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*Personal Comprehension of Meaning:
Content, Strategies, Peculiarities*

Osobiste osiągnięcie sensu życia: treść, strategie, specyfika

SUMMARY

The article provides an analysis of modern views on the problem of meaning comprehension and determines correlation between values, senses and motivation of human behavior. It has been established that motivation is closely associated with activity. Being expressly target determined it promotes the realization of creative values. Other meaning comprehension strategies include phenomenological design of actualized experience values and transcendental values used in psychotherapy to encourage the counselee and facilitate his personal growth. For this purpose a component of positive psychotherapy known as a technique of counter-concept formulation is used. The article stresses the importance of an organismic sense as personal embodiment of experience. Being the basis of love it suggests an intuitive choice of meaning comprehension strategies. An organismic sense is inherent in every individual and forms the transpersonal spiritual unity of mankind. It has been indicated that meaningful life is characterized by a wide scope of inescapable existential experiences ranging from happiness to suffering.

Keywords: values; meaning; psychotherapy; motivation; organismic sense

INTRODUCTION

Finding meaning in life is a fundamental problem approached by many disciplines, religion, philosophy, and psychology among them. The latter, in addition to theoretical reasoning, elaborates on practical recommendations to help coun-

seels with different needs. Psychotherapeutic interviews become indispensable amid modern globalization processes when pursuit of material wealth and economic feasibility degrades values of personal development giving superiority to success over achievement, fulfillment over individuation. The social significance of creation values stands out against values of experience and attitude. In the meanwhile other deformations of individual and collective consciousness can be observed. Thus, the dominance of experience values can encourage a hedonistic life position and a compulsive search for pleasure and happiness. The prevalence of attitude values along with the neglect of others has a passive lifestyle, social de-adaptation, etc. as its result. In this regard balancing a diverse range of individual and collective values expressed in life guidelines is of ultimate importance. The theoretical analysis of the concepts of “value” and “meaning” presented here has been conducted to outline mechanisms of meaning comprehension and indicators of its harmonious implementation in the individual and collective existence.

ELEMENTS OF MEANING COMPREHENSION: VALUES, MOTIVATION, MOTIVES

Psychological literature mostly outlines two strategies of meaning comprehension: meaning-making and meaning-finding. Some authors prefer the first strategy (mostly representatives of the humanistic movement: Rogers 1994; Maslow 1999; and others), others emphasize the priority of meaning-finding (Frankl 1990), still others try to integrate both strategies (Virtc, Cobeli 2012; Karpenko 2009). In line with the proponents of the integrative approach I will attempt to deepen the understanding of the content, strategies and peculiarities of personal meaning comprehension.

Analyzing processes of meaning-making and meaning-finding as well as indicators of a meaningful life is impossible without defining basic concepts. In their reference book Hornostay and Titarenko define a “personal meaning as a non-verbal construct that reflects the knowledge, values, guidelines, personal attitude and individual experience in their indissoluble unity” (Chepelieva 2001, p. 118). “A value is an essential component which corresponds to a person’s actual needs, ideals, personal meaning” (Hornostai 2001, p. 146). Hence, a value becomes worthwhile acquiring an inner meaning. However, most psychologists point out that this view can easily be criticized because of the transcendent nature of values which they display when they come into contact with individual consciousness. Values are the potentialities which unite the mankind and are reflected in both the individual and collective existence. “When it comes to choosing a particular system of values, it is an exclusive prerogative of a person as a unique spiritual entity. The drama of the axiological self-determination is caused by the fact that most choices are made automatically, unconsciously or semiconsciously

so out of a probably infinite range of potential meanings the person chooses those which, he knows in advance, are right or wrong” (Karpenko 2009, p. 76). The rest of values are left to await their comprehension (that is, implementation in the individual or collective meaning) in the superpersonal axiosphere. Thus, family formation and child-rearing may not always be a value. However, this does not mean that they are of no value altogether.

Therefore, the claim that a value becomes worthwhile provided it acquires an inner meaning is valid only in case of interiorized values that stand out for the person among the infinite number of others. By instilling a sense in certain values and choosing them we give them a meaning which can be of an individual and/or collective, conscious and/or unconscious nature. So, it can be inferred that senses correspond to values but values are not always endowed with a sense. Thus, certain value orientations help people form a new meaning once the previous one has been lost.

