

Mission in Southern Brazil: The Transformative Experience of Student Volunteers

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship among volunteering, meaning in life, and suffering, based on Viktor Frankl's theory. It focuses on the experience of 41 university student volunteers who served in areas affected by the floods in Rio Grande do Sul in June 2024 through a project of the Adventist University Center of São Paulo – UNASP, in the city of Porto Alegre. The study assumes that volunteering, by enabling experiences of self-transcendence, can contribute to overcoming the existential vacuum and strengthening resilience in the face of suffering. Data were produced through questionnaires (with open- and closed-ended questions) based on the principles of Logotherapy, addressing topics such as motivation, suffering, and meaning in life. A Discussion Group was also conducted to deepen and validate the results. Data analysis followed the criteria of Prose Analysis, a qualitative approach focused on subjective aspects. The results indicate that volunteer involvement enabled students to reframe suffering, increasing empathy and their sense of purpose. Many reported that small actions had a major emotional impact, both on those receiving assistance and on themselves. In addition, volunteering fostered a sense of belonging and existential meaning. Challenges were also identified, however, including emotional strain in the face of the extreme vulnerability encountered.

Key words:

Volunteering, Rio Grande do Sul, meaning in life, suffering, Viktor Frankl.

Introduction

Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and founder of Logotherapy, argues that the search for meaning in life is a fundamental human motivation. In his seminal work, "Man's Search for Meaning," Frankl explores how suffering can become bearable when people find purpose or meaning in their lives. Volunteering in disaster contexts can be a significant source of meaning. The present study addresses the relationship among volunteering, meaning in life, and suffering. Specifically, it investigates how engagement in volunteer activities in the region affected by the floods in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, helped participants find meaning in their lives even in the face of suffering.

The will to meaning is the central concept of Logotherapy. Frankl (2018, p. 124) proposes that the search for meaning is the human being's "primary motivation," surpassing the pursuit of pleasure (as suggested by psychoanalysis) and the pursuit of power (as suggested by Adlerian psychology), while also maintaining that human beings have the freedom and capacity to go beyond their biological and psychological conditions by drawing on their deepest and truest dimension, the noetic dimension (Frankl, 2014a). For Frankl, the search for meaning is the intrinsic need to find purpose and value in life, an orientation that transcends self-actualization and internal equilibrium.

Personal fulfillment is achieved only by turning toward something or someone beyond oneself. This may involve altruistic actions, meaningful work, engagement in social causes, or the pursuit of goals that positively affect the community and the world, demonstrating love and care for others and helping to fill the existential vacuum and find a deeper meaning in life (Frankl, 2018). Self-transcendence, another central concept in Logotherapy, also promotes personal and social

development. By engaging in activities that benefit other people and society, individuals experience personal growth and a sense of fulfillment that goes beyond material success (Frankl, 1990).

Through volunteer service, people find a purpose that transcends everyday life, enabling them to cope more effectively with their own internal and external challenges. This practice alleviates the suffering of those who receive help while also providing volunteers with a concrete experience of meaning in life. By seeking to fill what Frankl (2011) calls the existential vacuum through altruistic actions, the individual finds fulfillment and meaning both in small actions and in the larger causes to which they devote themselves.

Volunteering may be not only a form of social assistance but also a path toward existential fulfillment, as Viktor Frankl proposed. Volunteer activities provide a unique opportunity to experience the values of self-transcendence, responsibility, and care for others, promoting not only personal development but also the construction of a more just and supportive society. By recognizing the importance of this role, we strengthen the sense of community and create a space in which everyone can contribute to the common good and find profound meaning in their actions and lives.

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship among volunteering, meaning in life, and suffering, based on Viktor Frankl's theory, with specific emphasis on work carried out in areas affected by the floods in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) investigate how engagement in volunteer activities in disaster areas influences participants' perception of meaning in life; (2) explore how volunteers deal with their own suffering and the suffering of others in the context of natural disasters; and (3) analyze volunteers' narratives regarding how meaning in life is constructed or strengthened through volunteer work in devastated regions.

Data analysis resulted in five main categories (topics), each composed of several subcategories (themes) that emerged from participants' statements and reported experiences. For the purposes of this presentation, however, only the category "Perception of Meaning in Life" will be addressed because it constitutes the central axis of the study and is the category most directly related to the premises of Logotherapy.

Methods

Two main instruments were used for data collection in this study: a questionnaire with closed-ended questions, intended to obtain quantitative data on participants' profiles and opinions, and a semi-structured interview conducted in a discussion-group format, intended to deepen understanding of the topics addressed in the questionnaire and explore new perspectives arising from participants' experiences. The combination of these two approaches enabled a more complete and comprehensive analysis of the object of study.

First, questionnaires developed on the basis of Frankl's principles of Logotherapy were administered, focusing on aspects such as meaning in life, motivation for volunteering, and the

experience of suffering. The questionnaires, composed of closed- and open-ended questions, were administered to 41 students from different higher education programs who served as volunteers in a project developed by the Adventist University Center of São Paulo – UNASP in June 2024, in the Sarandi area of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul.

