

November 30, 2013

Millennial Searchers

By EMILY ESFAHANI SMITH and JENNIFER L. AAKER

FOR Viktor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor who wrote the best-selling book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” the call to answer life’s ultimate question came early. When he was a high school student, one of his science teachers declared to the class, “Life is nothing more than a combustion process, a process of oxidation.” But Frankl would have none of it. “Sir, if this is so,” he cried, jumping out of his chair, “then what can be the meaning of life?”

The teenage Frankl made this statement nearly a hundred years ago — but he had more in common with today’s young people than we might assume.

Today’s young adults born after 1980, known as Generation Y or the millennial generation, are the most educated generation in American history and, like the baby boomers, one of the largest. Yet since the Great Recession of 2008, they have been having a hard time. They are facing one of the worst job markets in decades. They are in debt. Many of them are unemployed. The income gap between old and young Americans is widening. To give you a sense of their lot, when you search “are millennials” in Google, the search options that come up include: “are millennials selfish,” “are millennials lazy,” and “are millennials narcissistic.”

Do we have a lost generation on our hands? In our classes, among our peers, and through our research, we are seeing that millennials are not so much a lost generation as a generation in flux. Chastened by these tough economic times, today’s young adults have been forced to rethink success so that it’s less about material prosperity and more about something else.

And what is that something else? Many researchers believe that millennials are focusing more on happiness than prior generations, and that the younger ones in that age cohort are doing so even more than the older ones who did not take the brunt of the recession. Rather than chasing the money, they appear to want a career that makes them happy — a job that combines the perks of Google with the flexibility of a start-up.

But a closer look at the data paints a slightly different picture. Millennials appear to be more interested in living lives defined by meaning than by what some would call happiness. They report being less focused on financial success than they are on making a

difference. A 2011 report commissioned by the Career Advisory Board and conducted by Harris Interactive, found that the No. 1 factor that young adults ages 21 to 31 wanted in a successful career was a sense of meaning. Though their managers, according to the study, continue to think that millennials are primarily motivated by money, nearly three-quarters of the young adults surveyed said that “meaningful work was among the three most important factors defining career success.”

MEANING, of course, is a mercurial concept. But it’s one that social scientists have made real progress understanding and measuring in recent years. Social psychologists define meaning as a cognitive and emotional assessment of the degree to which we feel our lives have purpose, value and impact. In our joint research, we are looking closely at what the building blocks of a meaningful life are. Although meaning is subjective — signifying different things to different people — a defining feature is connection to something bigger than the self. People who lead meaningful lives feel connected to others, to work, to a life purpose, and to the world itself. There is no one meaning of life, but rather, many sources of meaning that we all experience day to day, moment to moment, in the form of these connections.

It’s also important to understand what meaning is not. Having a sense of meaning is not the same as feeling happy. In a new longitudinal study done by one of us, Jennifer L. Aaker, with Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs and Emily N. Garbinsky, 397 Americans were followed over a monthlong period and asked the degree to which they considered their lives to be meaningful and happy, as well as beliefs and values they held, and what type of choices they had made in their lives.

It turns out that people can reliably assess the extent to which their lives have meaning, much in the same way that people can assess their degree of life satisfaction or happiness. Although a meaningful life and a happy life overlap in certain ways, they are ultimately quite different. Those who reported having a meaningful life saw themselves as more other-oriented — by being, more specifically, a “giver.” People who said that doing things for others was important to them reported having more meaning in their lives.

This was in stark contrast to those who reported having a happy life. Happiness was associated with being more self-oriented — by being a “taker.” People felt happy, in a superficial sense, when they got what they wanted, and not necessarily when they put others first, which can be stressful and requires sacrificing what you want for what others want. Having children, for instance, is associated with high meaning but lower happiness.

When individuals adopt what we call a meaning mind-set — that is, they seek connections, give to others, and orient themselves to a larger purpose — clear benefits can result, including improved psychological well-being, more creativity, and enhanced work performance. Workers who find their jobs meaningful are more engaged and less likely to leave their current positions.

Further, this mind-set affects what types of careers millennials search for. Today's young adults are hoping to go into careers that make an enduring impact on others. Last spring, when the National Society of High School Scholars, a global honor society for high school students, asked more than 9,000 top students and recent graduates what they wanted to do with their lives, they found that these recession-era millennials favored careers in health care and government. Of the top 25 companies they wanted to pursue out of a list of more than 200, eight were in health care or at hospitals while six were in government or the military. St. Jude Children's Research Hospital came in as the No. 1 place these millennials wanted to work "The focus on helping others is what millennials are responding to," James W. Lewis, the chief executive of the honor society, told Forbes.

Some studies have suggested that millennials are narcissistic and flaky in their professional and personal lives, and are more selfish than prior generations. But new data suggests that these negative trends are starting to reverse. In a study published this summer in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, the researchers Heejung Park, Jean M. Twenge and Patricia M. Greenfield looked at surveys that have, each year since the 1970s, tracked the attitudes of hundreds of thousands of 12th graders. Although concern for others had been decreasing among high school seniors and certain markers of materialism — like valuing expensive products such as cars — had been increasing for nearly four decades, these trends began to reverse after 2008. Whereas older millennials showed a concern for meaning, the younger millennials who came of age during the Great Recession started reporting more concern for others and less interest in material goods.

This data reflects a broader pattern. Between 1976 and 2010, high school seniors expressed more concern for others during times of economic hardship, and less concern for others during times of economic prosperity. During times of hardship, young people more frequently look outward to others and the world at large.

Of course, nobody likes living through tough economic times — and the millennials have been dealt a tough hand. But at the same time, there are certain benefits to economic deprivation. Millennials have been forced to reconsider what a successful life constitutes. By focusing on making a positive difference in the lives of others, rather than on more materialistic markers of success, they are setting themselves up for the meaningful life they yearn to have — the very thing that Frankl realized makes life worth living.

Emily Esfahani Smith is an editor at The New Criterion and Defining Ideas, a Hoover Institution journal.

Jennifer L. Aaker is a professor of marketing at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.