never, seldom, some times, weekly, daily) in the following activities: a) Fund raising for community / neighborhood activities; b) teaching things that you know to others; c) Working as a volunteer with the neighborhood kids; d) Working as a volunteer for those in need; e) Working as a volunteer in associations such as NGOs, church / temple or other institutions. Those who reported to be involved weekly or daily in at least one of these activities were considered as socially engaged.

As a general result, 601 youngsters (29%) were categorized as socially engaged and 1.459 (71%) was considered as not socially engaged in our sample.

The instrument used in the research was the “Youth Purpose Survey” developed by the Stanford Center on Adolescence. This Survey is composed by different scales and considering the different perspectives of purpose presented before, the following scales were used: Life Goals Scale; Identified Purpose Scale; Ryff’s Purpose In Life Scale; Activity Engagement scale; SWLS - Satisfaction With Life Scale. They were adapted to the Portuguese language and also to the Brazilian culture.

Besides the regular analysis of each scale, an additional one was created considering the aim of this research. The subjects’ answers were classified according to the relevance they attributed to each category, which is composed by one or more items of the scales. Attributing a value between 1 and 5 in a Likert-type rating for each item, this relevance is obtained calculating the mean of the category for each respondent. The subjects were then classified according to the relevance they attributed to each category: a) Less then 3,5; b) More or equal to 3,5 (3,5 to 5). In this way, it means that a subject that attributed a mean of 4,0, for example in a economic life goal category, probably values well that category. The new analysis tried to identify possible differences between those engaged and those not engaged in social and communitarian activities.

The association between social engagement and the scales mentioned in each category was done by chi-square test. The statistical program used was Stata 11.0, and the level of significance was 5% ($p < 0.05$).

Results

Identifying the differences between Brazilian students engaged and those not engaged in social and communitarian activities, in different scales and analysis, the following results were found.

- **Life Goals**

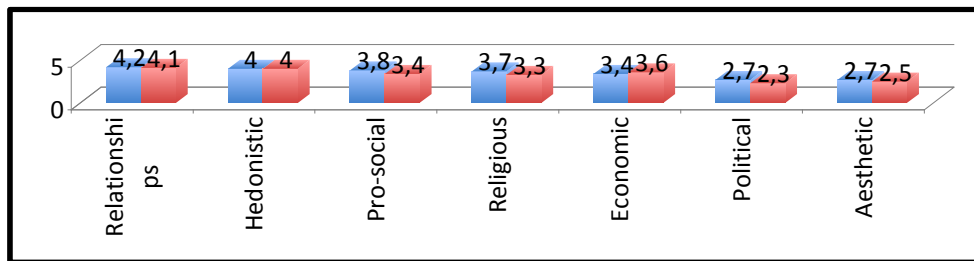
Life Goals are an important aspect of a youth Purpose in a way that among other characteristics Purpose is a long-term life goal, and has the feature to give motivation to others aspects of life and meaning to the efforts made in everyday life (Damon, 2008; Bundick, 2009). The Scale created by Robert and Robins (2000) was used to understand what are the main goals of life in the youth sample.

This scale has 16 items and the analysis was made using the following categories: Economic, Aesthetic, Pro-social, Political, Relationships, Hedonistic, Religious.

Table 1 – Categories of Life Goals – Complete sample

Categories of Life Goals	n	Mean	SD
<i>Relationship</i>	2003	4.16	.7145
<i>Hedonistic</i>	1985	3.96	.7032
<i>Economic</i>	1989	3,58	.8954
<i>Religious</i>	2021	3.41	1.2817
<i>Pro-social</i>	2029	3.51	.8708
<i>Aesthetic</i>	2043	2.58	1.3318
<i>Political</i>	2026	2.41	.9651

Figure 1 presents the mean differences between those subjects socially engaged and those socially not engaged.



In general, socially engaged youngsters had a higher mean in all but the hedonistic and economic categories when compared to those not engaged. When analyzing the association between social engagement and life goals, presented on table 2, social engagement is positively associated to all but the relationship and hedonistic categories, which are negatively associated. Thus, the proportion of students with average values greater than or equal to 3.5 in each of these categories is higher in those who have social commitment, with the exception of the relationship and hedonistic categories, whose proportion is lower.