This study also used a Discussion Group as one of its data-production devices, with the aim of clarifying, validating, modifying, or expanding the results obtained through the questionnaire. Five university students, specifically from the Hortolândia campus, participated in this group. They had first completed the questionnaire and then chose to participate in the Discussion Group meeting. The group was held on the institution's premises, at a time and place previously agreed upon with the participants, and was conducted by the lead researcher with the support of an assistant researcher. The researchers used a guide containing suggested topics for discussion, developed on the basis of the study objectives and Viktor Frankl's theory. The guide served only to suggest discussion topics, ensuring that the discussion unfolded naturally and allowing participants to share their experiences and reflections freely without the dialogue being rigidly controlled.

Questionnaire responses were interpreted using the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS, version 28.0). A descriptive frequency analysis was conducted to explore the behavior of the data; an analysis of variance was used to quantify the variability of the data around the mean, that is, to measure how far the data were from the expected value; and inferential statistical analysis was used to compare the means of quantitative variables using Student's t-test in order to measure the degree of uncertainty associated with certain generalizations (Dancey e Reidy, 2006).

The data obtained from the discussion group were interpreted through Prose Analysis, as proposed by André (1983). This approach consists of identifying topics and themes through analysis of participants' statements while considering the study context. These elements are continuously reviewed and adjusted throughout the analysis on the basis of the theoretical principles and research objectives.

Results and Discussion

Topic: perception of meaning in life

The following results present the category "Perception of Meaning in Life," one of the central axes emerging from the analysis. This section shows how participants understand and experience the meaning of their existence through volunteering, contact with suffering, and the search for transcendence, in accordance with the foundations of Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy.

The qualitative data obtained through the questionnaires and the analysis of statements extracted from the discussion group reveal a process of personal transformation, highlighting aspects that demonstrate the impact of volunteering on the construction of meaning and purpose. Four themes were identified within this topic, representing different dimensions of participants'

perception of meaning in life. These themes reveal nuances in the individual search for meaning and show how volunteering, coping with suffering, and relationships with others contribute to existential maturation.

Theme 1 addresses the discovery of purpose through volunteering, showing how altruistic actions provided new meaning to existence. Theme 2 discusses the reassessment of values and priorities, with participants reporting shifts in perspective and greater appreciation of aspects previously considered trivial. Theme 3 highlights recognition of the transience of material possessions, emphasizing the contrast between the transient and the immaterial. Finally, Theme 4 concerns the expansion of participants' perception of reality, in which contact with situations of vulnerability awakens empathy and a deeper understanding of the human condition.

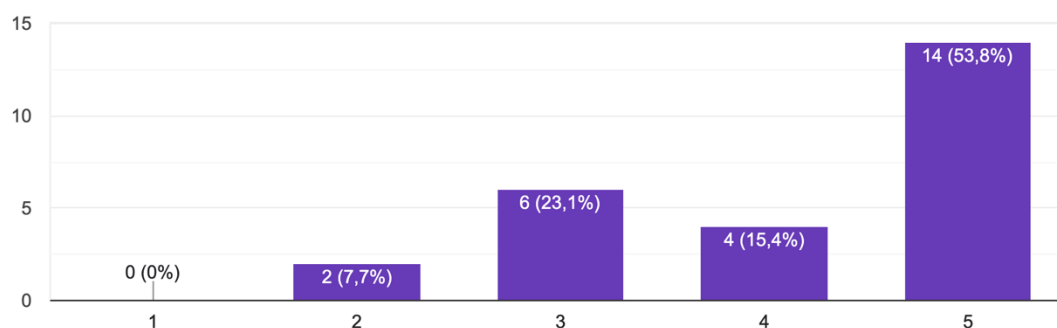
The results presented in Figure 1 indicate that the vast majority of participants believe they have a clear understanding of the meaning of life, with 96.1% of responses concentrated in options 4 and 5 on the scale.

Figure 1

Understanding the meaning of life: "I understand the meaning of life."

Antes de participar do voluntariado, eu já sentia que minha vida tinha um sentido claro.

26 respostas



Source: Authors' own work.

This predominance suggests a high level of existential clarity, with respondents demonstrating well-structured values and goals. In addition, strong conviction regarding life purpose may be associated with greater psychological and emotional well-being, since a study using the Chinese version of the Purpose in Life Questionnaire (C-PIL) found empirical evidence that higher levels of meaning in life were related to enhanced psychological well-being (Shek, 1992), indicating that individuals who perceive meaning in their existence tend to be more resilient and satisfied.

