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## Purpose of life and attitude toward death

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## PURPOSE OF LIFE AND ATTITUDE TOWARD DEATH

The problem of purpose in life is among the central questions of contemporary psychology, especially humanistic-existential psychology. This psychology analyzes the perceived purpose in life, which is a fundamental human need. The gratification of this psychological need is a primary source for motivation human behavior.

The importance of purpose in life, stressed by V. E. Frankl today, is based on an understanding of what the highest value in life is. The answer to this question is as integral a part of a person's essence as thinking ability (cf. Gromm, 1975:77). One who has transcended himself through the acceptance of human values need not stop before considering the problem of purpose in life. When purpose is lacking then what Frankl calls the „noogene neurosis" arises, whose central symptom is an existential vacuum.

A person having a strong sense of purpose in life understands in depth his life's goals and is open to all that the future brings. The high sense of purpose in life gives the person a feeling of certitude, security in life, and a possibility of self-actualization. As a result, life becomes attractive.

Persons who lack a sense of purpose in life exhibit the opposite type of behavior (cf. Frankl, 1967).

The need of a sense of purpose in life comes later in an individual's life than biological needs, but is at least as strong. The problem of purpose in life appears in extreme and sometimes dramatic situations, when a person would choose to survive for that purpose, but would not save his life if its sense of meaning is missing (Frankl, 1970).

Also in life's fundamental moments appears a problem of death, which is boundary human situation. Death is not a separate fragment of life but an existential dimension of human being. According to Frankl, an unconditional conferral of meaning upon life must contain the moment of death, because only in the face of death is life meaningful (cf. Buscaglia, 1978: 93—97). Death ends the process of becoming. In death, a person „is", and „is" in a way that is analogous to the way he „was" in life (cf. Bulka, 1974).

The death as a natural phenomenon could play a positive role in provoking a person to make an existential decision. To play this role, death must be integrated into the person's psyche, and especially into his understanding and evaluation of life, and also his

self-perception in interpersonal relations (cf. Loder, 1982: 147; Rogers, 1980: 88).

Philosophers and psychologists say that the problem of death and transition is connected with the purpose in life. For example, according to A. Schaff (1961), death is a major stimulus to consideration of life. A. Maslow (1967) thinks that one can describe one's sense of purpose in life on the basis of his relationship to death. These theoretical statements about the connections between attitudes toward death and level of sense of purpose in life have been partially confirmed in some thanatological research (e.g. Bolt, 1978; Durlak, 1972; Landau and Maoz, 1978).

The present article looks at the correlation between level of sense of purpose in life and various dimensions and instances of attitudes toward death.

### Method

The aim of this article is to answer the question: do relationships exist between level of sense of purpose in life and various dimensions of attitudes toward death? The present research contains only some fragments of a discussion of the problem, because the respondents were young (age 21—35;  $M=25.8$ ). They completed two psychometric instruments: „Purpose in Life Test” (PLT) and „Inventory of Attitudes toward Death” (IAD). Using PLT, the level of sense of purpose in life was determined and psychometric groups were distinguished. By means of IAD, the attitudes toward death of these groups were described.

L. G. Croumbaugh and L. T. Maholick's „Purpose in Life Test” (1969) measures the phenomenon of existential frustration. The present study used only one part of this test measuring the intensity of sense of life's purpose.

Among the 250 respondents two extreme groups of 50 persons each were identified. The total average results for each of these groups on the PLT were: for the group with the high sense of purpose in life (HP)  $M = 122.6$  (women:  $M = 123.2$ , man:  $M = 122.3$ ), and for the group with the low sense of purpose in life (LP)  $M = 75.8$  (women:  $M = 72.9$ , man:  $M = 80.2$ ). These two groups differ significantly with regard to the level of sense of purpose in life, which was independent variable, while attitudes toward death were the dependent variable.

The „Inventory of Attitudes toward Death” was constructed by the author of this study. It consists of three parts: the scale, the questionnaire, and sentence completion. When establishing the set of statements which constitute the scale the Wrocław taxonomy was made use of, this taxonomy being a variant of a factor analysis (Szulga, 1971). As a result, eight dimensions of the attitude toward

death were obtained: 1) inevitability (In) = awareness of necessity of death, 2) centrality (Ce) = psychic nearness of the problem of death, 3) mysteriousness (My) = death as a tormenting question connected with uncertainty, 4) value (Va) = death as having a cathartic character, 5) anxiety (An) = death as a phenomenon causing fear, 6) tragedy (Tr) = death as an impressive and unhappy event, 7) destructiveness (De) = death as the cancellation of development and activity, and 8) absurdity (Ab) = death as a release of feeling of hopelessness and senselessness.