Table 2 – Life Goals Categories x Social Engagement

Life Goals Categories	Social Engagement		
	Yes	No	p
	%		
<i>Economic</i>	54,2	61,9	0,001
<i>Aesthetic</i>	31,1	24,3	0,002
<i>Pró-social</i>	74,1	58,1	<0,001
<i>Pró-social poli</i>	27,8	14,4	<0,001
<i>Relationship</i>	83,4	84,4	0,592
<i>Hedonistic</i>	76,4	75,8	0,784
<i>Religious</i>	64,1	52,5	<0,001

- **Identified Purpose**

Moran, Bundick, Malin & Reilly (2009), from the Stanford Center on Adolescence, created a scale with 10 items that aim the identification of Self-oriented Purpose (5 items) and Beyond-the-Self Purpose (5 items).

In a Likert type rating, subjects had to answer how much they agree or disagree with the statements that followed the question “The purpose of my life is to . . .”. The *Self-oriented Purpose* statements were: Have a good career, Have fun, Make Money, Be successful, Earn the respect of others. *The Beyond-the-self Purpose* statements were: Do the right thing, Help others, Make the world a better place, Serve God/a Higher Power, Support my family and friends.

In the self-oriented items a mean of 4,2 was obtained by both samples (socially engaged and Socially not-engaged). In the Beyond-the self items the mean of the socially engaged youth was 4,4 while the socially not-engaged got 4,1.

Studying the association between social engagement and the Identification of Purpose, significance was found in those socially engaged analyzing the Beyond-the-self items.

Table 3 – Identified Purpose Categories x Social Engagement

<i>Life Goals Categories</i>	Social Engagement		
	Yes	No	p
	%		
<i>Self Oriented</i>	93,8	94,9	0,335
<i>Bts_oriented</i>	94,7	92,0	0,036

- **RYFF’s Purpose in Life Scale**

The instrument used in this research is a sub-scale, part of the PWB – Psychological Well-Being, created Carol Ryff (1989). The PWB-P sub-scale aim to identify if the young person is focusing on his/her future plans and if they are oriented to reach their life goals.

Subjects had to show their agreement or disagreement to 9 statements in a Likert type scale. The ranking was: Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree. The statements were: I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality; I am an active person in carrying out the plans I set for myself; Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them; I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future; I tend to focus on the present, because the future nearly always brings me problems; My daily activities often seem trivial and unimportant to me; I don't have a good sense of what it is I'm trying to accomplish in life; I used to set goals for myself, but that now seems like a waste of time; I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life.

The mean obtained for the socially engaged was 4,0 while for the non-socially engaged was 3,7.

Table 4 presents the association between social engagement and the Ryff Purpose in life scale, showing that the youngsters socially engaged tended to score higher in the items that compose Ryff’s scale.

Table 4 — Ryff's purpose in life scale x Social Engagement

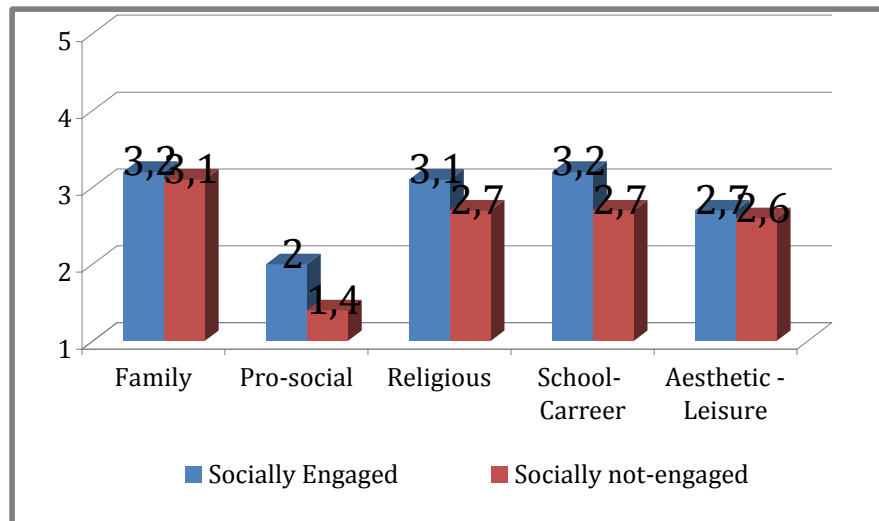
Categories of Purpose in life (Ryff)	Social Engagement		
	Yes	No	Yes
	%		
<i>Ryffs</i>	78,9	69,6	<0,001

- **Activities Engagement**

Engagement in different kind of activities is an essential element to better understand people's purpose. Analyzing if the young person is involved in actions that might help them to materialize their purpose is a way to differentiate the purposeful person from those who Damon (2008) calls dreamers.