The context in which these individuals are situated, whether academic, religious, or volunteer-based, may have influenced this positive perception by encouraging reflection on the meaning of life. Another relevant aspect is the absence of responses in options 1 and 3, indicating

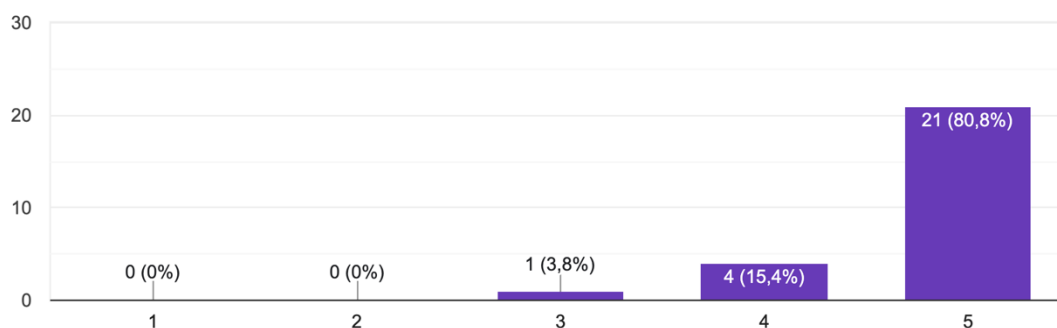
that no participant feels completely lost or undecided on the matter and suggesting a more homogeneous group in terms of beliefs and values. Thus, the data suggest that respondents have high self-esteem, existential security, and a well-established sense of purpose, characteristics that may positively affect their choices and life experiences.

Figure 2

Meaning in life prior to the project: “Before participating in the volunteer project, I already felt that my life had a clear sense of meaning.”

Após o voluntariado, sinto que meu propósito de vida está mais forte.

26 respostas



Source: Authors' own work

Students were asked whether, before participating in the volunteer project, they already felt that their lives had a clear meaning. The results also show (Figure 2) that 53.8% already strongly felt that their lives had a clear meaning before the volunteer experience, selecting 5 on the scale. Another 15.4% also indicated a high level of clarity by selecting option 4. However, one group selected intermediate values: 23.1% chose 3, suggesting that they had a moderate perception of meaning in life before volunteering. In addition, 7.7% selected 2, demonstrating a lower level of existential clarity. No participant selected 1, indicating that no one considered themselves completely without purpose before the volunteer activity.

The results suggest that, before becoming involved in volunteering, most participants already had some degree of clarity about meaning in life, with more than half expressing strong conviction regarding their purpose. However, the presence of intermediate and lower responses suggests that volunteering may have had a significant impact on the construction of this meaning for some respondents.

These findings reinforce the idea that, although some people already have a well-defined sense of meaning in life before volunteering, others may gain greater clarity and purpose throughout the volunteer experience. This may be related to connection with others, a sense of belonging, and

the possibility of making a difference in people's lives, elements frequently associated with the positive impact of volunteering on psychological and existential well-being.

Participants were also asked to respond to the statement: "After volunteering, I feel that my life purpose is stronger." The results (Figure 3) show that the vast majority of participants perceived a positive impact on the strengthening of life purpose following the volunteer experience. 80.8% selected option 5, demonstrating that the volunteer experience strongly reinforced their sense of purpose. In addition, 15.4% selected 4, indicating a considerable increase, although slightly lower than that of the previous group. Only 3.8% selected 3, suggesting a moderate impact, while no participant selected options 1 or 2, indicating that no one perceived an absence of change or a negative impact on life purpose.

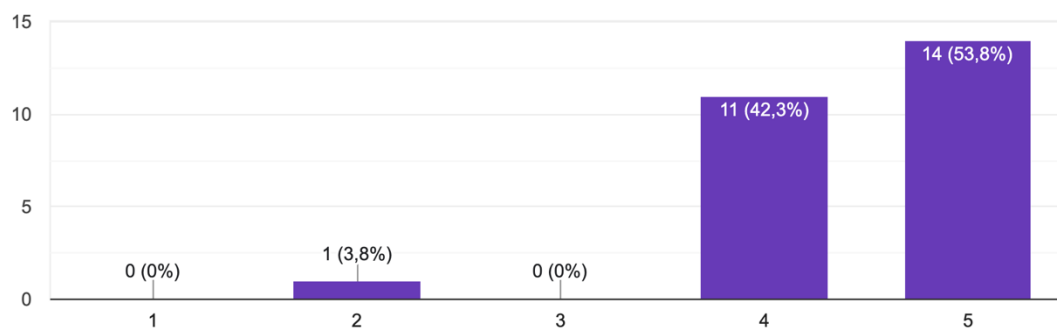
These results show that volunteering played a significant role in strengthening participants' life purpose. The fact that 96.2% of respondents selected 4 or 5 indicates that the experience was transformative for most participants, reinforcing their perception of meaning and existential motivation. The absence of responses in 1 and 2 suggests that none of the participants felt that the experience was irrelevant or negative with respect to their life purpose.

Figure 3

Strengthening of life purpose: "After volunteering, I feel that my sense of purpose in life is stronger."

Eu compreendo o sentido da vida.

26 respostas



Source: Authors' own work

This response pattern corroborates research indicating that volunteering is associated with a significant increase in psychological well-being. The study by Jiang et al. (2021), based on randomized clinical trials, indicated that participation in volunteer activities improves self-efficacy and life purpose, promoting a more positive perception of existence by providing experiences of human connection, altruism, and positive social impact. By engaging in volunteer activities,

participants may have experienced greater personal fulfillment, validating their beliefs and values and thereby contributing to a stronger life purpose.

