

THE MEANING OF LIFE, SELF ESTEEM, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

HOMELESSNESS

Absolute poverty represents one of the main global issues of humanity, with its basic characteristic being a day-to-day struggle for survival. It has taken the form of homelessness, which is one of the problems of a postmodern society in many countries around the world. Homelessness has also become a part of our society in Slovakia. We classify homelessness as a socially pathological phenomenon. Social pathology defines this phenomenon as a destructive or auto-destructive behaviour in people. It is comprised of pathological behaviour, pathological conditions, social, cultural conditions and processes evocating or causing pathological behaviour (Balogová et al. 2003). *Anybody can be a homeless person. Man, woman, child, whole families, young, old, sick, healthy, employed, unemployed, addicted or abstainer, ex-convict, abused woman or a boy from an orphanage* (Beňová 2008: 10). Giddens (1999) points out a fact, that in the last few years, the term homeless person was transferred to a category of people, who have nowhere to sleep, and because of that, they sleep on the streets or in old, abandoned boarding houses, or they temporally live in a charity hospice.

In the EU, people are considered to be homeless when not only are they seen on streets or in hospices, but also those, who are hidden, wandering from hospice to hospice or sleeping under bridges and in other places. People at risk of losing a home, are unemployed, or are victims of domestic abuse, and who cannot afford to pay the rent are considered to be a potential homeless person (Beňová 2008). Hradecká, Hradecký (1996) mention extreme exclusion when discussing homeless persons. Homeless people are usually unemployed. Neglected looks, inappropriate clothing, and poor health prove to be a problem when looking for a job as they adversely affect the employer when choosing future employees. Homeless persons are a socially excluded group of people. Vágnerová (1998) states that homeless people usually have unsatisfied needs and are under the influence of bad experiences tend to quit, expecting nothing from life et al., which leads to an attitude of resignation, apathy and fatalism.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

The of social worker dictionary defines the meaning of life as a regulative term that modifies and explains social norms by which a person should guide themselves. A person's value system along with their confrontation with social norms helps define the secret of an individual's existence; also known as the meaning of life (Strieženec 1996). To understand the meaning of life means to understand ourselves. When we discuss the meaning of life, it does not have to mean only one thing; therefore, we can talk about a so-called plurality of meanings. We assign different meanings to each of our spheres of life. We can examine the pathology of purpose of our existence, because such meanings can strengthen each other (when we reach one meaning we can proceed to reach another one) or contradict each other (Šulavíková, Sejčová 2008). When we ponder the purpose of our existence from the point of view of psychology, two types of questions arise. The first being the exploitation of the understanding of that purpose, and the second being the creation of purpose. The creation of understanding of the meaning of life can be defined as a process. In this process, people judge, re-evaluate and verify the significance of events while discovering the meaning of life. According to Taylor, an increased necessity to find the meaning of what is happening occurs mainly in situations that bother the person very much. The creation of the meaning is best explained as something that is most required and most important in a particular situation. According to some authors, the ability to discover a meaning is something a person is born with. Creating this meaning is very important for a person as it helps them better identify and evaluate themselves (Křivohlavý 2006). It does not matter in what situation a person finds themselves; their life is still potentially meaningful. According to P. Macek (1997), to be nobody but ourselves, to be aware of our value, and to consider our future belongs at the top of the system of values and interests of a person. Some of our authors like Orosová, Zelina, Kováč, Komárik, and Halama approach a person's meaning of life through an analysis of the meaning of life's function, by naming components and dimensions of meaningfulness in which the meaning of life can thrive and develop. Particularly, it is an acknowledgment of the presence of relevant and significant goals, values, beliefs, life aspirations, and plans in a person's life. Life goals, that enrich life with a purpose, are an outcome of a functioning of beliefs, and they are so connected with them that they become inseparable. Life plans and goals are real factors that contribute to the regulation of human behaviour. Studies show (Orosová 1991), that through analysis we can define how much of a cognitive reflection preferred values will have on the level of meaningful-

ness and life goals of a person. A system of listed beliefs is supposed to provide an individual with context and a specific form of understanding of the outer world and an awareness of meaningfulness of the world and their own life. It is not static and it also possesses the ability to eliminate negative events in feelings followed by existential facts. A system of beliefs also functions as a provider of certain behavioural criteria. In its core, the meaning of life represents a compilation of goals, values and beliefs, which give a person a feeling of value and purposefulness in their life.

SELF ESTEEM

According to Shavelson & col. (1976), self-image is a way of perceiving ourselves. This perception is formed by experience with the environment and significant others.

We can define three aspects of self-image: the cognitive aspect, which deals with its structure and content; the affective aspect defines the relationship of an individual with themselves and their self-evaluation; the aspect of action defines how a person will act in accordance with their self-knowledge and self-evaluation (Blatný & col., 1993, Macek 1997). Much research has proved that if a person values themselves, they could establish harmony in their life. A positive self-image lowers the risks of drug and alcohol addiction and the risk of suicide (Stempelová 1998). The affective part has the greatest practical use when it comes to researching self-image. Rogers defines self-evaluation as a person's acceptance of themselves and how positive their relationship is with themselves (Hoyle & col. 1998).

