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Sense of the Meaning of Life among Students Demonstrating Different Self-Education Activity Levels

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Abstract

The purpose of the presented study was to recognise mutual relations between students' self-education activity and their sense of the meaning of life. The answer to the question : *What is the sense of the meaning of life among students of high, average and low levels of self-education activity?* was sought. In the study, the estimation method was used. Students' level of self-education activity was measured on the basis of the Self-education Activity Scale (SAS), created by the author, whereas in order to define the level of the sense of the meaning of life, J.C.Crumbagh and L.T.Macholicka's Meaning of Life Sense Scale, adapted to the Polish reality by Z. Płużek, was used. Analysis showed a relationship between the above-mentioned variables, in particular in terms of one's sense of life and assessment of its value. As for the other components of the sense of the meaning of life level: self-esteem and approach towards death and suicide, no significant dependencies were observed.

Keywords: self-education, meaning of life, higher education didactics

Introduction

A rapid pace of civilisation development, the quality and nature of changes as well as social, political and economic transformations occurring recently have created a necessity for life-long self-education. This is a chance to exist in the labour market, to find one's own place in rapidly changing reality, to form it creatively. Without self-education efforts, it is impossible to shape a coherent and

autonomous personality, nor is it possible to enhance one's creative abilities. Only with self-education does one realize subjectivity in the process of becoming, it also protects people from uniformity and instrumentality in the cultural and social life system. The issue of self-education should be perceived as a challenge faced by every individual aspiring to a high quality physical, material and non-material life, including cultural and social life. Owing to self-education, it is possible to realize the full development of humans. (cf. Jankowski D., 2004, p.164; Bauman Z., 2011, pp.159-160). Self-education is a complex, multi-aspect process, realized throughout the entire human life. It is of dynamic and changeable nature, in different periods of life, depending on situations and needs, an individual may choose self-education directed towards different goals, content, also its activity and efficiency level may be different. The presented study concerns people who live in a particular moment of their lives, which falls on the period of studies. Self-education in a higher education institution should prevail over directed education, which augments the probability of its continuation during the rest of life. In practice, however, as different research shows (cf. Rodek V. (publication pending); Wróblewska W., 2008; Dudzikowa M., 1993), the commonness of self-education at a higher education institution, its popularity grade, level and content are not satisfactory. Students also do not seem to be sufficiently prepared for conscious and systematic work on themselves. The situation seems an additional argument for conducting research on self-education at higher education institutions, especially in terms of its different conditioning: personal, pedagogical, social, environmental and cultural. In the presented article, the author wants to define the relationship between students' self-education activity level and their level of sense of the meaning of life¹. The research assumed a broad understanding of self-education as an autonomous process, where an individual becomes an active subject that directs their own development, according to the appreciated values. On the other hand, the sense of meaning of life may be defined as a subjective state of feeling life satisfaction with the selected goals and assumed value system. (Klamut R., 2002, p.42, Popielski K., 1996, p.56). The sense of the meaning of life cannot be achieved once, it is a result of appropriate development, related to following values which are important for the human being and to achieving appropriate goals. In this way, one may define different levels of the experienced meaning of life sense. (R.Klamut, 2002, p.42; K.Popielski, 1993, p.202). In the presented research, the fol-

¹ The inspiration for searching a relationship between the highlighted variables was the results of the author's previous qualitative and quantitative analyses, performed on a group of 1014 randomly chosen pedagogy and non-pedagogy students (Cf. Rodek V.: *Stan i uwarunkowania autoedukacji studentów*. Publication pending).

lowing question was posed: *What is the sense of the meaning of life among students demonstrating high, average and low levels of self-education activity?* The condition of resolving the main problem was to formulate more detailed questions, such as:

1. What is the level of the sense of life among students demonstrating high, average and low self-education activity levels?
2. How do students demonstrating high, average and low levels of self-education activity assess the value of their lives?
3. What is the self-esteem of students presenting different levels of self-education activity in terms of: self-acceptation level, sense of freedom, responsibility and control?
4. What is the approach of the respondents with high, average and low self-education activity towards death and suicide?

