

INTERPERSONAL CLOSENESS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE OF ADOLESCENTS – PREVENTIVE AND THERAPEUTIC VALUE

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Abstract

In this article, the authors will present an extremely interesting and at the same time very topical topic concerning two areas - interpersonal closeness and adolescents' sense of meaning in life. Young people today, in what we can call the age of consumerism, focus on taking rather than giving. Interpersonal relationships are diminishing, closeness, as well as the sense of life, in young people, are losing their value. This can lead to many dangerous situations, as a consequence of which the adolescent may stop coping with life in the real world. The article presents a qualitative study of young people from Poland. The study used a structured interview, whose questions concerned the meaning of life and the sense of interpersonal closeness. The results of the study have preventive and therapeutic value.

Keywords: interpersonal closeness, adolescent, young people

Discipline: pedagogy

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Absztrakt**A SERDÜLŐK INTERPERSZONÁLIS KÖZELSÉGÉLMÉNYÉNEK ÉS ÉLETÉRTELEM ÉRZÉKELÉSÉNEK PREVENCIÓS ÉS TERÁPIÁS JELENTŐSÉGE**

A tanulmány egy rendkívül időszerű és releváns témakört vizsgál, amely két, egymással szorosan összefüggő területet ölel fel: az interperszonális közelség élményét, valamint a serdülők életértelmének érzékelését. A kortárs, fogyasztáscentrikus társadalomban felnövekvő fiatalok egyre inkább a befogadásra, a megszerzésre irányulnak, miközben a kapcsolatok minősége, a közelség és az élet értelmének megélése háttérbe szorul. E tendenciák következtében az interperszonális kapcsolatok leépülhetnek, ami hosszú távon hozzájárulhat a pszichés egyensúly felborulásához, illetve a valósággal való megküzdés képességének csökkenéséhez. A tanulmány egy lengyelországi kvalitatív kutatás eredményeit ismerteti, amely strukturált interjúmódszert alkalmazott. Az interjúkérdések az élet értelmére, valamint az interperszonális közelség megtapasztalására irányultak. A kutatás eredményei mind preventív, mind terápiás szempontból jelentőséggel bírnak, mivel rávilágítanak azokra a pszichológiai tényezőkre, amelyek elősegíthetik a serdülők mentális jóllétének támogatását és fejlesztését.

Kulcsszavak: interperszonális közelség, életértelem, fiatalok

Diszciplína: neveléstudomány

Introduction

This article aims to show a very current topic concerning two areas - interpersonal closeness and the sense of life in adolescents who are members of the Catholic Community of Merciful Jesus Young in Poland.

The first of the topics discussed in the article, related to the sense of meaning in life, derives from logotherapy, which is a form of psychotherapy, and its precursor was V. E. Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist of Jewish origin. Logotherapy is primarily concerned with nurturing and clarifying the meaning of life and also treating by helping people find meaning (Solecki, 2022). The name of Frankl's concept is derived from: *logos* meaning word, sense, explanation + *therapeo* meaning I care, I cure. The whole Franklian concept mainly focuses on helping the patient to find meaning in the most hopeless situation, which at first might seem to be a no-win situation, because everything that happens, happens for something (Frankl, 2018, 169). Frankl believed that certain situations are beyond our

control, as they are our irreversible destiny (Ibid., 170).

The second theme focuses on interpersonal closeness, namely the closeness through which a person can build relationships with another person. K. Tucholska described closeness as a basic human need, more important than physiological needs (Bunda, 2025). It is worth noting that the aforementioned closeness does not have a single definition, as it can be analysed on many levels. The first of these can be intimacy, which is nothing but sexual, bodily closeness. The next is physical proximity, which can result from affectionate and friendly touch, even just a hug. Then there is emotional closeness, which is, in the simplest terms, a bond that can arise on a human-to-human or human-to-animal level, an object, or a specific place. There is also intellectual proximity, which is a kind of kinship, an understanding of each other, and something more delicate and finer, namely spiritual proximity, by which we can feel very close to someone, physically distant from each other

(Ibid.). The complexity and interdisciplinarity of the word “closeness” are so vast that it cannot be described by a single definition. Proximity is something extremely broad.