The feeling of self-value is strongly influenced by the feedback of social environment, and therefore a need of positive self-evaluation has a supportive role in creating and maintaining social relationships.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

The system of social support can be understood as some sort of absorptive system that protects people from the potentially adverse influence of stressful situations. Many foreign and local authors agree on this definition. People with a strong system of social support at their disposal appear to be better equipped to deal with serious changes in life or everyday annoyances (Cohen, Wills [in:] Křivohlavý 2006). In a wider sense, by social support we understand it to mean help that is provided by other people to a person in a stressful situation (Křivohlavý 2006).

A person gains strength to mobilise their own psychological resources when they are emotionally and generally supported by others. To fight stress and stressful situations, a person needs to feel someone backing them up, supporting them, someone to talk to about their problems.

It has been proved, that receivers of social support tend to avoid being reliant on their social network and ask for help only when all of the others coping strategies have failed. According to Satir (1994), the way to creating and maintaining a connection to proper, effective, and responsible behaviour is to have a sense of our own value.

INSTITUTE OF CHRIST THE HIGH PRIEST /IKV/ ŽAKOVCE - A CHARITY PROJECT

The warden and administrator of the Institute of Christ the High Priest is Ing. Marián Kuffa, Dr.h.c. It was his idea to turn an old farm into a centre and shelter for homeless people in Žakovce, Kežmarok County. In the case of community work with homeless people, employees of the Institute are trying to create such ground that would help homeless people and problematic citizens to reintegrate and begin a standard life, a family where they would be useful and create values for our society. Problematic people are taken care of 24/7, not only during working hours, but also outside of them. The employees who work on their reintegration also reside with them. They organise various activities for them and even spend their evenings with them. Homeless individuals are not inactive in this institution. Employees of the Institute follow these three rules when working to reintegrate homeless persons: *1/ Alcohol and other addictive substances are forbidden. 2/ The Prevention and forbiddance of criminal activity. 3/ Occupational therapy.* During reintegration, homeless persons go through three stages. The first stage: *They neither care about other people nor themselves when they enter the facility.* The second stage: *They only care about themselves.* Third stage: *They care not only for themselves, but look for opportunities on how to help others.* During occupational therapy, homeless people assist around the facility in which they reside. They try to be self-sufficient, some of them even work around the farm (the facility is self-sufficient when it comes to the production of potatoes, milk, eggs, meat and, partially, vegetables) since expenses to provide food are just too high. A bakery has been built on the grounds of the Institute, therefore making it self-sufficient when it comes to the production of bread. Many of them work on construction. We can say that the building for the physically disabled was built by homeless persons. This gives them a feeling of capability and usefulness, and some of them have found a new meaning of life. Many of them found

themselves working as janitors, caretakers or cooks in this building. To change a person not only on the outside, but also from the inside, is the core of reintegration (Inštitút Krista Veľkňaza, <http://www.ikv.sk/dbjs.phtm>).

GOAL OF THE STUDY

The goal was *to study the meaning of life for homeless persons; to study the differences in this meaning and its two dimensions (actual meaning of life, searching for meaning of life) in relationship to satisfaction with social support.*

Method

Study sample: A study sample was made involving 175 homeless persons from the Institute of Christ the High Priest (IKV) in Žakovce. 38% of them were women and the average age being 42.6, SD=10.21 (Minimum: 19 years, maximum: 66 years). 104 homeless persons submitted a completed questionnaire.

Procedure

Taking part in this study was voluntary and anonymous. Data collection was carried out with the researcher guiding the whole event. The warden and administrator of IKV in Žakovce gave his consent for this data collection.

METHODOLOGY

Meaning in Life

Meaning in life questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi et al. 2006). The questionnaire was comprised of 10 parts, 2 dimensions of meaning of life: 1. *Dimension of the actual meaning of life* (if they believed that their life had a meaning), 2. *Dimension of searching for a meaning of life* (if they seek a meaning and try to understand it). Subjects answered every question with numbers from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), this being based on Likert's scale type. The Cronbach's Alpha value of MLQ was 0.80.

Self Esteem

Self-image was monitored by SELF-methodology, created by J. Výrost (Vasilová, Bendžalová 2004). The participants were asked to compare them-

selves with other people from their social network using the Likert's scale: 1- far less than others, 2- less than others, 3- more than others, 4- far more than others were. They were supposed to grade these components: self-image, happiness, success, physical endurance, mental endurance, self-confidence, sense of humour, ability to communicate and number of acquaintances, along with some extra factors like: ability to get up, shake off and move further, desire to work and desire to help others.

Social Support

Social support was monitored by the question "How would you rate your satisfaction with how many reliable people you have, using percentage? %". Using the Visual Binning method, it was able to create three groups of homeless people based on their satisfaction with social support: low level of satisfaction ($\leq 20\%$), moderate level of satisfaction (21 – 40%) and higher level of satisfaction (41%+).

Statistical Analysis

Results were analysed through SPSS 20 using the Mann-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis test, and Kendall's serial correlating coefficient.