The research is of exploratory and diagnostic nature and is treated as an introductory phase for a wider analysis, whose main objective would be a quantitative definition of the cause and effect relations as well as correlative connections between the above-mentioned variables. In this study, the estimation method was used (Łobocki M., 2005, pp. 27-32). The self-education activity level was established on the basis of self-education goal achievement level,² included in the research tool constructed by the author – the Self-education Activity Scale (AAS).³ The entire scale consisted of 29 items (categories), assigned in different number to five subscales, referring to cognitive (S_CG), instrumental (S_IN), social (S_SC), biological (S_BI) and spiritual (S_SP) development of a human being. The research participants assessed their own grade of achieving particular self-education goals with a five-grade adjective scale, where grade 1 indicated that a given goal was fulfilled to the lowest degree, and grade 5 value – to the highest degree. The basis for defining a student's self-education activity grade was the overall amount of points obtained by them on the entire scale. The results were duly expressed with the standard ten (men and women separately), according to which 1-4 standard ten results were treated as low; 5-6 as average, and 7-10 as high. On the other hand, to define quantitatively the sense of the meaning of life (or its absence), J.C. Crumbaugh and L.T.Macholicka's Meaning of Life Sense Scale, adapted to the Polish reality by Z. Płużek, was used. The full version of the scale consists of three parts: one quantitative and two qualitative ones. In this study, only the quantitative

² Self-education goals may be defined as constant states of being that are desired by a given individual, which are related to all life aspirations and which result from general perception of the world and place in the world assumed by the individual.

³ Detailed description of the study tool and its standardisation process are included in the paper by Rodek V.: "*Stan i uwarunkowania autoedukacji studentów*" (publication pending).

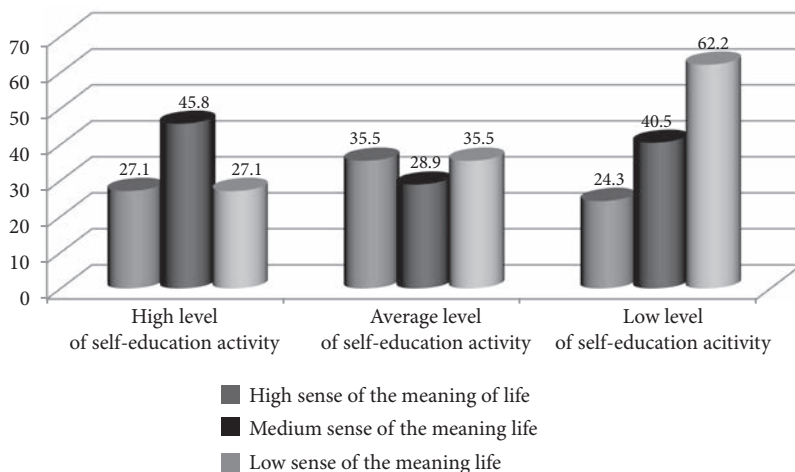
scale was used, regarding four categories of symptoms, determining the meaning of life sense, such as: goal consciousness, value realisation, life affirmation; one's own life assessment, approach towards death and suicide. Thus, the quantitative part consisted of 20 statements. A 7-grade scale referred to each of them, defining the approval intensity presented by research subjects towards a given statement (7 presents the highest approval intensity, whereas 1 – the lowest). The result consisted, therefore, of the total of answers to all the statements. The range of possible results was located between 20 and 140 points, where the higher the result, the stronger the sense of the meaning of life (cf. K.Popielski, 1987a, p.244; T.Borowska, 2003, pp.121-122). The study was conducted in February 2013 at the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology of the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. The study was carried out using a purposive research sample, thus the obtained results do not constitute the basis for defining generalisations regarding all the student population. However, this is a sample for initial recognition of the question of the author's interest, which will be subjected to further, more profound quantitative and qualitative analyses. The research sample was composed of 130 full-time Bachelor's students in the field of Pedagogy. In this sample, women dominated – 89.2% of all the examined students were female, which seems to comply with general trend of feminizing pedagogy studies. The following part of the article presents the results obtained in the study.

Level of the sense of the meaning of life among students demonstrating high, average and low self-education activity

In the first place, the results of the general sense of the meaning of life among students demonstrating different levels of self-education activity are presented in Chart 1.