Values are the material from which individual meanings arise. They are a reservoir of meanings and an original source of motivation. Virtc and Cobeli claim that values are deeply rooted motivations that determine our actions (Virtc, Cobeli 2012). Thus, values are identical to motivation. However, the legitimacy of this claim seems doubtful and quite contradicts the definition of “motivation” as a system of individual motives for an active achievement of important goals. I believe that the focus on the goal determination of motivation based on creation values, does not address other phenomenologically oriented values (i.e., experience values). In its turn a motive is a subjective activity in the form of a reason that stimulates the achievement of certain vitally important or situational needs and goals.

Motivation can be extrinsic and intrinsic (Liepikhova 2001). The former shapes human behavior with external factors (a social environment, current situation, etc.) while the latter – with internal determinants (need for self-actualization, cognitive interest, etc.). Anyway, motivation is always related to activities and becomes a psychological mechanism of implementation of life meanings. Hereby we mean their emergence in the intrapsychic or external reality of an individual or community. So, values form meanings which account for the enrichment of a person’s motivational sphere.

Overall, I believe that motivation of human behavior is permeated by both teleology of meaning-making and an all-round development of the person, focused mainly on targeted activities. Dependence on experience and attitude values allows distancing from excessive voluntarism. Goal motivation, however, cannot help survive the loss of a beloved. To this end one needs to respond to own emotions, overcome helplessness, accept the inevitability of the grief. Thus, apart from goal motivation meaning comprehension is achieved through sensory, process and transcendent perception.

From the above it can be concluded that a motivational component of activity is often reinforced by creation values, process – by experience values, and transcendental – by attitude values (Frankl 1990). Experience values are engaged in the first and the third cases. Due to them one is able to experience the fullness of human existence. This entails at least two strategies of meaning comprehension: meaning-making and meaning-finding. Indicators of their congruence with external (objective) realities and internal (subjective) conditions comprise an organismic sense, emotional competence, intuition, etc., which embody experience values. The latter, incidentally, are embodied in love and claim to be a separate, third strategy of meaning comprehension.

STRATEGIES OF MEANING COMPREHENSION: MEANING-MAKING,
MEANING-FINDING, UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

In general, explicit or hidden disagreements about the legitimacy of certain strategies of meaning comprehension are observed not only within psychology but also between psychologists and the clergy, between Eastern and Western schools. Sometimes ideological opponents are so categorical in their judgments that it can become impossible to find a compromise in the search for truth. Therefore, I tried to rid the further considerations of rigidity and integrate views of different researchers.

Accepting the idea that meaning can only be constructed by an individual or system (family, community, etc.) would ruin the potential of the both. By constructing the meaning, we choose one or several vectors of life creation out of the infinite number of others that are ignored but do not disappear from the plane of existence. On the other hand, over-focusing on the finding in the existential field of “ready” meanings eliminates the upward vector of personal development, ignores the creative potential of an individual and his abilities to generate meanings (of a single behavioral activity and life in general), as the individual focuses on searching a meaning beyond the realms of the personal Ego which later leads to suffering. Loss of subjectivity means deprivation of the capacity for critical thinking and makes people vulnerable to outside influence of imposed dogmas, values and stereotypes. “The category of subjectivity indicates the degree of freedom in human life and the ability to become the reason for the world and mankind, to build the meaning of life, act and take responsibility for actions. The lack or complete loss of subjective freedom entails the personal drama of existence, loss of life meaning” (Vaskivska 2001, p. 129). It should be noted that I agree with the last statement only to the extent that the man is the creator of his life. However, I reject any categorical concepts such as excessive voluntarism (often inherent in the Western society) or excessive optimism about the opportunities of the Ego as they lead to existential frustration, a sense of existential vacuum and, finally,

noogenic neurosis described by the founder of logotherapy Frankl. Noogenic neurosis is initially caused by a spiritual problem, moral conflict or existential crisis but, unlike classical neuroses, it is not of psychogenic nature (Frankl 1990). So, neurotization, lowering of adaptive capacity of the organism, limitations of self-actualization powers may be due, in particular, to the imbalance between meaning-making and meaning-finding. "Anyone who focuses on the eventual, risks getting lost in the current" (Virtc, Cobeli 2012, p. 34). Conversely, the emphasis on utilitarian needs leads to total loss of perspective.