Godawa (2023) writes in his book: „proximity belongs to the category of fragile, susceptible to deformation and destruction. That is why systematic work on its correct shape and care to protect it from the destructive influence of external factors is needed” (Godawa, 2023, 24). It is worth mentioning that intimacy is an element in the life of every human being, which, in all its aspects, should be nurtured and cared for so that it can continually develop, especially at the level of the relationship with another person.

Taking into account the above, the main question of the presented research is: What are the areas of the respondents' sense of meaning in life, and what factors shape the respondents' sense of meaning in life? How do the subjects define interpersonal closeness, and what meaning do they give to it?

The collected information was grouped and recorded in the form of a matrix oriented to the selected issues corresponding to the research questions.

The first part of the paper is the theoretical basis of the research. The next part shows research methodology and results. The conclusion presents a discussion of the research results and a summary.

Theoretical basis

Frankl wrote about the fact that the most important and crucial motivation in the life of every human being is the search for meaning. The aforementioned meaning is unique, unique in its uniqueness because man is the only one who is capable of fulfilling it, and in this way, the will to meaning is accomplished. Man, in Frankl's perception, is capable of living for the values and ideals he professes and, more importantly, is willing to sacrifice his life for them (Frankl, 2018, 152).

Nevertheless, everyone's will to meaning can also

succumb to a kind of frustration, hence Frankl's term existential frustration. The Viennese psychiatrist, who was also a doctor of philosophy, said that the adjective “existential” can be understood here in three ways: in relation to: (1) existence as such, i.e. human being, (2) the meaning of existence, and (3) the striving to find the concrete meaning of one's own existence, in other words the will to meaning (Ibid., 153.).

The aforementioned concept of „existential frustration”, according to Frankl, is a phenomenon characteristic of modern times and is caused by emptiness, i.e., the absence of something of value. It is the stopping at the surface of events, the lack of motivation from the level of the depths of the human being, that would drive the person to act; it is simply the lack of meaning (Szykula, 2022, 51). According to logotherapy, it can be a factor in the onset of neurosis, which logotherapists refer to as “noogenic neurosis”. It is rooted in the noological dimension of human existence (Frankl, 2018, 154), the word “nóos” comes from Greek and can mean “reason” or “mind”. For Frankl, it is a philosophical term for the fundamental dimension of the human being, which is the spiritual dimension. He often used to say that man has a psyche and a body, but he is a spirit, and this constitutes his dignity (Frankl, 2021, 54-56).

Each person, as a free, unique, and unrepeatable person, has a mission and is called to specific actions that will give meaning to life. Each person, in his or her uniqueness, is unique and no one will ever be able to replace him or her and fulfil his or her mission, and, above all, it must be remembered that no one will live our life for us and we will never be given the chance to live it again. So each of us has a unique task to perform, just as the opportunity to perform it is unique (Frankl, 2018, 164).

Frankl wrote that meaning changes not only from day to day and hour to hour, but also from person to person. Hence comes the statement that

it is not some generally and top-down accepted meaning that is important, but what is most important is the fact of what now, at a particular moment in one's life, is most meaningful to the unique and unrepeatable individual that is man (Ibid., 163-164). Frankl believed that the meaning of life is the ability to find and perform specific tasks that are individual for each individual (Michalski, 2021, 8). The most important thing is to be able to find one's light in life, a certain aspect to which each person, as an individual, will be able and willing to aspire, the reason for his or her existence.

Proximity is an extremely important category in the individual's perception as a person, but it is also defined and categorised at the level of social life (Godawa, 2023, 24). Proximity in itself is a very broad concept that can fall into many categories. Many researchers have attempted to define proximity. One of the most interesting analyses on intimacy has been conducted by Ch. Lauer (2016), who believes that intimacy can be defined and described in terms of two categories: the psychological function of intimacy and emotion. When analysing intimacy from the point of view of its psychological function, one can see a kind of contradiction in intimate relationships, as the author analyses intimacy as a kind of tension between the desire to achieve unity and longing. From the point of view of the second category - emotion - according to Lauer, intimacy should not be identified with the feeling that a person is currently experiencing, as such emotions may be false due to the fact that the source that triggered them was uncertain.

