



Ako nájsť zmysel života v sociálnej práci s rizikovými skupinami

2. ročník Košických dní sociálnej práce

Eva Žiaková (ed.)

Zborník príspevkov z vedeckej konferencie s medzinárodnou účasťou v rámci projektu VEGA č. 1/0282/12 Interdisciplinárna analýza zmyslu života a jeho komponentov v sociálne významných skupinách adolescentov z hľadiska jeho formovania a možnej intervencie.

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A sense of the meaning of life in women experiencing homelessness

Beata Szluz (PL)

Summary: *Searching for the meaning of life is associated with a specific means of an individual's existence in the world, which can determine axiological existence. A situation that almost forces one to ask questions about the meaning of life is a threat to the perspective of death and experiences through human suffering. The aforementioned questions therefore appear, especially in the critical moments of human life, such as illness, disability, and homelessness. This article was written based on its own broader study, which was conducted in 2009 among 52 homeless women in Podkarpacie. The test subjects were selected in terms of age, place of residence during the conducted research, and their occasional or permanent residence in a shelter. The biographical method, and the narrative interview technique, a special form of free or in-depth interview, were used. In the article are the deliberations concerning the meaning of life in the perception of homeless women.*

Keywords: Meaning of life. Homelessness. Homeless woman.

Introduction

Questions about the "meaning of life" in a broader sense about the purpose of human activities, for worthy desirable goods, for the happiness of man, the importance, that we give life, there are questions reaching into the depths of human existence. The meaning of life is explored when we try to answer the question - why, and for what purpose, do we exist, who we should be, what to strive for, what to do to make our lives a happy and successful (S. Witek, 1974, p. 166). A sense of purpose in life can therefore be seen as a specific need, as a set of instructions and motivation, which are the foundation of subjective values, beliefs, judgments and perceptions. On one hand, they allow the setting up of life goals, while on the other hand they contain a set of guidelines that enable their implementation. Questions concerning the meaning of life do not have a universal character, but especially appear in critical moments of individual biographies (experiencing death, illness, disability, homelessness, etc.).

This article was written based on its own broader study, which was conducted in 2009 among 52 homeless women in Podkarpacie. The test subjects were selected in terms of age, place of residence during the conducted research, and their occasional or permanent residence in a shelter⁴. The biographical method, and the narrative interview technique, a special form of free or in-depth interview, were used (B. Szluz, 2010, pp. 128-130). In the article are the deliberations concerning the meaning of life in the perception of homeless women.

1. A sense of the meaning of life – Introduction

The concept of "meaning" is present in a variety of theoretical formulations, and is also applied to practice. It is found in philosophical teachings, in theology, psychology, as well as in sociology. Teachers refer to it. In the expression of K. Popielski (1987, p 126) different variants reflecting the content of the concept are formulated in the shown aspects, it is largely dependent on general philosophical and anthropological-psychological assumptions.

⁴ The statements of people contained in the article are reported after the transcription of audio recordings using simplified transcription symbols (Silverman, 2008, p. 328; Silverman, 2009, p. 431). In order to preserve complete privacy, city names, given names, and surnames were intentionally omitted in the text, and the names of homeless women have been changed. Certain portions of the narrative used in the article have been published in a book by B. Szluz (2010).

A sense of meaning to life is a basic psychological need of a human being. T. Borowska (1998, s. 52) stressed, that it is a creative approach to their own existence. It determines the relationship of the individual to their environment. The meaning of life is treated as part of the incentive structure. It promotes the implementation of the objectives designated by individuals for themselves. Giving meaning to their lives is related to the manifestation and taking a proactive approach to different situations. Individuals having a low sense of meaning in life exhibit tendencies of passive behavior (A. Kępiński, 1985, quoted in B. Popielarska, p. 37). The meaning of life is not given to an individual forever; it is brought to specific situations or events that force searching and discovering their meaning. With regard to the given circumstances it has an individual character, which allows their own meaning to be found.

Finding the meaning of life is a prerequisite for the proper functioning of a human being. As K. Obuchowski notes, "in a normal human adult the only course of action that could provide higher, mature forms of behavior, is a direction determined by the need for meaning in life. (...) The satisfaction means justifying for oneself, in some way, the meaning of one's own existence, and setting a clear, practical and possible to approve course of action (K. Obuchowski, 1966, p. 227, 229). A sense of the meaning of life depends on an individual's self-consciousness, which consists of: a sense of existence and subjectivity, self-image, as well as an ideological orientation which is the highest form of consciousness and the internal representation of reality, which includes a sense of the meaning of life and one's place in the world (W. Jakubowski, 1999, p. 48). W. Dykcik presented the situation of an individual reflection on the meaning of life as follows, "We often ask ourselves whether our lives as a whole make sense, then imagine some outside observer, who could be ourselves, looking at the value of our existence from the perspective of lessons learned and past experiences in order to assess whether our past life was/is happy or not, whether there is the opportunity to guide one's own destiny for its continuity or change for the better" (W. Dykcik, 2005, p. 248). Therefore, a human being looking for meaning in life, may experience a "hunger" of the meaning of life, which in extreme cases leads to self-destruction, which are manifested by, for example, alcoholism, drug addiction and attempts at suicide.