Reliability of the subscales (dimensions) was measured by the retest method after a 3-week lag;  $r_{tt} = 0.66$  to  $0.84$ . The questionnaire and sentence completion supplied information on attitudes toward death in three instances (cases), in the death of a stranger, that of someone close, and in one's own death. Described below are results obtained from the scale and questionnaire of the IAD.

## Results

### (a) dimensions of attitude toward death

Between persons with high and low level of sense of purpose in life exist statistically significant differences in 4 dimensions: inevitability ( $p < .01$ ), centrality ( $p < .05$ ), mysteriousness ( $p < .05$ ), and anxiety ( $p < .05$ ). There are not qualitative but quantitative differences, and express diverse intensity in perception of some dimensions of death. The persons with the high sense of purpose in life perceive the inevitability of death and its mysteriousness a little less frequently. They are less afraid of death, or rather, to be more precise, they do not know whether they are afraid of death. The two groups exhibit unanimity regarding the destructiveness of death, and a very great similarity in perception of death's value as well as its absurdity. The highest index obtained was for mysteriousness dimension. It is likely that the persons with the low sense of purpose in life emphasize the mystery and problematicity of death because for these people life itself is an enigma.

For a deeper analysis of attitudes toward death in each of the psychometric groups it seems useful to observe the intercorrelations among dimensions of death.

Comparison of the internal structures of attitudes toward death brings a new observation. And, for example so-called centrality of problem of death, or its spot in a person's cognitive field is differently constituted in the group with the low sense of purpose in life than in the other one. The low group experiences the problem of death in connection with its tragedy, value, inevitability, and anxiety. Instead, for the persons with the high sense of purpose in life the centrality of problem of death has positive correlations only

Table 1  
Intercorrelations among dimensions of attitudes toward death in two groups

Dimensions of death	In	Ce	My	Va	An	Tr	De	Ab
	High sense of purpose							
Inevitability (In)		.53***	.05	.39**	.43**	.03	.03	-.11
Centrality (Ce)	.48***		-.18	.36*	.14	-.26	.007	-.17
Mysteriousness (My)	.25	.04		-.09	.45***	.54***	.53***	.49***
Value (Va)	.36*	.45**	.13		.15	-.32*	-.12	-.30*
Anxiety (An)	.39**	.35*	.43**	-.05		.46***	.48***	.41**
Tragedy (Tr)	.52***	.47***	.39**	.005	.58***		.68***	.63***
Destructiveness (De)	.32*	.05	.40**	-.007	.40**	.44***		.67***
Absurdity (Ab)	.20	.03	.24	.33*	.40**	.44**	.47***	
	Low sense of purpose							

\*p < .05    \*\*p < .01    \*\*\*p < .001

with the value and inevitability dimensions. There are also interesting differences in value dimension. The value of death in the group with the low purpose in life is perceived as an absurd and necessary fact (event) while in persons with the high purpose in life death's evaluation is connected with an acceptance of its necessity, anxiety, and the negation of the tragedy and the absurdity of death.

There are no differences in the dimensions of attitude toward death between women and men, except in the group with the low sense of purpose in life, where women see a greater value of death than men ( $p < .05$ ).

Analysis of these data leads us to the next question, which is interesting from the methodological point of view: we can ask — does not the preferred system of values influence the various intercorrelations of dimensions of attitudes toward death in the two groups? If this were so, all results obtained up to now would have to be wrong. We related the two levels of purpose in life to scores on the G. W. Allport, P. E. Vernon, and G. Lindzey's „Study of Values". We found no statistically significant differences (at .05 by chi-square) between the two groups.

Concluding the psychometric-psychological analysis of the relationship between level of sense of purpose in life and the structure of attitudes toward death, it must be noted in general, that there are no radical, i.e., qualitative, differences in dimensions of attitudes toward death between persons with the high and low sense of purpose in life. Instead there exist differences in the intensity of four dimensions: inevitability, centrality, mysteriousness, and anxiety. There are also various intercorrelations among dimensions of attitude toward death in two groups.