Another view of the concept may be that intimacy is simply something physical, while looking at the concept more broadly, we can see intimacy as including other people in oneself, giving them permission to be included in a person's private and personal world (Aaron and Aaron, 2024).

Through the analysis of various definitions, Godawa (2023, 27) categorised proximity in his book:

Criterion: Spheres integrating the human person.

Category: (a) Physical proximity - touch, physical contact, (b) Emotional-feeling proximity - caring, bestowing feelings, c) Genetic proximity - importance of blood ties, d) Moral proximity - a similar system of values and attitudes, e) Existential proximity - shared existential experiences, f) Epistemic proximity - commonality of thoughts and views.

In the context of the studied group of respondents, who are adolescents from a Christian youth group (Community of Merciful Jesus Young), it is also worth mentioning that, as Godawa writes, man is a relational entity (Ibid., 29). The aforementioned relationality is rooted in the very essence of the being of the human person, and it manifests itself in two ways: at the horizontal level, i.e., as a natural inclination to live in Community, and at the vertical level - as an inner striving towards a relationship with God, i.e., a kind of Absolute (Choromański, 2015).

Every human being needs relationships because, as Choromański describes, the human person was created to create such relationships and, above all, to nurture them. A person who chooses to live without intimacy and relationality becomes afflicted with loneliness, which can result in all sorts of disorders in the psychological, physical, and noetic (spiritual) spheres.

Research methodology and results

This study is qualitative in nature. The subject of this research is contained in the topic of adolescents' sense of meaning in life and interpersonal closeness. The theoretical and methodological intention of the article is to analyse and describe the sense of meaning in life and of interpersonal closeness among the members of the Community of Merciful Jesus Young. To analyse the topic in

depth, a research problem was posed, which was encapsulated in the following research questions:

1. What are the areas of the respondents' sense of meaning in life, and what factors shape the respondents' sense of meaning in life?
2. How do respondents define interpersonal closeness, and what meaning do they give to it?

The raw data were transcribed and collated, analysed, and interpreted about the main and specific research questions. The structuring of the collected data started with their selection and segregation, according to the purpose of the study. The collected information was grouped and recorded in the form of a matrix oriented to the selected issues corresponding to the research questions and according to the following areas: areas of the sense of a meaningful life, factors that shape it, definition of interpersonal closeness, and the meaning of closeness.

The present study was conducted in March 2024. Eight people took part in the survey, including four men and four women. The age range of the respondents was 15–20 years. The people surveyed belonged to the Community of Merciful Jesus Young in Rybnik. It is quite a young organisation, having been established on 14 February 2012 in Rybnik, which is the day of the beautiful feast day of two prominent and influential evangelisers in the history of the Catholic Church, Cyril and Methodius. This day marked the beginning of a collaboration of sorts between the three groups: Emmaus, the community from Stone, and from Chwalowice, which decided to grow, pray, and form together. The Community of Merciful Jesus functions on the basis of a decree by the Archbishop. The spiritual care of the Community is exercised by a priest, and its leader is a lay person, who is elected for a specific term by the other members of the Community. The whole Community, which has about 250 members at present, is divided into smaller groups, which meet once a

month in order to be able to form themselves in a smaller group. It is also a space to get to know each other better, as the groups are reassigned each year, so that their members change. The young people, or Community members, are growing every day. In front of the eyes of the adults, they grow.

Young people also have the opportunity to fulfil their passions, as there is also space in the Community to fulfil themselves musically, for example by playing instruments or singing during prayers and worship evenings, there is also a theatre deaconess who organises nativity plays or mystery plays, and in Youngs there is also the opportunity to worship God in a flag dance (Web1).