2. A sense of the meaning of life in homeless women

In the literature it is emphasized that "the homeless are people extremely marginalized in the field of material conditions of existence, not even living at the minimum level of existence, excluded from the quality of life enjoyed by people of a very modest social standing, yet having a roof over their head. In the case of the homeless, biological duration is a major determinant of their lives. (...) Homelessness is a specific suffering, it changes the meaning of existence" (D.M. Piekut-Brodzka, 2006, p. 185, 209). A sense of the meaning of life is an existential experience, thus it is difficult to meaningfully construct one's life in the reality in which homeless people remain, that is, emptiness, boredom, reluctance to effort, a lack of tasks, passion and enthusiasm (D.M. Piekut-Brodzka, 2006, p. 212).

The concept of homelessness is defined in a variety of ways⁵. One of the so-called operational definitions is: "Homelessness is understood (...) as a situation for people, who in a

⁵ An attempt to organize definitions of homelessness was undertaken, among others, by L. Stankiewicz (2002, p. 20). When reviewing a series of definitions, he found that it is not possible to create a single, comprehensive approach. He accepted that such a possibility is provided by reference to the theory and practical needs of social policy and social work, with achievements in the social sciences. Assuming the indicated point of view, the definitions were listed in the following groups: definitions resulting from their origin (etymology); definitions of altruistic roots; definitions of homelessness binding it with its main cause; definitions of homelessness binding it with accumulation of causes; definitions of homelessness as a complex social phenomenon and cultural and personality state; others, such as built on the basis of events that includes a scientific discipline or arising from practical experience (eg, local).

given time do not possess, and who by their own efforts, cannot secure such a shelter that would meet the minimum requirements which allow it to be considered a living space. Homeless people are seen as people and families: making use of shelters in various centers providing them assistance, as well as satisfying their accommodation needs in all sorts of non-residential buildings or remaining out in the open air; having or not having a residence in any livable space, if their actual situation fits into the definition of homelessness; only people with Polish citizenship and having a permanent residence permit in Poland, or refugee status (also during the process of applying for this status), only adults, or those children found in a situation of homelessness along with their parents or legal guardians” (A. Przymeński, 2001, p. 29). A precise formulation of the definition is important due to its use for example in scientific research and in practice in social assistance.

Encountered in the reference literature is the classification of homeless women, developed by the Institute for Social Research in Saarbrücken, which distinguishes three specific categories:

1. women focused on normalisation, who strongly strive to return to life in society. They try to get work and their own apartment. It was noticed, that the need for using social assistance benefits, is a source of discomfort;
2. women focused on institutions, they are their beneficiaries and it is difficult for them to even imagine a life outside the institution. The prospect of an independent existence causes them distress;
3. women focused on alternatives, who have adapted to life “in the street”. They find their place, a sense of community, and even security, in the environment of homeless people (W. Reichmann, 1998, quote of L. Stankiewicz, 2002, p. 37).

A world image emerged from the research of H. Kubicka, full of sorrow and the suffering of homeless mothers who, along with their children, use the assistance of institutions. 53 respondents perceived the surrounding world as: evil, grey, depressing. They described other people as: hypocritical, unkind, and insincere. They had experienced unfair treatment, as well as a sense of rejection. In the statements of the six women who had a place of employment during the study, there was an optimistic view of the world. They indicated experiencing happiness and positive aspects bound on the hope of improving their living conditions. 52 people emphasized and stressed plans connected with their children. It was important for them to get an education and perform in their profession, resulting in a high income and high social status. Respondents who had limited parental rights, wanted to create a happy home for their children, and also depended on maintaining good relations with them in the future; the health of their children was also important for them. Eight women were not able to determine their expectations connected with the future life of their children (H. Kubicka, 2005, p. 92). The experience of homelessness, and in this context, a limited ability to meet the basic needs of human existence, makes it difficult to meet the needs of a higher order. In terms of K. Obuchowski: “(...) meaningful life gives human biography specific value. Thanks to this, an individual finds in themselves and in that which they do, and in the name of what they do, the rationale necessary to pose important goals and to overcome the difficulties associated with them” (K. Obuchowski, 1990, p. 7).

During the study conducted within the Podkarpackie voivodeship (B. Szluz, 2010), among the fifty-two surveyed women, fragments were found in only twenty-five narratives, where respondents referred to the context of the meaning of life, making an attempt to answer the question: what meaning they give to their lives?

Implementing the need to explore the meaning of life is a prerequisite for the proper functioning of human personality, their health and mental well being. According to psychologists, the aforementioned needs belong to one of the basic human psychological needs, and its satisfaction secures a normal life and functioning of the individual as a person (J. Mariański, 1990, p. 88-89).

