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Report from the Conference: the Meaning of Life and Values

Introduction

The search for the meaning of life is solely a human need and distinguishes humans from animals. Values and aspirations belong to the most important phenomena which give meaning to human life, driving our development and setting future directions of our actions.

The words *values* and *meaning of life*, functioning in colloquial speech, have a long history. The notions have been shaped over many centuries and have taken on many meanings. Their understanding has been influenced by various research perspectives, including of course the significant role of theology, but also of economics or humanities as well as the social sciences. In the academic world they have existed for centuries and are therefore perhaps extremely difficult to define.

Currently, meaning of life and values are among the phenomena studied mainly within positive psychology, as human resources and the 'strengths' of man. Historically, studies on the meaning of life and values are associated strongly with positive psychology, but interest in these topics predates the beginning of the positive psychology approach, and is present in different fields of psychology and other studies. The topic of values and meaning of life is also examined in different ways, including both quantitative and qualitative studies, among both clinical and non-clinical population.

The meaning of life and values constitute a kind of counterweight to focusing on the pragmatic side of human existence and to the loss of reflection on the events of everyday life. The problem is that while declaring

the importance of certain values, some people organize their lives according to their contents, while others live, so to say, next to them or in conflict with them.

Generally, man is guided by the aspiration to achieve and maximize benefits and success, and therefore it is assumed that the discrepancies between declarations and their realization have their origins in an insufficient discovery and recognition of already realized and respected values, other than the very resources of a given person (including the ability to experience and express emotional states), mental and executive performance, level of knowledge about oneself and the world.

In psychological literature, the notions of meaning of life, attitude towards the meaning of life, existential attitude, individual conception of life are neither unequivocal nor precisely defined, and therefore the scope of awareness and behavioral elements included in this class of phenomena is very wide. In recent years, we have witnessed a number of attempts to integrate values (e.g. Fromm, Scheller, Rokich, Shwartz and others) and meaning of life (Frankl, Beck, Längle, Wong, Steger and others) into the system of psychological notions, to analyse the role of these notions in the regulation of behavior and research into the development of values and the level of perceived meaning of life, in the course of an individual life. This notion is, first and foremost, to turn attention to the role that values play in regulating behavior and its related phenomena.

The conference: Values and the Meaning of Life

The Conference Values and the Meaning of Life was held on 21st and 22nd September 2015 in Poznan and was organized by the SWPS University. The Academic Committee included: prof. Paweł Boski (SWPS, Poznan), prof. Jan Ciecuch (Card. Stefan Wyszyński University), prof. Maria Straś-Romanowska (University of Wrocław), prof. Anna Zalewska (SWPS University, Poznan) and Jarosław Piotrowski, PhD (SWPS University, Poznan). The Organising Committee was chaired by Mariusz Zięba, PhD.

The conference began at 10.00 am with prof. Ralph Piedmont's presentation on A Psychological Ontology for Spirituality. The aim of the presentation was to introduce a rational, existential model representing a set of psychological features and motivation which uniquely characterize the human experience, in terms accepted by the scientific approach.

Then prof. Dariusza Krok had a presentation on Psychology in Search of the Meaning of Life. Methodological Aspects of Research on the Meaning of Life and Quality of Life. An analysis of the research findings, according to Fr. Professor Krok, points to two important conclusions. Firstly, the meaning of life is a multidimensional construct, involving elements rooted in the internal mental processes and social relations of the individual. Secondly, the meaning of life has a function of a mediator in relations between psychosocial factors. The obtained results indicate that the meaning of life plays an important role in constructing the consistency of human behavior and enables man to achieve his objectives.

On the first day of the conference, 29 papers were delivered in seven thematic groups. The first session, chaired by Magdalena Kolańska, MA, concerned the challenges of modern times, the meaning of life and values. The second session, chaired by Agnieszka Bojanowska, PhD, concerned Conceptual and Methodological Aspects of the Themes of Values, the Meaning of Life and Well-being. Maciej Kościelniak, MA, chaired the third session entitled, Values and the Meaning of Life among Adolescents and Young Adults.

Debates in small groups lasted until the lunch break, after which began the plenary lecture by Professor Anna Zalewska on: Values and Quality of Life – Various Research Approaches. The aim of the lecture was to present the relationship between values and the quality of life in the concepts and research focusing on the objective approach to the quality of life (referring to the concepts defining arbitrarily when life has a high quality), and focused the subjective approach (assuming that the test takers are the best experts as far as the evaluate the quality of life is concerned).

After the coffee break, discussions in small groups continued. The fourth session, chaired by Janina Nowak, MA, concerned the Meaning of

Life and Values in the Conditions of Exclusion and Isolation. During the fifth session, the theme of Values and the Meaning of Life among Adolescents and Young Adults Continued. Dr Mariusz Zięba chaired the sixth session about the Values and Meaning of Life in the Context of Therapy and Trauma. Seventh session, under the chairmanship of Prof. Elżbieta Trzęsowska-Greszta, presented the issues: Family and Gender Roles and the Meaning of Life. A gala dinner finished the first day of the conference.

The second day of the conference was opened at 9.00 with a plenary lecture by prof. Paweł Boski on Humanism and Derived Axiological Constructs in Polish Culture. According to the presented research findings, the last 30 years have systematically produced data supporting the thesis that humanism is an indigenous psychological characteristic of our culture and that sometimes it is contrasted with materialism or efficiency.

Then, prof. Jan Ciecuch in his lecture entitled Specificity of Psychological Reflection on Values attempted at a reconstruction of the meanings that researchers tend to have in mind when, in psychology, they are talking about values, even if these meanings are not present *explicite* in the definition of values. The reconstruction was carried out from the point of view of the possibilities and limitations of psychological methodology.

On the second day of the conference, 18 papers were delivered in four thematic groups. Eighth session, chaired by Dr Andrzej Piotrowski concerned The Cultural and Social Determinants of Well-being and the Meaning of Life. Dr Agnieszka Czerw chaired the ninth session of the conference on Values in Work and Work as a Value. After the lunch break began the tenth session, chaired by Wioletta Małota, MA, on The Issue of the Meaning of Life and System of Values versus Work. The last session of the day, chaired by prof. Józef Maciuszka concerned The Meaning of Life and Values in the Face of Old Age and Death.

The second day of the conference ended with a plenary lecture by Professor Maria Straś-Romanowska, entitled The Place of Axiological Sensitivity in the Personal Structure of Man. The leading idea was the assumption that axiological sensitivity, which is a specific form of cognitive openness, is a constitutive feature of man as a personal subject.

Conclusion

The conference was summarised by the Academic Committee of the conference. Active participants in the conference could also publish selected papers in the current issue of *Personality Psychology* entitled: *The Meaning of Life and Values – Different Perspectives and Research Approaches*.

Research findings in humanities and social sciences show a considerable diversity in terms of the durability and changeability of values and the meaning of life in various social groups and categories. The dynamics of this process could be easily determined in a repeated or panel research. An approximate determination of the dynamics is achieved in inter-generational studies among young and old people. Psychological research, especially that which is mass in character, penetrates quite deeply into the motivational sphere of the sense of life, but is limited mostly to gathering feedback on the perceived meaning, or meaninglessness, the frequency of these feelings, the factors influencing the attitude towards life, and finally to the relations between values and the meaning of life. All participants agreed that the difficulty begins already at the level of defining the studied variables as well as the research methods and tools applied.

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