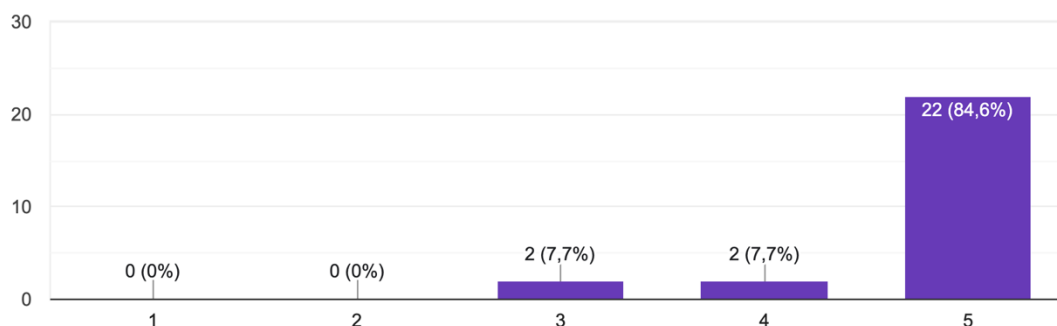
Figure 4 presents responses to the statement: “Helping people affected by the floods made me realize how closely the meaning of life is connected to serving others.” The results show that the vast majority of participants strongly recognized this relationship. 84.6% indicated that the volunteer experience with flood victims significantly reinforced their perception that serving others is directly connected to meaning in life. In addition, 7.7% indicated considerable, though somewhat less intense, recognition. Another 7.7% selected 3, suggesting a moderate perception of this relationship. No participant selected 1 or 2, meaning that there was no disagreement with the state.

Figure 4

Perception of meaning in life and service to others: “Helping people affected by the floods made me realize how closely the meaning of life is connected to serving others.”

Ajudar as pessoas afetadas pelas enchentes me fez perceber o quanto o sentido da vida está ligado ao serviço aos outros.

26 respostas



Source: Authors' own work

The data reveal a strong impact of volunteering on participants' construction of meaning in life. By selecting options 4 and 5, the large majority demonstrate that direct contact with people in situations of vulnerability reinforced their perception of the importance of altruism and service to others. The fact that no respondent selected 1 or 2 indicates that all participants recognized, to some degree, the connection between helping others and finding purpose in life.

This result reinforces Viktor Frankl's perspective (2003; 2018) on meaning in life, which emphasizes transcendence and commitment to others as essential sources of existential meaning. It also supports studies on the impact of volunteering on mental health, suggesting that altruistic actions not only benefit those receiving help but also transform those who serve, strengthening their identity and purpose (Nweke, 2022). Thus, volunteering emerged as an essential element in the

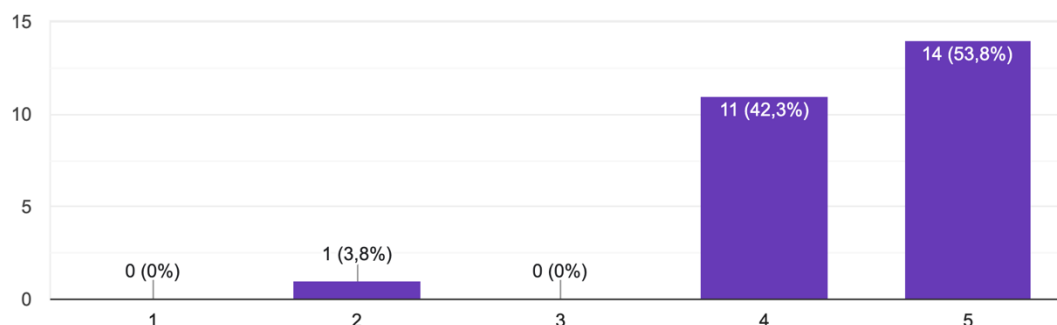
construction of meaning in life for these participants, particularly in a crisis situation such as the floods.

Figure 5

Volunteering produces a sense of personal fulfillment: “I realized that volunteering not only benefits others but also provides a profound sense of personal fulfillment.”

Eu compreendo o sentido da vida.

26 respostas



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 5 presents responses to the statement: “I realized that volunteering not only benefits others but also brings a profound sense of personal fulfillment.” The results indicate that the vast majority of participants (88.5%) experienced a profound sense of personal fulfillment through their involvement in volunteering. Another 7.7% selected option 4, indicating that they also perceived this fulfillment, though somewhat less intensely. Only 3.8% selected 3, indicating a moderate perception of the personal impact of volunteering. No participant selected options 1 or 2, meaning that all respondents recognized, to some degree, that volunteering provides individual benefits.

This shows that volunteering was a highly rewarding experience for the participants. The predominance of responses in 4 and 5 suggests that the vast majority of volunteers experienced a strong positive impact on their emotional and existential lives, possibly because of the sense of belonging, social contribution, and purpose generated by the experience.

The fact that no participant disagreed with the statement reinforces the idea that volunteering is not only an altruistic act but also a practice that enriches the lives of those who serve. This finding is consistent with Post's (2011) research on psychological well-being and social engagement, which indicates that helping others increases levels of happiness, reduces stress, and strengthens a sense of purpose in life. Thus, the volunteer experience not only positively affects the community being served but also profoundly transforms the volunteers themselves, providing them with a lasting sense of fulfillment and meaning.