Determination of the position of an individually selected sense creation strategy is not of primary necessity to me. Instead, it's important to emphasize the need to balance the ratio of such strategies within the motivational sphere to their full operation. Therefore, when studying meaning categories we must take into account various circumstances in which this meaning arises: within the intrapsychic reality or as a result of the search outside the personal Ego. Detection of meaning involves activation of individual search activities whereas construction thereof – transformational activities. However, meaning-making as a productive activity that structures and sets the limits is inseparable from the transcendental meaning-finding, from human susceptibility to existing meanings and impartial observation and reasoning (Virtc, Cobeli 2012). Meaning-making and meaning-finding are the opposites whose implementation helps a person be more holistic and integrated. It promotes the development of the transcendental view of the world and the personal Ego and facilitates spiritual and personal growth, forms an ability to overcome difficulties. In addition, these dichotomies are not only the result of the abstract philosophical and psychological discourse. They have an expressive psychotherapeutic potential which, in particular, is realized through positive advancements in psychotherapy going as far back as the analytical psychology of Jung and individual psychology of Adler. Hereby I mean crystallization of vital concepts and formulation of their polarities, called counterconcepts (Pezeshkian 1996). The process of counterconcept formation is not strictly framed and can vary from selection of the opposite meaning to reformulation of each word in the counselee's concept. This enables a thorough examination of the conscious and unconscious traumatizing material, distancing the counselee from it and reintegration of the counselee's Ego on the way to his own Self. "Reaching own Self is the climax of personal growth that embodies the totality and integrity of human nature" (Hrabaska 2001, p. 113). Thus, countervailing aspirations of the human psyche, the conscious and the unconscious, individuation and self-actualization are reintegrated and bring the personality closer to itself. This process is illustrated with a famous aphorism: "To become what you want to become be what you are". Such an integration is achieved through transcendence with respect to the polarities and combines cognitive and emotional components, feelings and intuition, etc.

Operations with counterconcepts reflect a merely technological aspect of psychotherapy typical of all psychotherapeutic schools but not a fundamental approach allowing to reconsider difficulties, life in general. In my opinion, only love possesses such a potential that along with meaning-making and meaning-finding could be called the third strategy of meaning comprehension and implementation. It is a transcending force in psychotherapy and an important psychotherapeutic tool. Such love balances between a focus on the process (existential-phenomenological psychotherapy) and the result (cognitive-behavioral therapy) and is equidistant from the both (Fig. 1).

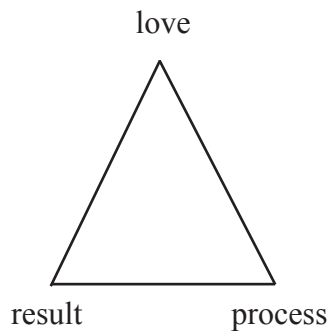


Fig. 1. Transcending power of love in psychotherapy (author's conception)

Psychotherapeutic love differs from love between a man and a woman as it excludes idealization and the erotic component. Instead, it is characterized by acceptance of the counselee, faith in his healing potential, confidence in his experience. It can be illustrated with the following aphorism: "If we treat a man as he deserves, we treat him badly". Psychotherapeutic love is given to the patient in advance, it serves as a platform for further transformation and personal growth, and supports his faith in his abilities.

Psychotherapeutic love also excludes suspension of the counselee typical of the orthodox psychoanalysis or, conversely, bewilderment with him. It shows attention and respect for the personal and counselee's boundaries, does not make estimates or impose its will. Finally, psychotherapeutic love encourages the counselee to realize the stressful factors and comprehend (make or find) new meanings.

Meaning-making and meaning-finding are reflected in other basic concepts of positive psychotherapy, i.e., the concept of a conditional and predetermined fate (Kirichenko 2009) which correlate with creation and attitude values. The former depends on human activity and responsibility, the ability to make choices, develop the potential whereas the latter does not depend on a person and lies in the ability

to accept the inevitable as it is. Some life circumstances depend on the individual, the community forming and taking responsibility for them, while others exist independently of anybody's desires.