To investigate the activities engagement, in a 5 items Likert type scale that asked for frequency (never; once a month; once in a week; few times a week; every Day), researchers from the Stanford Center on Adolescence created a scale to measure this engagement in different categories of contents: Family (Family celebrations, Spend time with your sibling(s), Talking with your relatives, Visiting with relatives); Pro-social (Volunteering in your neighborhood, Volunteering with those in need, Working on a political cause or campaign, Working on a social cause, Volunteering in NGOs); Religious (Praying, Attending religious or spiritual services, Reading or studying religious or spiritual books); School / Carreer (Studying or doing homework for class, Meeting with a tutor or mentor, Working for pay, Extra-curricular courses); Aesthetic / Leisure (Creating art, Dancing, Music, Sports, Involvement with computers/technology) .

Figure 2 presents the mean differences between those subjects socially engaged and those socially not engaged.



As shown, socially engaged youngsters have a higher mean in all levels when compared to those not engaged. And this data comes out again when analyzing the association between social engagement and activities engagement, presented on table 5:

Table 5 – Activities engagement x Social Engagement

Categories of activities engagement	Social Engagement		
	Yes	No	Yes
	%		
<i>Family</i>	41,0	38,4	0,292
<i>Pro-social</i>	4,5	0,9	<0,001
<i>Religious</i>	37,1	22,6	<0,001
<i>School Career</i>	40,6	19,2	<0,001
<i>Aesthetic_leisure</i>	14,6	8,8	<0,001

- **SWLS – Satisfaction With Life Scale**

Another psychometric scale used in this research was the SWLS - Satisfaction With Life, elaborated by Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). This 5 items scale, one of the most used psychological scale worldwide, aims to evaluate, in a cognitive dimension, people's general perception about life satisfaction.

In this study, in the perspective of the Positive Psychology, it is understood that crossing data from satisfaction with life and social engagement could be a relevant element to comprehend the importance of Purpose for the youth.

Again, in a 5 items Likert type rating, youngsters had to answer how much they agree or disagree with the following statements: I am satisfied with my life; If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing; The conditions of my life are excellent; In most ways my life is close to exactly how I want it to be; So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

The mean obtained in the youth socially engaged was 3,5, against 3,3 in those socially not-engaged.

An important significance was found in the association between social engagement and the satisfaction with life scale.

Table 6 – Satisfaction with life x Social Engagement

Categories of satisfaction with life	Social Engagement		
	Yes	No	Yes
	%		
<i>Swls</i>	53,9	45,4	0,001

Discussion

As pointed before, a better comprehension of a youth purpose should consider the complexity of this psychological quality, as a virtue that is characterized by certain

stability in one's goals and objectives in life, guiding future actions and plans towards a beyond the self purpose that transcend his/her individuality.

In terms of the human psychological functioning, one's purpose has a characteristic of centrality in the self and in the system of values, affecting the self-understanding, commitments and convictions. In this way, one's purpose is integrated in the person's identity and may motivate and guide actions and reasoning.

This discussion reinforces the relations of purpose with activities engagement and the psychological Well-being. Assuming that purpose motivate and guide actions, the kind of activities a person is engaged permit infer, at least generally, the kind of purpose he/she might have. Also, anchored in the positive psychology knowledge, if a person is coherent with herself, with her purposes in life, it is probable that will have more satisfaction with their own lives.

In this research, social engagement was defined as the independent variable to study youth's purpose. It can be considered as an ethical perspective in a way that someone engaged in citizenship and community actions is clearly worried about others and the construction of social Well-being and justice. Exploring the identification of life goals, the beyond the self or self-oriented purpose in life, a meaningful engagement in purposeful activities and the well-being and satisfaction with life in Brazilian youth engaged and not engaged in social and community issues was a way to deepen the studies about youth purpose.

The results of this study evidenciate that socially engaged Brazilian youth, High School and college students, which represents roughly only about 30% of the sample, are more other-regarding oriented in terms of life goals (Pro-social, Political, Relationships, Religious, Aesthetic categories). They are more identified with beyond the self oriented purpose. They are more oriented to reach their life goals. They are more engaged persons in society and, finally, they showed a higher level of satisfaction with life.

These results bring some reflections about the importance of introducing service-learning and other perspectives of moral and citizenship education in the school curricula, in lower and higher education. Active learning methods, based on principles of ethics and citizenship, seems to be crucial to foster social engagement. As a consequence, it can foster the development of more beyond the self oriented purpose and the psychological Well-being, with probable reflections in the youth's satisfaction with life.

In the specificity of the Brazilian society and its struggle to overcome historical social inequalities, the promotion of moral education strategies aiming the development of purpose, a greater citizenship awareness and the youth engagement can be a basis for changing the Brazilian youth mindset, towards the construction of a society based on democracy, justice and social solidarity. Of course this presuppositions can be generalized to other cultures and societies.

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