Theme: discovery of purpose through volunteering

The experience of volunteering in contexts of tragedy proved to be a catalyst for the discovery of purpose among participants. By engaging in helping others, many volunteers reported awakening to a deeper meaning in life that extends beyond individual interests. The reflections emerging from the statements below demonstrate that direct contact with the suffering of others and the opportunity to contribute to restoring other people's dignity provided a sense of personal fulfillment.

The statement, "You realize that, like, it's much more worthwhile to live to, like, help people and not do things only thinking about yourself" (Student 5), illustrates a clear process of value transformation. The participant demonstrates a shift in focus, moving away from prioritizing personal interests toward recognizing the intrinsic value of living for others. This perspective is aligned with Frankl's concept of self-transcendence (2018), which suggests that human beings find fulfillment by directing themselves toward something or someone beyond themselves. He states that "the more one forgets oneself - by giving oneself to a cause or to another person - the more human one becomes and the more one actualizes oneself" (2018, p. 115). This idea reinforces the value transformation expressed in the student's account, which demonstrates a shift in personal priorities toward altruism and the meaning found in serving others.

Another participant describes volunteering not as an imposed task or merely formal act, but as an intrinsic and spontaneous moral duty. The statement shows how volunteering awakens a sense of genuine responsibility toward others, highlighting an emotional and ethical connection with people in need. This sense of duty transcends formal obligations and reflects a deep commitment to universal human values such as empathy and solidarity.

At that moment, I wasn't thinking about myself, you know? I would wake up and think: wow, there are people there who need help. So the whole time I was thinking about other people and not even considering the consequences, not considering anything. I simply knew it was a duty, and not just because it was an obligation or because it needed to be done, but because I felt that it wasn't about me; it was about the other person (Student 1).

Another brief statement summarizes the impact of volunteering as an experience of existential transformation: "And it was like this: a fantastic, transformative experience" (Student 1). The experience transforms the way the participant sees the world, allowing them to reinterpret their own existence and find a greater purpose. Frankl describes noological awakening as the activation of the human spiritual dimension, enabling a person to find meaning even in the most challenging circumstances. He states that the human being is not only conditioned but also conditioning; a person can rise above themselves and can change themselves (Frankl, 2018). This process occurs when an individual undergoes profound experiences that lead them to reinterpret their existence, aligning with the student's account of the transformative impact of volunteering. Frankl further

states that “man is capable of changing the world for the better, if possible, and of changing himself for the better” (2018, p. 131).

Furthermore, Student 3, speaking about the physical and emotional exhaustion portrayed here as a sacrifice, explained that it was justified by a sense of fulfillment: “So we came back somewhat emotionally and physically tired, but with a sense of mission accomplished.” This experience of a “mission accomplished” demonstrates how volunteering allows participants to transcend suffering by connecting it to a greater purpose. According to Frankl (2018), suffering becomes bearable when it finds meaning: “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is part of life, just as fate and death are. Without suffering and death, human existence cannot be complete” (p. 88). This student’s statement illustrates this idea, showing that dedication to others generates a sense of fulfillment that surpasses the strain involved.

Another participant recognizes that volunteering requires more than isolated or superficial actions; it demands complete commitment to the well-being of the other person. This dedication reflects an internalization of the concept of ethical responsibility, a fundamental characteristic of self-transcendence in which attention shifts entirely toward the other person’s well-being: “And volunteering is exactly that. You have to understand that the person you are going to care for is more important. So, you have to dedicate yourself. It’s total, total dedication” (Student 1).

Finally, regarding this theme, Student 5’s comment addresses the need for continuity in volunteer practice in order to keep personal transformation and a sense of purpose alive:

Focusing more on this part about the meaning of life, I think that, like, it’s not something where it’s enough just to... At least for me, you know? You go there and you have a different perspective. You realize that, like, it’s much more worthwhile to live to, like, help people and not do things only thinking about yourself. But even so, I think you have to keep practicing it. Because, for example, with an experience like that, you learn this, but then time goes by, you don’t keep doing these things, and you end up forgetting, whether you want to or not.

The statements analyzed under this theme reveal how volunteering functions as a space for self-transcendence and discovery of existential purpose. Participants experience a shift in focus, moving from a self-centered perspective toward dedication to others, corroborating Frankl’s thinking when he states: “The more one forgets oneself - by giving oneself to a cause or to another person - the more human one becomes and the more one actualizes oneself” (2018, p. 115). In other words, human beings truly fulfill themselves when they move beyond focus on their own ego and direct their lives toward something greater, whether a cause, meaningful work, or service to others. This aligns closely with the experience of the volunteers, who find purpose by dedicating themselves to others and undergo existential transformation by redefining their priorities.

Theme: reflections on values and priorities after the experience

Reflections on values and priorities after the volunteer experience also emerge as one dimension of the perception of meaning in life, revealing how direct contact with realities of suffering and scarcity produces significant transformations in the way participants view their own living conditions. The following statement reflects a profound process of reframing, in which the volunteer experience leads to a reassessment of previous patterns of dissatisfaction and the development of a new perspective on what one already has.

I always tended to be a person who complained a lot, and after going through this whole situation and seeing that I have everything, I have everything I want, I have everything I like... It changed my life (Student 6).