Respondents indicated that the meaning of their life is God and a relationship with Him, as well as a constant pursuit of Him, of which two people also mentioned the support they receive from God in difficult moments in their lives. Two people responded that, according to them, values are the meaning of life. In their opinion, the meaning of life is the values that make you want to live; they are the centre of a person. The meaning of life is certain values they live by; it is a life full of passion. Another person indicated that for them, the meaning of life is knowing why, for whom, and for what one lives. Yet another answer was given by a respondent, saying that the meaning of life is having a certain purpose. More than half of the people responded that they find their meaning of life in the Community they belong to. Respondents alluded to the fact that, thanks to the Community of Jesus Merciful Young, they can fulfil themselves and develop their passions and be close to other people. Thus, proximity appeared to be an important factor for a sense of meaning in life. They also said that meaning for them is the very essence of belonging to such a group, where they feel needed by the other person. In addition, they stated that their sense of meaning in life is all the relationships that are formed, which make them feel important to someone. Three people in their

responses acknowledged God as the space and person in whom they find their meaning of life. One respondent answered that he finds his meaning in many things, such as his passions. He also mentioned the meaning of love in a broad sense.

The respondents emphasised how important relationships with other people, as well as with God, are for them and how much joy they bring. Through these answers, one can see a certain correlation that people who live with God are happy and cheerful. These people know what they live for, why they live, and for whom they live. One can see the immense joy that their relationship with God and their close companions exudes from them. Another equally important result is that the members of the Community of Merciful Jesus Young want to live for the other. They repeatedly said how important relationships with other people are for them. During the interviews, it was noticed that the young people interviewed had great enthusiasm, joy, and passion when they spoke about the other person and the relationship with them. Every young person needs relationships, closeness, and presence, as John Paul II said in Buenos Aires in 1987, youth is the time when man feels the greatest need for acceptance and support, when he most wants to be heard and loved (John Paul II, 1987).

The young people who have made a conscious decision to join the Community are very mature in their life choices. The respondents express themselves in a very beautiful and extremely mature way about their faith, God, and the Community they belong to. All areas related to their religion have a huge impact on their sense of meaning in life and closeness. The modern Church yearns for the young zeal spoken of by the Holy Father, John Paul II. The Church needs energy, enthusiasm, and youthful ideals so that the Gospel can penetrate society (John Paul II, 2004).

Proximity in the eyes of the respondents is a deep interpersonal and spiritual relationship based

on trust, openness, and presence. It is a joining of hearts, a readiness to be hurt, but also to fully welcome the other person. They emphasise the aspect of support and being there for the other. They point to emotional security. They describe closeness as the foundation of friendship, both physically and spiritually. They link it to Mary's attitude of presence, care, and perseverance.

Proximity to God manifests itself for the participants in the study as a spiritual experience: an emotional stirring, a prayerful connection, and the certainty that God is listening, the sacraments and faith despite the lack of emotions, a friendly relationship, also in crises, or the difficult but deep and real presence of God.

Proximity in Community is described as a relationship based on truth and authentic acceptance, mutual help, care, and gestures of closeness, deepening relationships, and growing together. They also perceive difficulties in building bonds among people and a certain isolation, which also shows a barrier to the community experience of closeness.

Half of the respondents referred to their relationships with people from the Community to which they belong. They mentioned that it is thanks to people from the Community of Jesus Merciful Young that they find meaning in their lives. According to them, these good relationships shape meaning because people from the Community who have experience and wisdom are able to help with many things, and through talking to them, they feel a deep sense of meaning. It was also claimed that the relationships in the Community give a lot, for example, due to the fact that one of the participants in the study has not had a dad for eight years, but gets a lot of support from the animators, who surround her with paternal care and good advice. She also mentioned relationships at home, where she is very often ridiculed because of her faith, but this also builds her up, and every day she learns compassion, understanding, and