RESULTS

Meaning of Life for Homeless People

The study uncovered that searching for the meaning of life is on higher level than the actual meaning of life. ($Md^{\text{actual meaning of life}} = 22, 0$, $Md^{\text{searching for meaning of life}} = 24,0$).

The Role of Gender in the Meaning of Life of Homeless People

The studies showed that there was no huge difference between men and women in the dimension of the actual meaning of life for homeless persons ($U \text{ test} = 2,473$, $z = -0, 96$, $N=152$, $p= 0,336$). On the contrary, there were huge differences in the dimension of planning for the future ($U \text{ test} = 2,091$, $z = -2, 11$, $N = 150$, $p = 0,035$, $Md^{\text{men}} = 25,0$, $Md^{\text{women}} = 23, 5$). A higher level of planning for future was discovered among homeless men.

Meaning of Life and Satisfaction with Social Support

Significant statistical differences were discovered in the dimension of the actual meaning of life ($\chi^2 = 22,8$, $p < 0,001$, $Md^{\text{low level of satisfaction with social support}} = 21$, $Md^{\text{moderate level of satisfaction with social support}} = 21$, $Md^{\text{higher level of satisfaction with social support}} = 28$, 5) and in the dimension of the planning of the meaning of life ($\chi^2 = 25,5$, $p < 0,001$, $Md^{\text{low level of satisfaction with social support}} = 24$, $Md^{\text{moderate level of satisfaction with social support}} = 24$, $Md^{\text{high level of satisfaction with social support}} = 28$, 0) among the three groups of homeless persons diversified by their level of satisfaction with social support.

Homeless persons with a higher level of satisfaction with social support (41%+) showed a higher level of the actual meaning of life and searching for the meaning of life than homeless persons with a lower ($\leq 20\%$) and moderate level (21 – 40%) of satisfaction with social support.

The Meaning of Life and SELF

Statistically significant, positive results between self-image and the actual meaning of life were discovered in observed components of happiness, success, ability to communicate, ability to get up, shake off and move further, desire to work and the desire to help others. Statistically significant, positive results between self-image and the factor for searching for the meaning of life were discovered in observed components of happiness, self-confidence, sense of humour, ability to communicate, ability to get up, shake off and move further, desire to work and the desire to help others. The strongest relationship was discovered between the self-image component of happiness and the factor of searching for the meaning of life.

CONCLUSION

It is inarguable that homelessness has a significant impact on loss of life expectations (Nusselder et al. 2012). In the dimension of the actual meaning of life, the study did not confirm differences based on gender, but a higher level of planning of future was discovered among homeless men. The posted results correspond with the research results of the qualitative study by authors Liu et al. (2009), which showed the aspirations and hopes of homeless men in handling and resolving presented life situations.

The results show that homeless persons with a higher level of satisfaction with social support listed higher levels of the actual meaning of life and higher levels of searching for the meaning of life in comparison to homeless

persons with a lower and moderate level of satisfaction with social support. The posted results correspond with the conclusions of other studies which show that social support plays an important role in the process leading to homelessness, and that it is one of the important factors in relation to the life expectations of homeless persons. The absence of social support can lead to suicidal thoughts and hopelessness connected with handling their life situation (van Wyk, van Wyk 2011, Schutt, Meschede, Rierdan 1994).

The motivation of the homeless persons of the IKV to participate in the research, which is strongly affected by the fact that they belong to the target group of much research, belongs to the basic limits of the study. The study's goal was to point out the homelessness phenomenon in Slovakia and also to point out ways of how to assist such persons, particularly in the above-mentioned IKV.

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Summary

The aim of this research study was to examine the meaning of life for homeless people; examine the differences in their meaning of life in two aspects (the actual sense of life, and the long-term search for a comprehensive meaning of life) in relation to their gender and degree of satisfaction with social support in their environment. The goal of this research was to study the relationship between the components of self-image and the factors of the meaning of life. 104 homeless persons who took part in the research were from the Institute of Christ the High Priest (CHP) in Žakovce. 38% of the sample group were women, the average age of the

sample group was 42.6, and the SD equalled 10.21. During the research, the respondents were presented with a survey questionnaire on the meaning of life (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, et al. 2006). The perceived level of surroundings' social support was monitored by the question *At how many percent are you satisfied with the number of persons whom you can rely on in times of trouble?...%*, and self-image was studied by the Self methodology (Vasilová, Bendžalová 2004). A distinctively higher level of planning for the future was observed among homeless males. Individuals who declared greater satisfaction with social support that they received from their surroundings also reported increased levels of a temporary sense of life as well as of a long-term search for a comprehensive meaning in life than the subjects reporting lower and medium levels of satisfaction with perceived social support. It was discovered, that the strongest relationship occurred between the self-image component of desire to help others and the actual meaning of life, and between the self-image component of happiness and the factor of searching for the meaning of life. The results suggested the importance of considering gender traits in measuring personal life satisfaction and a demand for the provision of social support and strengthening self-image in social work with homeless people.

Key words: meaning of life, self esteem, social support, gender, homeless people