The theme drawn from this testimony is directly aligned with Viktor Frankl's theory (2003), which argues that meaning in life can be found in how one deals with circumstances and in the ability to transform one's perspective on challenges, because "it is not suffering that is unbearable, but living without an ideal" (Frankl, 2003, p. 68).

The participant who previously saw themselves as someone who "complained a lot" recognizes, through volunteering, that they have everything they want and need. This recognition does not arise from a simple comparison between their own reality and that of the flood victims, but from a deeper process of self-perception and change in mindset. Volunteering provides a concrete experience of contact with extreme vulnerability, allowing volunteers to encounter individuals who lost everything yet still find the strength to continue. This experience produces a reality shock that reconfigures individual perceptions of gratitude and appreciation for what one has, since "involvement in altruistic activities strengthens emotional resilience and expands the capacity to face life's challenges, promoting a meaning in life that is more connected to the collective" (Wong, 2012, p. 619).

The shift in perspective described by the participant also suggests emotional maturation and a transition from everyday dissatisfaction toward greater contentment and appreciation of the present. Frankl (2003) states that suffering can play a crucial role in constructing meaning in life because it allows individuals to develop resilience and learn to attribute new meanings to their experiences. By recognizing that their life is already complete and their needs are met, the participant breaks with the logic of constant lack that often drives human behavior. Lukas (2012) states that such a break is fundamental to developing a new perspective on one's own circumstances and strengthening a more solid and conscious sense of purpose.

In addition, this statement suggests a change in how the participant establishes priorities. Whereas there had previously been a tendency to focus on what was lacking or what could be different, after the volunteer experience there is a shift toward a more reflective and grateful stance.

Wong (2012, p. 620), adds that “genuine joy does not come from the relentless pursuit of personal satisfaction, but from connection with something greater than ourselves, frequently expressed in service to others.” This may lead to changes in everyday behavior, such as adopting simpler habits, valuing interpersonal relationships, and greater engagement in altruistic actions (Lukas, 2012). Analysis of this statement suggests that this restructuring of values and priorities occurs not only at the individual level but may also have collective effects, as volunteers tend to disseminate these reflections within their social circles, encouraging others to reconsider their own perspectives.

Many people, even when their basic needs are met, feel a profound inner emptiness that they attempt to fill with material possessions or external achievements (Frankl, 2012). However, through volunteering and witnessing more challenging realities, the participant experiences a change in their understanding of what truly has value (Batthyány, 2016). This shift from a material focus toward recognition of what one already has indicates that volunteering can be a powerful tool for confronting the existential vacuum, offering a new source of meaning and satisfaction. “Meaning in life often emerges when the individual turns beyond the self, finding purpose in serving others and contributing to society” (Batthyány, 2016, p. 427)

Finally, this reflection on values and priorities after the volunteer experience reinforces the idea that meaning in life is not fixed but can be constructed and reconstructed through experiences and individual choices. Volunteering acts as a catalyst for this transformation by providing experiences that challenge beliefs and promote a deeper understanding of what truly matters. In the participant’s case, the change in how they perceive their own life demonstrates that exposure to more adverse realities can have a lasting impact on how people interpret their own circumstances and define their daily priorities. This process not only strengthens emotional resilience but also expands the capacity for empathy and solidarity, promoting a meaning in life that is more connected to the collective.

Theme: recognition of the transience of material possessions

The theme Recognition of the Transience of Material Possessions highlights another significant aspect of the volunteer experience: the reassessment of personal priorities and awareness of the transitory nature of what one possesses. Participants’ statements reveal a process of profound reflection in which experience in a context of tragedy and deprivation prompts questioning of the true importance of material possessions and individual achievements. This recognition not only transforms the way volunteers view their own circumstances but also leads them to seek more transcendent and meaningful values.

Student 4 made the following statement: “Everything here ends. Everything here has a finite nature. And what is infinite, you know? [...] We focus so much on what is finite here. Oh, I want my phone, I want to graduate... Okay, but what if your life ends here?” By stating that “everything here ends” and asking what would happen “if your life ends here,” the participant demonstrates an

expanded perception of existence that goes beyond materiality. This idea resonates with Viktor Frankl's theory, which argues that human beings do not find meaning in the accumulation of possessions but in how they respond to circumstances and connect with something greater than their own existence. Frankl (2011, p. 12), emphasizes that "the lack of meaning in life is the root of this 'existential vacuum' typical of contemporary Western man" and that this feeling can manifest itself in various ways, including an unrestrained search for material comfort without a greater purpose. The statement also suggests a distancing from the immediatist logic of consumption and a concern with what remains after the finitude of life. This type of reflection generally emerges in situations of crisis, when material losses expose human vulnerability and reveal the fragility of the structures that sustain everyday life (Pereira, 2007).

Another relevant point is the impact that this awareness has on how participants view their habits and behaviors. The dialogue between Student 6 and Student 2 demonstrates this change as they compare their previous reality with that of the people affected by the tragedy.

Valuing the little that we have—we build things little by little, you know? So it helped me a little to value things more (Student 6).

I think everyone does it, right? A lot of times we complain about what we have, like, wow, this phone of mine is bad, I already want to replace it. And there, many times, they hadn't just lost a phone; they had lost things, laptops and everything (Student 2).