patience with her family members. One participant spoke about how the Lord Jesus shows to walk with other people, and it is these people who give him meaning, because they are his Community, his second family. These relationships make it much easier for the respondent to walk through life. Another boy said that relationships matter a lot to him because it is thanks to the relationships in the Community that he found meaning again. They helped me to get out of the hole and took that first step with me to go up with God; they helped me to get out of many crises. He very much emphasised the statement that the Community is a chosen family. The participant noted that in her life, she needs relationships with people who live with Jesus and know Him, as she claims that this is a key point for relationships with non-believers or with those who, for some reason, have drifted away from God. Another participant, when asked about the impact of relationships on the meaning of life, replied that she notices meaning through taking time and committing to each other in relationships and praying together. The next participant said that relationships very much shape her and her sense of meaning in her life. The last respondent said that through relationships, she can appreciate certain situations in her life more.

Through the analysis of the respondents' answers, it can be seen that the young people surveyed live in their Community. The relationships formed between the members of the Christian youth group are built on truth, honesty, and trust, but above all on God, because it is for Him that the described group was created. The respondents highly value their relationship with God and with all members of the community. They call themselves a family; it can be considered a kind of family of choice, because everyone can decide whether they feel comfortable in it and whether membership in such a Community brings positive results with regard to a sense of meaning in life. The author of this thesis mentioned in the

fifth subsection of the first chapter that relationships are an extremely important factor in the formation of a sense of life.

Discussion of the research results

It is worth noting that the term sense of meaning is an important aspect in adolescence, because it is at this stage that adolescents search, discover, find and try new things, experience positive as well as negative experiences that involuntarily affect later life, therefore it is so important to help them in pursuing their goals and in discovering the meaning not only understood as the meaning of life, but also as the meaning of individual everyday events (Porczyńska-Ciszewska, 2013, 171).

Young people often lose motivation for life, do not see any sense to their existence, and become overwhelmed by an excess of stimuli, errands, and duties to be performed. In many cases, not seeing any sense, they give up and do not want to fight for themselves, their lives, plans, or dreams, which in today's times can often result in depression or discouragement to take responsibility for their choices (Web2).

Being in adolescence, young people are just getting to know the real world and learning new roles in society, which may not be easy for them. For this reason, they may make a lot of mistakes and, when trying to adapt to a new environment and surroundings, join a particular social group with different values from their own, and they enter a kind of crisis. All this can result in deep frustration or even loss of meaning in young people. Often, certain events, severe stress, uncomfortable situations, unresolved problems from youth can have an impact on later life in adulthood. Therefore, it is important to try to find meaning, even in the worst and most painful moments, and also in suffering (Frankl, 2018, 170).

By carefully analysing all the answers of the people surveyed, it is possible to indicate that, in their opinion, the meaning is God, the relationship

with Him, and the Community to which they belong. Thanks to these answers, it is possible to see a certain correlation that people who live with God are happy and cheerful. These people know what they live for, why they live, and for whom they live. One can see the immense joy emanating from them, which the relationship with God gives them. The relationship with God is full of excitement, meaning, and intimacy, for true believers (Mullins, 2022, 235-239).

Another equally important conclusion is that the members of the Community of Merciful Jesus Young want to live for other people and closeness. They repeatedly said how important relationships with other people are for them. Interpersonal closeness is one of the most important values in life. According to Y. Tu and colleagues, „experiencing self and other as one coherent unit, rather than as separate entities, characterises interpersonal closeness. It follows that in decision making, increased closeness will result in a greater sense of the self-other collective, which will lead participants to choices that increase the total benefit to the self and other.” (Tu and Shaw, 2016, 670).

In modern times, the theme of the meaning of life and interpersonal closeness is an increasingly topical subject, and it seems that prevention of difficulties, education on the meaning of life and closeness, therapy, sociotherapy, and therapy based on inner transformation should take place in schools, universities, or among professionals, because man needs to develop in the spiritual dimension. In this context, an important postulate would be to introduce elements of logotherapy, which sensitise the most important noetic dimension in man, into the work with young people and professionals. According to W. Chi Ho Chan (2023, 15), „teaching meaning in life is crucial not only for social workers and other helping professionals to acquire the skills of facilitating clients” search for meaning but also has great

implications for their self-care and in turn their personal and professional psychological health. It is hoped that this article may provide a starting point for further discussion on teaching meaning in life for social work students and helping professionals”.

