

The Sources of Meaning in Life Among Educators of Socially Vulnerable Adults

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ABSTRACT

Life work considered as a critical source of meaning in life. This can be particularly true for the educators who choose to work with and teach adults who belong to socially vulnerable groups. To this context, the aim of our study was to investigate the sources of meaning in life of educators of socially vulnerable groups, and the possible relation between the sources they derive meaning from and their decision to work with this specific kind of students. A total of 12 educators were interviewed providing information regarding their experience in working with socially vulnerable groups, their motives considering their professional choice, the way they perceive themselves as teachers of vulnerable adults and the sources of meaning in their lives. Thematic Analysis was used to analyze the data. It was found that the primary sources of meaning in life of the participants are (a) interpersonal and social relations, and (b) personal relationships; moreover, there is a close relation between the participants' sources of meaning in life and their perception about vulnerability.

Keywords: Adult Education, Socially Vulnerable Groups, Sources of Meaning in Life

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I. INTRODUCTION

Research on meaning in life has gained increasing attention, becoming an objective of theoretical (Martela & Steger, 2016; Wong, 1998) and empirical interest (Schnell & Hoof, 2012; Steger *et al.*, 2006) during the last decades. A variety of studies indicate that meaning can arise from a plethora of sources such as interpersonal relationships, religious and spiritual beliefs, personal development, relationship with nature, creativity, freedom, family, etc. (Battista & Almond, 1973; Schnell, 2021). The present study aims to investigate the sources of meaning in life of a special group of educators, those who teach to adults who belong in socially vulnerable groups.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Sources of meaning represent commitments to different areas of life from which humans derive meaning (Schnell, 2021). Among the first who empirically set up the most important sources of meaning in life were Battista and Almond (1973). They reported six life orientations: interpersonal, service, understanding, obtaining, expressive and ethical. De Vogler and Ebersole (1980, 1983) elaborated this classification and discriminated four additional areas: life work, growth, pleasure/happiness, and health. O' Connor and Chamberlain's research (1996) identified six main domains of meaning: religious and spiritual, social and political, relationship with nature, personal development,

creativity, and relationships with people. These and other qualitative studies (see Schnell, 2021) consistently found that social relationships are among the most significant sources of life for all age groups.

Social support and closeness with other people are positively related to the sense of meaning in life, while social exclusion has been showed to reinforce the perception of one's life as meaningless (Lambert *et al.*, 2013; Twenge *et al.*, 2003). According to Stavrova and Luhnmann (2016), social connectedness can function as a source of meaning in life as being a member or just accepted by a social group might satisfy the need for self-worth and efficacy which were shown to be important predictors of meaning in life (Baumeister *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, meaning in life can function as a source of social connectedness as it might influence individual's goals setting, making social relationships gain in importance relative to other goals (Martos & Kopp, 2012). A stronger approach motivation typical of humans with a strong sense of meaning (Steger *et al.*, 2008) may facilitate on these goals and engage in behaviors aimed at increasing social connectedness, such as approaching new people, maintaining existing connections, or joining larger group or associations (Stavrova & Luhnmann, 2016).

III. AIMS OF THE STUDY

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, the present study aims to investigate (a) the sources of meaning in life of educators of socially vulnerable groups, and (b) the possible relation between the sources they derive meaning from and their decision to work with this specific kind of students.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

We adopted a qualitative research method. Through semi-structured interviews we had the opportunity to collect rich and insightful data (Robson, 2011) concerning participants' thoughts, beliefs, and experiences as educators of socially vulnerable groups.

B. Participants

The sample of the present study was composed of 12 educators who had teaching experience in socially vulnerable groups such as refugees, immigrants, homeless, prisoners, drug users, etc. Four of them were males and 8 females, aged 26 to 64 (mean: 42,2 years). Their teaching experience varied in duration (mean: 9,8 years). Five were teaching professionally and the rest of them voluntarily.