The observation that we often complain about what we have and always want something new contrasts with the experience of people who lost everything, including possessions essential to their survival. This contrast awakens a sense of gratitude and reframing, leading volunteers to value what they have more and to understand that constant dissatisfaction with material things often conceals an existential vacuum. Frankl (2020a, 2020b) argues that human beings are driven by the "will to meaning" and that, without this search, they may experience a profound emptiness that nothing material can fill.

The transformation in the perception of material possessions is also evident in how volunteers begin to view their achievements and ambitions. Student 4 mentions, "Oh, I want my phone, I want to graduate...", that is, "we focus so much on me, me, me," expressing a critique of individualism and the relentless desire for personal achievement as the sole source of meaning. This recognition opens space for reflection on the importance of others and the need to balance individual aspirations with actions that have social impact. This change in perspective is directly related to the concept of self-transcendence, in which meaning in life is found by moving beyond one's own ego and directing efforts toward the common good (Pascual, 2003).

Student 1's statement that volunteer work should be carried out with excellence and without expectation of return reinforces this change in mindset:

When you volunteer, you don't think about getting anything in return, not even a thank you, not even recognition. Because it's dedication. It's something that you... you also have to do with excellence; it's not because I'm a volunteer that I'm going to do it any old way. And I find that very interesting (Student 1).

The commitment to doing something well, regardless of recognition or reward, suggests a new way of understanding the value of work and personal effort. This perspective opposes the prevailing logic of contemporary society, which often associates value only with what produces tangible benefits. For Frankl, authentic fulfillment emerges when we devote ourselves to something that transcends our own personal interest, and this dedication “is not a loss of oneself, but a fuller realization of one’s own being” (Frankl, 2011, p. 104). Volunteering therefore teaches that there is meaning in selfless dedication and that true impact lies not in what is received, but in what is given.

The volunteer experience also awakens awareness of the finitude of one’s own life and of what truly remains after death. Student 4 states: “And then you look and say, really, none of this matters. I’m going to change everything here, even though I might leave here in five minutes. And what I accumulated here is going to stay here.” This suggests an understanding that material possessions are ephemeral and that a true legacy may lie in the relationships built and the impact left on other people’s lives. This reflection reinforces the notion that meaning in life is more closely linked to how one lives and the choices one makes than to the accumulation of possessions. Elisabeth Lukas, in validating Frankl’s Logotherapy, points out that “meaning is not in what we have, but in what we are capable of giving to the world” (Lukas, 2003, p. 76).

Finally, the realization that “life is not only here and now” points to an expanded awareness of existence. The idea that there is “something afterward,” mentioned by Student 4, may be associated both with a spiritual perspective and with a broader understanding of the impact of human actions. The complete statement reads:

Everything here ends. Everything here has a finite nature. And what is infinite, you know? We focus so much on what is finite here. Oh, I want my phone, I want to graduate, I want to make money, I want to be a mother, I want to get married. Like, we focus so much on me, me, me. I want to fulfill myself here. Okay, but what if your life ends here? What happens afterward?... So I think we live very much in that. Very much in the here and now. But life is not only here and now. There is something afterward. And we forget about that afterward. And I think that when we get a shock like this, we remember that this isn't all there is (Student 4).

This idea reinforces the view that life has a purpose that goes beyond the immediate and that choices made in the present have future repercussions. Frankl teaches that human beings should not merely ask what the meaning of life is, but should realize that life asks them what their purpose is (Frankl, 2014b). Thus, the volunteer experience not only provides a reality shock but also drives a

search for more enduring meaning that transcends the logic of consumption and personal fulfillment.

Theme: perception of a different reality

The perception of a different reality emerges through volunteering as a transformative experience in which participants encounter a context of vulnerability and loss that challenges their usual conceptions of everyday life. Direct involvement in a disaster situation places them in a disrupted environment where the normality of daily life gives way to the urgency of reconstruction and uncertainty about the future. This direct contact with adversity produces a reality shock, awakening greater social awareness among volunteers, strengthening their capacity for empathy, and promoting deep reflections on the true meaning of life and the role they play in society.

Participants' statements demonstrate this impact by expressing how different it was to encounter people who had lost everything and who faced a routine of uncertainty and a daily struggle to recover the minimum necessary for survival. In the following statement, Student 5 describes an experience that highlights the contrast between the volunteers' reality and that of the flood victims: "Anyway, I liked helping the people, but it's a situation where you go there and see that it's very shocking, a reality completely different from ours, but being able to help is what makes it [worth] going there, right?" (Student 5).

This reality shock is one of the factors contributing to a change in the volunteers' worldview, leading them to see their own lives from a new perspective. The contrast between the volunteers' reality and that of the victims of the tragedy reinforces the Franklian conception that suffering can be transformed into learning and growth (Pereira, 2007; Frankl, 2018).

Another central aspect of this theme is the observation of the emotional impact that the tragedy has on those affected:

The people you see with no hope in their eyes, who lost practically everything, everything, you know? Material things, of course; a lot of people lost family members and everything else, people without hope. That is a completely different reality from what we live here day to day, going to college, going to work. The person has lost... lost their lifeworld, you know? (Student 5).