Conditional fate as well as predetermined fate is an integral part of life and provide different ways of meaning comprehension. All attempts at their division lead to a biased and incomplete understanding of reality. Accordingly, mental traumas can be caused by attempts to absolutize the importance of one of the factors extrapolated to inappropriate life scenarios. Most clearly this is observed in existential crises and losses. Thus, in case of conditional fate the destructive scenario would consist in delegating responsibility to others. The concept of responsibility is transformed into guilt which with the help of a defense mechanism of projection is attributed to others and forms the position "You" and often "Us-" and "Original Us-". This transformation of basic emotional guidelines leads to the fact that the person blames his problems on anyone but himself and thus promotes exclusion, loneliness, conflict, emotional burnout, etc.

Implementation of the destructive scenario in case of predetermined fate means taking up too much responsibility which the person cannot handle. So the person addresses a protective mechanism of introjection which transforms this responsibility into a chronic sense of guilt and leads to negative changes in the personal Ego and forms the "I" position. This is not surprising given that the responsibility is always realized at present and directed into the future. The guilt is realized at present but directed into the past being a tool of avoiding responsibility. Thus the person becomes prone to idealizing others and developing various forms of depression, suicide, psychosomatic diseases, addictions, etc.

ORGANISMIC SENSE AS AN INDICATOR OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Postulating that values are of superpersonal and transcendent nature, I acknowledge that a person interiorizes and stores them in individual experience in the form of meanings. So, I can assume that there are many possible combinations of values, some of which are implemented, some awaiting their implementation while the rest not implemented altogether. The first group reflects the content of the personal axiological sphere at present, the second has the potential to reach implementation in the future, and the third represents Supreme Forces (the Divine Providence) which are generally not subject to human cognition. The latter which can be only accepted with full humility corresponds to the idea of predetermined fate which, unlike the other two, does not provide for the search (predetermined fate) or transformations (conditional fate) in meaning comprehension.

Based on what has been said we express optimism that the potential for meaning comprehension is always there, even when what happened defies every logical explanation as in case of wars, senseless deaths, natural disasters, etc. The Divine

Providence is inaccessible to empirical understanding. However, this does not mean that it does not exist at all. I consider a popular existentialist (Camus, Sartre, Virc, Cobeli et al.) idea of a meaningless life valid only in terms of an individual existence but not from the viewpoint of transcendent values. This conclusion apart from its logical justification seems to be extremely beneficial in psychotherapy of counselees with predetermined or conditional fate where stressful factors should either be accepted or battled. In this context the ability to consider one's organismic sense which unites us with all humanity, with the transcendent and gives us a hint of meaning comprehension strategies (meaning-making, meaning-finding or unconditional acceptance) is of ultimate importance. The sense-filled life depends on the correct choice in certain circumstances.

In my opinion, making a good choice in favor of particular strategies of meaning comprehension and their balancing are possible through realization of experience values. It has already been noted that they emerge through not only unconditional acceptance but also a personal organismic sense as its foundation. It requires attention to emotional and physical manifestations of a person which are first to respond to certain external and internal stimuli. It is because of these that the first encounter with the outside world is made which answers unconscious questions "Do I like it or not", "Is it safe or not" and so on. Meneghetti (1993) claims that cognition first takes place at the corporal, organismic level and eventually transits to the level of our consciousness. The organismic sense is inherent in all people. However, not everybody is equally open to interpretation and a correct choice of meaning and life comprehension strategies. As a result, noogenic and even psychogenic neuroses, psychosomatic disorders, addictions, conflicts, etc., arise. The organismic sense unites all mankind and drives everyone in the "from Ego to Eco" direction which is aimed at harmony with oneself and with the world, the rational use of human and natural resources. Thus, both values and strategies of their implementation form a transpersonal spiritual unity of the mankind. Experience values embodied in the organismic sense are not only a separate strategy of meaning comprehension but also a meaningful indicator of a well-comprehended individual and social existence which precedes logical comprehension of information. In our view, discursive intelligence is launched after the "conclusions" of the organismic sense which, however, does not prevent further interpretation and, quite often, distortion of the latter, thus distancing the person from individuation and self-actualization. A detailed analysis of psychophysiological mechanisms of consciousness proposed by Chuprikova led to the conclusion that a decisive factor which causes emergence of logically (meaningfully) structured consciousness is a "partitioning of integral sensory impressions" with summarizing of their essential features (concept formation) being the outcome of this dissection (Chuprikova 1985, p. 154). "Thus, it can be experimentally confirmed that figurative and symbolic (meaningful) cognition of reality precedes logical-conceptual one"

(Karpenko 2009, p. 73). So, the source of this initial figurative and symbolic cognition of reality is an organismic sense ("sense impressions"). "The sense crisis is also a crisis of sensibility in the form of hostility to the sensory perception, its stupor. We are granted a global meaning in a form of sensations. Loss of sensibility also means loss of opportunities to dream of something larger and superior, of participation in the world creation" (Virtc, Cobeli 2012, p. 65).