C. Jaspers' (1971) analysis of human existence, an intuition, and daily experience form the basis for distinguishing three different instances of attitudes toward death. We can pay attention to death as a general phenomenon happening accidentally (TV images of death, obituary notices). This kind of death is characterized by its anonymity due to lack of personal acquaintance with the deceased. The next two sorts of death are totally devoid of this anonymity, because they are connected with close person or oneself. Thus three instances of attitude toward death were distinguished: 1) death of stranger (unknown person), 2) death of someone close, 3) possibility of one's own death.

Below we will present types of feelings connected with death, frequency of thinking about death, and, at the end, the sorts of questions arising during reflection on death and their influence on life-style.

## (b) emotional context of thinking about death

Table 2 shows the percentage distributions of feelings connected with three instances of human death.

Table 2  
Percentage distribution of feelings connected with the death  
of a stranger, someone close, and oneself  
in the groups with the low (LP) and high (HP) sense of purpose in life

Reflection on death generates above all	Death of					
	a stranger		someone close		oneself	
	LP	HP	LP	HP	LP	HP
distaste for life	8	6	2	2	8	—
feeling of transition	48	46	2	4	10	10
uncertainty of the future	4	10	—	—	10	2
despair	2	7	26	16	—	—
tranquility	4	8	6	—	10	8
pain	4	4	30	24	—	—
bereavement	10	4	2	2	20	20
hope	4	8	—	2	8	12
sadness	10	12	30	50	6	28
anxiety	6	—	2	—	28	20

It can be seen from table 2 that, generally, in thinking about death of a stranger, a feeling of transition dominates ( $M = 47\%$ ). No differences exist between persons with the high and low sense of purpose in life. The situation is similar for thinking about death of someone close, where in both groups the feeling of sadness is strongly marked ( $M = 40\%$ ). It is striking that the anxiety does not occur in persons with the high sense of purpose regardless of whether they think both about death as an universal phenomenon or experience the death of a relative. On the other hand in thinking about their own death, their anxiety is a rarer phenomenon than in persons with the low sense of purpose in life.

Other feelings clearly marked in thinking about death of someone close are pain ( $M = 27\%$ ) and despair ( $M = 21\%$ ), but at the same time these are more prominent in persons with the low sense of purpose. Thinking about death is not accompanied by the feeling of uncertainty about the future. It is in some measure intelligible, because — as is well-known — a person's demise inspires particular

reflection on how nobody is an island unto himself but lives in multiple interpersonal relations. A typical trait of this human relations is the existence of partners. If the death of an interaction partner is involved the shaking of future perspective could be expected; for death is an end to some world of human existence on both sides. Probably the feeling of future uncertainty keeps in the background in comparison with these experience, which more directly engage the young person's emotional activity in this case, such as: sadness, pain, despair. The hope, anxiety, bereavement, tranquility, feeling of transition, and distaste for life appear weakly, almost vestigially.

Thinking about one's own death follows another courses. Respondents are not indifferent with regard to bereavement, which occupies second place. The dominant feeling in reflection about one's own death is anxiety. The lack of feelings of pain and despair, as well as clearly marked sadness (especially in the group with the high sense of purpose) and the transition feeling are characteristic in this case.

(c) frequency of thinking about death

Table 3  
Low (LP) and high (HP) purpose in life  
and frequency of thinking about death (%)

I think about death	Death of					
	a stranger		someone close		oneself	
	LP	HP	LP	HP	LP	HP
very often	6.0	6.7	10.0	13.3	8.0	10.0
often	32.0	46.7	36.0	40.0	36.0	30.0
seldom	60.0	43.3	52.0	46.7	52.0	60.0
never	2.0	3.3	2.0	—	4.0	—

Thinking about death of someone close is different from thinking about death of a stranger or one's own. Among persons with the low sense of purpose in life there are those who never think at all about death. This does not mean that the problem of death is totally foreign to the young, because almost half the respondents very often or often think about death of a stranger ( $M = 45.7\%$ ), someone close ( $M = 49.7\%$ ), and themselves ( $M = 42\%$ ).