Student 5 mentions seeing "people with no hope in their eyes," indicating the psychological weight of loss and the difficulty of finding motivation to continue in the face of destruction. Seeing another person's pain has a profound impact on volunteers, who come to understand that suffering is not limited to material loss but also affects victims' emotional and psychological dimensions. This perception strengthens empathy and solidarity, elements essential to the construction of meaning in life as proposed by Frankl; it also recalls his concept of existential frustration, which describes loss of meaning as one of the central causes of human suffering (Frankl, 2018).

Logotherapy emphasizes that, in the face of pain and adversity, individuals can rediscover purpose, often through helping others. This idea is also addressed by Kwee (2012, p. 250), who states that “resilience is built when we find meaning in pain and use that experience to transform our worldview.” In this context, volunteers play a fundamental role by offering support and relief not only through concrete actions but also through compassionate reception and active listening.

Student 2 describes the following experience: “...trying to salvage, to pick up what was left, you know? Of their things, so it was something totally different.” This statement reinforces the idea that the volunteer experience not only contrasts with the participant’s usual reality but also challenges their conceptions of what it means to live under extreme conditions. The idea of “trying to salvage, to pick up what was left” suggests forced adaptation to a new way of life in which priorities are redefined and survival becomes the main objective. This change in perspective leads volunteers to reflect on their own lives and value what previously seemed trivial. The simple fact of having a safe home, a predictable routine, and access to basic resources comes to be seen as a privilege, and this new awareness may have a lasting impact on how participants view the world and their own social responsibilities.

In extreme situations, economic status and individual achievements lose their importance, and everyone faces the same difficulties in rebuilding their lives. Student 1 reported the following experience:

Because there the reality had been completely changed, right? As they had said. Their routine was to wake up and try to restore what they had. And in other situations too, we could see that even there, people who were more humble, people who were wealthier, were all in the same situation; everything there became equal, you understand? (Student 1)

By stating that “everything there became equal,” Student 1 highlights an essential aspect of the tragedy: the erasure of social differences in the face of catastrophe. This recognition strengthens the notion that vulnerability is a universal human condition and that solidarity should be a guiding principle in social relationships. This perception contributes to the construction of a more collective and interconnected meaning in life, in which happiness and well-being cease to be understood as individual objectives and instead become a shared commitment. This concept is reinforced by Lukas (2003, p. 50), who points out that “the development of an altruistic attitude is one of the most effective ways of overcoming the existential vacuum.”

The volunteer experience also awakens in participants a desire to continue helping rather than limiting themselves to a single, isolated action. When Student 2 was asked about the feelings experienced, the student reported:

Ah, maybe sadness, a very strong feeling of sadness. But also a very strong feeling of wanting to help everyone who needed it at that moment, you know? Like, to give advice. And for me this experience was completely different, you know? (Student 2)

By expressing sadness in the face of others' suffering, but also a strong desire to help, the participant demonstrates that contact with this new reality not only provokes intense emotions but also generates an impulse toward action. This desire to contribute continuously is aligned with the idea that meaning in life is constructed through engagement in causes that transcend personal interests. This phenomenon is described in Logotherapy as a process of psychological maturation in which pain and compassion propel the individual to act meaningfully in the world (Frankl, 2020).

This theme highlights how direct contact with a tragic situation has a profound impact on volunteers' perceptions, leading to greater awareness of the inequalities and vulnerabilities present in society. By witnessing the pain and resilience of those affected, they begin to reassess their own realities, recognizing the importance of solidarity and commitment to collective well-being. This experience stimulates reflections that go beyond individual experience, encouraging a more engaged stance that is sensitive to the needs of others and fostering a more humane and responsible view of the world around them.

Conclusions

The results of this study confirm that the experience of volunteering, especially in contexts of tragedy, serves as a powerful pathway for discovering and strengthening meaning in life, as proposed by Viktor Frankl. The analysis revealed that direct contact with the suffering of others promoted a movement of self-transcendence among participants—a central concept in Logotherapy—in which individuals find fulfillment by dedicating themselves to something beyond themselves (Frankl, 2018).

The volunteers' statements demonstrated transformations in their values and perceptions. Many reported a significant change in how they viewed their own existence, their priorities, and the world around them. This process is aligned with Frankl's (2003) assertion that human beings can find meaning even amid suffering, provided they are able to attribute meaning to the experience lived. In this sense, the volunteer experience functioned as fertile ground for reframing suffering and for personal maturation.

In summary, the results indicate that the perception of meaning in life constitutes a central element in participants' experience, revealing that engagement in volunteer activities fosters a process of self-transcendence and existential maturation. By confronting the suffering and vulnerability of others, the students broadened their understanding of themselves, their values, and the meaning of service, confirming Viktor Frankl's proposition that human beings achieve full fulfillment when they turn toward a cause or a person beyond themselves. Thus, volunteering

emerges not only as a practice of solidarity but also as a privileged pathway for holistic human development, capable of integrating ethical, spiritual, and affective dimensions while strengthening a sense of purpose and commitment to life.

Conflicts of Interest and Acknowledgements

The authors declare no conflicts of interest to report.

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