Five women who were experiencing homelessness, and remained homeless during the study, negated the meaning of life. It can be assumed, that in one of them it could be associated to problems in the field of mental health. The following parts of speech can serve as exemplification:

Life makes no sense. (Nina, 52 years, p. 3)

Life makes no sense, none. (Iga, 60 years, p. 10)

There is no point to life. I have no luck in life. I'm an Aries, I read the horoscopes, but I have no luck. (Alberta, 72 years, p. 4)

So far, my life was, and is meaningless. Nothing, I have no purpose, because when a person has a purpose, they strive to reach it, yet when a person has no purpose, it is meaningless. (Liliana, 20 years, p. 8)

The meaning of life can be positively defined as follows: human life becomes meaningful when set partial goals - measures for the higher order objectives – complement each other and are arranged harmoniously. Their achievement brings an individual closer to their fundamental objective, which crowns life as a whole. On the other hand, denial of the meaning of life - human life makes no sense - can be seen where existence is filled with actions motivated by conflicting circumstances, in the event of chaos, changing desires and tastes. S. Kaczmarek noticed that people are attached to life, and the lust for life is the strongest form of love, even if it comes to exist in extreme conditions (S. Kaczmarek, 1979, p. 119). One of the surveyed homeless women said that the meaning of life is that she's alive.

The meaning is life itself; to somehow live peacefully to the end. (Sylwia, 64 years, p. 6)

Other people, who remained homeless, stressed that meaning to their lives is given by other people, they pointed to their children (four people) and partner (four people). Three respondents emphasized and referred to faith in God and prayer.

For me, my children and my partner give meaning to my life. I have a partner of three years. (Adrianna, 29 years, p. 5)

Children and prayer is the meaning of my life. (Karolina, 32 years, p. 12)

Well it seems to me, that faith strengthens a person and gives such hope and meaning. (Stefania, 71, p 6)

One person, who left the shelter, said that the meaning of her life is her faith in God; while the other three women mentioned their children gave their life meaning.

I often experienced breakdowns. I don't know if I can cope. I thought: I don't want to live, I don't want to live. If I didn't have children, I don't know if I'd go down bad roads, be in bad company, maybe even take my own life. If someone has such family problems, then a breakdown happens. I have someone to live for. Children give me strength, they are the meaning of my life. I'm trying to show them that life is beautiful. (Oliwia, 26 years, p.7)

Reference to faith in God, prayer, searching for the meaning of life in their own children, and focusing on their development and education were found in the narratives of the women; both those who remained homeless, as well as those who left the institution and attempted to function independently.

A reference to the context of "having a home" was also noticed in the narratives. For a woman who lost her home to fire, the meaning of life was to regain a dwelling place.

The meaning is this house, to renovate it and then go there. To return and live there. (Michalina, 69 years, p. 4)

One individual, who came out of homelessness, recognized that the meaning in her life was that she had her own home.

I'm trying to somehow keep this house, so that it is nice here, so that this tamarisk grew nicely, flowers and so on, and somehow make ends meet. This is the meaning, that I have my own house. (Agata, 47 years, p.7))

In turn, a person who waited for a place in a social assistance facility, pointed out certain values which are, or could be, the meaning of her life.

Meaning gives me a sense of peaceful life, I have nothing left. Either here ((at the shelter)) or there, to a nursing home, to meet good people. To die with faith, well, because what do I have left, right? [...] I want to live as long as possible. Life is beautiful, to walk to church. To take a trip somewhere with good people. Just like my sister, to live nicely. If someone had an apartment, they would be well-balanced, pious. If he would give me an apartment, I don't say, for romance. I would be a housekeeper. That, which helps, works, right? Though, he would have to be honest, faithful, not a drunkard. Yet there are few of them. It's difficult. But if not, I will meet ((in a nursing home)) women [...]. If I am in a large one, I will meet friends. I will meet men. I'm cheerful. It can be nice. (Zofia, 79 years, p 6).

It seems vital, that none of the women, who came out of homelessness, said that their lives have no meaning. The situation in which the individual is found, hinders (remaining in homelessness) or eases (a way out of homelessness), giving meaning to life (A. Lech, 2007, p 290). Women's lives were given meaning by: their own children, partners, faith in God and prayer, a house and their own lives. F. Głód, making a presentation of his research conducted among the homeless emphasized that, "finding purpose and meaning in life is of great worth for people. People want their life to be fully meaningful and represent worth for others. Then, they can enjoy their achievements and continue to develop their own personality. It can be said that it is necessary to function fruitfully, both in individual and social life" (F. Głód, 2008, p 173).

Summation

In the literature it is stressed, that: "Life has meaning, if it was so arranged, that it creates a whole, reasonably heading towards the implementation of the best of those objectives to which implementations we are capable of in given conditions" (T. Czeżowski, 1989, p 172).

A survey conducted among women also confirms that the experience of homelessness hinders the giving of meaning to their life. It leads to the implementation of goals, for which the individual is capable, being homeless. The survey image changed in situations of coming out of homelessness, so it can be assumed, that the setting and realization of goals are also modified.

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