In the context of the research experience values embodied in an organismic sense function as an indicator of its presence. In a meaningful existence of a person or community they manifest themselves through a sense of completeness, integrity, harmony, but do not guarantee happiness. In this regard, Frankl (1990) wrote that achieving goals creates a reason for happiness. Although focusing on pragmatic and appropriate aspects this idea somewhat undermines the contemplative aspect of happiness it still admits that happiness should not be an end target but a consequence of certain values and life guidelines implementation which, however, can equally lead to happiness and suffering. Thus, comprehension (i.e., meaning completeness) of them both becomes a decisive factor. Without it happiness is impossible while suffering – useless.

Happiness is not an essential component of a meaningful existence as shown by implementation of a predetermined fate scenario according to which an individual must accept the given, humbly acknowledge what he cannot change. Often this process is accompanied by suffering which proves that both happiness and suffering are those components of experience values that characterize a person who seeks meaning. But are happiness and suffering the exclusive domain of those who lead a meaningful existence? Obviously not. However, people who seek, create and accept meaning possess a sense of self-identity, flexibility, openness to a new experience and adequate assessment of the chosen way of life. In contrast to these indicators of meaningfulness an automated choice of life path, behavioral, cognitive and emotional rigidity, asthenic attitude, complete psychological protection testify to distancing oneself from individual meaning comprehension. However, this opinion can be subjected to critical analysis and needs verification in future empirical research.

CONCLUSIONS

The problems of values, meaning and motivation are closely interrelated. Superpersonal values are a source of personal meanings. The system of motivation of human behavior as a set of motivating factors is strongly determined by activities and goals and facilitates the realization of creation values.

There are three main strategies of meaning comprehension and realization: meaning-making, meaning-finding and unconditional acceptance which are inextricably linked with each other. The dominance of one of the vectors along with

devaluation of others impoverishes individual and collective existence and leads to an unbalanced axiological sphere. Balancing these same moral values is an indispensable prerequisite for a meaningful existence including both happiness and suffering.

An organismic sense plays a key role in choosing a particular meaning comprehension strategy. With its help a person is able to determine the congruent Self and an adequate strategy in line with external realities. It also helps balance them together, deepen self-understanding and promote the integration of the mental and noetic aspects within a whole.

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STRESZCZENIE

W artykule poddano analizie i ocenie poglądy współczesnych badaczy na kwestię osiągnięcia sensu życia, określono wzajemne relacje między wartościami i kategoriami sensu życia ludzkiego oraz motywacjami postępowania człowieka. Proces motywacyjny wiąże się ściśle z działalnością jednostki, która – mając określony cel i determinację jego osiągnięcia – zmierza przede wszystkim do realizacji wartości tworzenia. Do innych strategii osiągnięcia sensu życia należy zaliczyć ich konstruowanie w zakresie aktualizacji wartości przeżywania, jak również pełne zaangażowania uczuciowe wobec wartości nastawień do wartości transcendentálnych, co jest przede wszystkim przydatne w procesie psychoterapeutycznych relacji mających wspierać klienta w trudnej sytuacji życiowej i dopomagać mu w osobistym doskonaleniu. W tym samym celu jest również wykorzystywana tech-

nika budowania przeciwstawnych koncepcji, co jest dopuszczalne w procesie psychoterapii pozytywnej. Określono także treść i rangę uczuć organicznie podstawowych jako osobiste urzeczywistnienie wartości przeżywania, co jest podstawą miłości i ukierunkowuje osobę na drogę intuicyjnego wyboru strategii osiągnięcia sensu życia. Wskazano ponadto na fakt, iż organiczne odczucia właściwe każdej jednostce budują ponadosobistą jedność duchową całej ludzkości. Podkreślono, iż zdobywanie sensu życia przez jednostkę charakteryzuje się szerokim zakresem przeżyć egzystencjalnych – od szczęścia poczynając, na cierpieniach kończąc, i charakteryzuje życie każdego człowieka.

Słowa kluczowe: wartości; psychoterapia; motywacja; uczucia podstawowe