Today's reality, which focuses on a digital, virtual world, makes it all the more necessary to have real, sincere, and genuine relationships, and due to the social situation and the pace of life, these relationships are becoming less and less common with time. It is for this reason that the search for one's sense of life and intimacy is all the more legitimate. The members of the Community of Merciful Jesus Young very often emphasised how important relationships with other people are for them. Through these relationships, the respondents get closer to God, whom they place in their hierarchy as the highest value, and they advocate that relationships both with other people and with God greatly influence and shape their sense of life.

Summary

The qualitative study conducted, set in the context of Viktor E. Frankl's logotherapeutic concept, reveals the meaning of life and interpersonal closeness in the experiences of young people belonging to the Community of Jesus the Merciful Young. Frankl's notion of the will to meaning provided the theoretical background for understanding the motivations of the respondents, for whom a relationship with God, community, and values is the primary source of existential direction.

The results of the analysis of the empirical material indicate that the young people surveyed experience the meaning of life primarily through relationships: both vertical - with God, and horizontal - with other people. They pointed to the importance of belonging to a community, which enables them to develop spiritually, emotionally, and socially. Interpersonal closeness was defined by them as a phenomenon deeply rooted in trust,

empathy, support, and mutual presence. Proximity to God, on the other hand, was manifested as a spiritual and emotional experience rooted in prayer, the sacraments, and personal dialogue with God.

Concerning the concept of Godawa (2023), the respondents described closeness in all the dimensions proposed by the author - physical, emotional, moral, existential, and epistemic - which indicates a deeply integrated understanding of this category. It was also recognised that interpersonal closeness has not only a relational but also a meaning-making function.

The results obtained support the assumption that adolescents who live within the structure of a religious community show a higher level of awareness of the meaning of life and the need to form deep, valuable relationships. Their statements indicate significant emotional and spiritual involvement in the community activities undertaken, which can be regarded as a protective factor against existential frustration and loneliness.

From the perspective of developmental psychology and pedagogy of religion, it therefore becomes an important postulate to implement programmes supporting young people in the process of discovering the meaning of life and forming mature interpersonal bonds. It is also advisable to include elements of logotherapy in educational and therapeutic work, especially in the context of the growing need for spiritual integration of the individual in the modern, secularised, and digital world.

The analysis of the content presented shows that both the meaning of life and interpersonal closeness are fundamental needs and constitutive categories for human existence. In the light of Frankl's logotherapy, the search for meaning represents man's deepest motivation, linked to his freedom, spirituality, and uniqueness. The meaning of life is not a universal, homogeneous construct, but a dynamic and individually lived category, conditioned by personal values, experiences, and the

readiness to fulfil the existential mission assigned to the individual.

Lack of meaning - as Frankl points out - can lead to existential frustration, resulting in psychological disorders of a noogenic nature. A key role in counteracting these conditions is played by the spiritual dimension of the human being, which is his or her essence and an expression of the dignity of the person. Nowadays, in the context of the challenges of civilisation, finding the meaning of life becomes not only an individual issue, but also a social one, related to the need for deeper involvement in the community and interpersonal relations.

The second important aspect addressed in the text is proximity - understood both as a relational value and as a psycho-social phenomenon. Proximity is grasped multidimensionally, encompassing the physical, emotional, moral, existential, and cognitive spheres. Man, as a relational being, needs the presence of the other for full development and self-realisation. Proximity thus becomes not only an expression of connectedness, but also a condition for giving life a deeper meaning.

The conclusions drawn from the theories and classifications cited above show that meaning and proximity are mutually penetrating phenomena. Both the relationship with God and with another person constitute a space for the individual to experience meaning, build identity, and overcome existential difficulties. Their presence in the lives of young people - especially during adolescence - can have a protective and developmental function, counteracting crises, loneliness, and a sense of existential emptiness.

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