The empirical data presented here suggest that frequency of thinking about death has no essential connection with level of sense of purpose in life, or, in other words, the conferral of meaning on one's own life is not a result of frequent thinking about death but of the quality of life.



## (d) thinking about death and type of question asked

It seems that thinking about death provokes two kinds of questions: theoretical and pragmatic. In the first case the question is about the origin and goal of life, and in second, what should be done not to waste one's life?

Table 4

Thinking about death and type of questions asked by the groups with the low (LP) and high (HP) purpose in life (%)

Thinking about death I ask above all	Death of					
	a stranger		someone close		oneself	
	LP	HP	LP	HP	LP	HP
1) what is the origin and goal of life	48.0	40.0	40.0	36.7	48.0	43.4
2) how not to waste my own life	40.0	46.7	38.0	36.7	28.0	26.6
3) it has no influence on my life	12.0	13.3	22.0	26.6	24.0	30.0

The most general tendency is to emphasize the question about the origin and goal of life. It is clearest in thinking about one's own death ( $M = 45.7\%$ ). The second alternative (how to not waste one's own life) is more marked during thinking about death of a stranger ( $M = 43.4\%$ ) and someone close, and less so in thinking about one's own death ( $M = 26.3\%$ ). Encountering the problem of one's own death is met with relatively great indifference in the group with the high sense of purpose in life.

One might try to explain this stress on the problem of life's origin and goals in thinking about one's own death by the philosophical interests of young people, whose philosophy of life is not yet stabilized. Stabilization entails a specific reckoning of the past to decide what is to be repaired and what was wasted; in short, the period of adult and mid-life are above all times to formulate a philosophy of future, but not to evaluate the past (cf. Kastenbaum, 1977: 145—150).

## (e) thinking about death and attitude toward life

Table 5 contains data on the selection of various alternatives when confronted with thinking about death.

Table 5

Reflection about death and attitudes toward life  
in the groups with low (LP) and high (HP) purpose in life (%)

When I come face to face with the fact of death I decide above all	Death of					
	a stranger		someone close		oneself	
	LP	HP	LP	HP	LP	HP
1) to get as much out of life as I can	8.0	10.0	10.0	16.7	22.0	16.7
2) change my ways	42.0	40.0	36.0	40.0	50.0	50.0
3) I make no decision	50.0	50.0	54.0	43.3	28.0	33.3

Reflection about death of a stranger has the least influence and then half the respondents do not make existential decisions, while the rest desire to reform ( $M = 41\%$ ). The situation is similar with thinking about the death of someone close. However when thinking about one's own death the situation changes radically; then the desire to correct oneself dominates ( $M = 50\%$ ). The question of how to get the most out of life also appears more often in this instance. Statistically significant differences do not exist between persons with the high and low sense of purpose in life.

On the ground of the foregoing data one can come to the conclusion that it is difficult for young people to be totally indifferent to one's own death. There is probably a mechanism of repression of the inevitability of death at work here, with the result that they seek a way to enjoy or amend life. This tendency is characteristic for both groups.

### Conclusion

The sense of purpose in life does not radically modify attitudes toward death, but only influences some of their dimensions (inevitability, centrality, mysteriousness, anxiety). Probably the basic factor conditioning perception of death in respondents of this study

is not the level of purpose in life but rather psychological distance from one's own death.

Thinking about death is infrequent in the groups studied. A considerable number of respondents, when confronted with the thought of death, make little change in their own life-style. Encountering the fact of death engages emotional processes more than intellectual ones such as mechanisms of autocorrection. The smaller the distance to the fact or problem of death, the greater the increase in feelings connected with the death. And so, if one thinks about the death of a stranger the tendency to intellectualize and the „philosophical” feeling of transition appear. This tendency disappears when a death is of closet one possible for a young person, that is, experience of a close relative's death. At such times unreasoned reactions (sadness, pain, and despair) predominate. When the respondents think about one's own death then both anxiety and bereavement are prominent.

In future research on the relationship between attitudes toward death and sense of purpose in life, consideration ought to be given to an understanding of purpose in life, especially in reference to values as these relate to sense of purpose in life. This will be possible after preparation of a new scale for measuring the various components of life purpose. Of course, the connection between subjective expectation and perception of time on the one hand, and with both the purpose in life and attitudes toward death, on the other, can help in the formulation of heuristically interesting hypotheses.

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