C. Measures and Procedures

The participants were interviewed with four groups of questions addressed to the main aims of the research. Specifically, they had to answer questions about (a) their experience in working with socially vulnerable groups, (b) what motivated them to do so, (c) the way they perceive themselves as teachers of vulnerable adults and (d) the sources of meaning in their lives. The interviews were conducted orally by the first author in an online meeting due to the restrictions imposed in personal contacts by the COVID-19 pandemic. The mean duration of the interviews was 42 minutes. Thematic Analysis was used to analyze the data. Participants did not receive any payment and they reassured of their anonymity.

D. Results And Discussion

Results showed that not all the participants conceived their lives as meaningful, but almost all of them agreed that the most important source of meaning in their personal lives is their family. Specifically, when asked about what gives meaning in their personal lives they answered: "My daughter of course! Because of her I dream a better world!" (Joan, 42), "The first and the foremost are the personal relationships, the family, the love and security in it" (Nephele, 35), "I guess that creating your own family gives meaning in one's life. I am not sure that I will find my meaning in the future, but I suppose where I will search for it; in my own family and the idea of being a mum" (Magda, 26). As seen, women were those who clearly identify family as the most significant source of meaning. For the male participants, it was taken for granted that their families are a priority without giving details for them.

What was surprising enough is that all the participants explained their need to talk about what gives meaning in their lives as a whole and all with no exception agreed on the social and interpersonal relationships. They claimed that

they perceive themselves as parts of a society in which everyone has to do at least the minimum they can do in order to help whoever feels vulnerable. For them, education is a way to assist other people, as most of them (8 out of 12) were professional teachers in a variety of fields, so they knew how to do it properly; also, they recognized the significance of education in the integration process of the socially vulnerable groups in the modern societies. They said, "Educating people who belong in a socially vulnerable group means that you provide the stepping stones to stand alone in their lives without your support. That is, they will know how to communicate, find a home and a proper job and there will be no need to be a member of a vulnerable group; just a member of the society" (Magda, 26), "This is exactly what adult education offers in socially vulnerable groups, it encourages them to be part of a fair and equal society where there is no space for any kind of discriminations" (George, 63). It has also to be said that some of the participants claimed that despite the accomplishment of the didactic goals, during the educational process the students had the opportunity to express themselves, share their anxieties, develop interpersonal relations and eventually form a group, in which they felt safe, happy and secure. This feeling of "belonging" was an additional source of meaning for the educators and their classes.

As it is obvious, the participants perceive "social relationships" not just as having friends, romantic relationships or taking part in a group or an association; rather they perceive "social relationships" as being an active civilian who helps in creating networks for the sake of the society and caring so everyone would have equal opportunities, not been discriminated, or excluded. For this, they said: "I feel that my life is meaningful when I feel that all the people around me know that they can rely on me, I would help them in any case to feel better, I would do my best for them not to feel alone" (Irene, 28), "If I cannot change the life of all the humans who feel vulnerable, I can help 100, 10 or just one. So, when this person feels that he/she is not excluded but is a part of something and is glad about that, I know that I did something meaningful. This is a source for me that motivates to go on in life" (John, 44), and "When I work with these people, when I interact with them and feel that I have a positive impact on their lives and their up-coming place in their new society, I take courage and I derive, what we say, the meaning in life" (Lucas, 30).

Lastly, some participants reported they derive meaning in life from spiritual beliefs, work, personal development; unexpectedly, one named the human itself; "I think I derive meaning just from the human, I am a human struggling to live peacefully with other humans and this is what gives meaning in my life" (Georgia, 39).

V. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the primary sources of meaning in life of the educators who work with socially vulnerable adults are (a) interpersonal and social relations, and (b) personal relationships, especially those with their family. Other sources of meaning in life are spiritual beliefs, work,

personal development, and the human itself. Social connectedness and the idea of belonging are key elements in their decision to work with social vulnerability, as they function as powerful motives for them. It seems that the fact they derive meaning from social and interpersonal relationships, not just for themselves but for every member of the society, affects in a great extend their need to help, through teaching, their vulnerable fellow citizens. Lastly, it turns out that there is an absolute positive relation between the sources of meaning, as regards their social life, and their behavior towards vulnerability.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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