On the basis of the data presented in Chart 1, it is possible to notice a difference in the sense of the meaning of life among the students presenting high, average and low levels of self-education activity. The least diversified results appeared in the group of respondents with an average level of such activity: a comparable percentage of students showed high, average and low meaning of life levels. Different results were noted, however, in other groups of respondents. Among the students with a high self-education activity level, an average meaning of life sense level was predominant (45.8%), and the same percentage of the respondents with high and low meaning of life sense levels was observed (27.1% of the respondents in each group). On the other hand, the students showing a low self-education activ-

Chart 1. Meaning of life sense level among students demonstrating different self-education activity levels



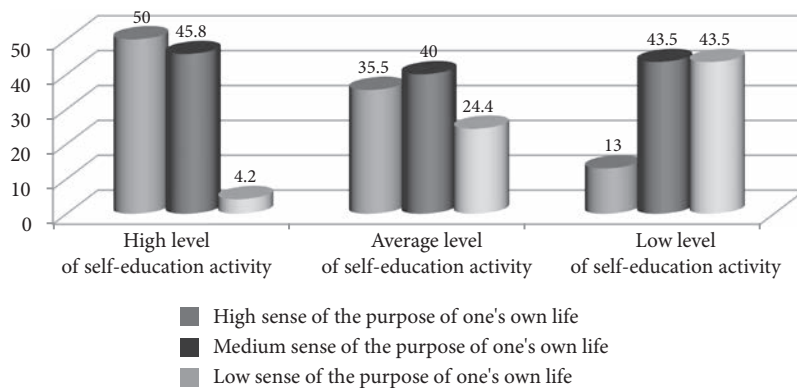
Data in % for N=48 respondents with high, 37 with average and 45 with high levels of self-education activity

Source: own study (AAS and J.C.Crumbaugh's Meaning of Life Sense Scale)

ity level also presented a low meaning of life sense level (62.2% in this group). Additionally, the lowest percentage of the respondents showed a high meaning of life sense level (only 24.3% of all the respondents of the low self-education activity level). Hence, a cautious conclusion may be drawn that there is a relation between self-education activity and the sense of the meaning of life. In order to elaborate on the issue, in the following part of the article the research results concerning detailed components of the meaning of life sense in the group of respondents with different self-education activity levels is presented. Component I regarded assessment of one's sense of life and consisted of 6 statements, which were evaluated by the students by means of a 7-grade scale. The obtained results were transformed into points, the maximum result to obtain was 42 points, the minimum result – 6 points (Chart 2).

The data presented in Chart 2 show that the students presenting a high self-education activity level are characterised by high and average levels of the meaning of life. Few respondents in the group (only 4.2%) demonstrated a low life sense level. Similar results were observed among the students with an average self-education activity level. On the contrary, in the group of respondents declaring a low

Chart 2. Meaning of life sense level among students demonstrating different levels of self-education activity



Data in % for N=48 respondents with high, 37 with average and 45 with high self-education activity levels

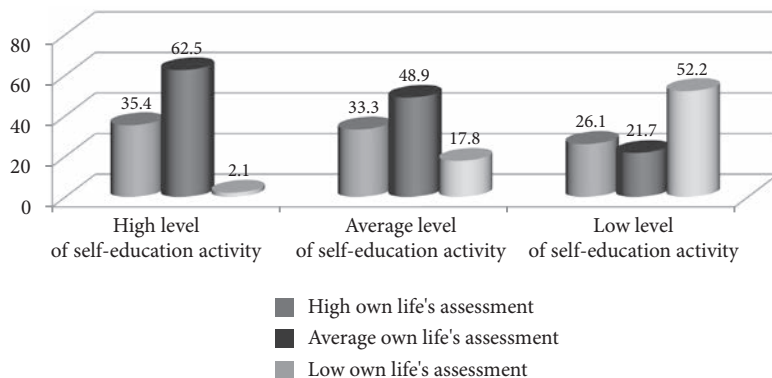
Source: own study (AAS and J.C.Crumbaugh's Meaning of Life Sense Scale)

self-education activity level, the highest percentage accounted for the respondents with low and average levels while the lowest part consisted of the respondents with a high sense of life level. It appears that the component is relevant in terms of an individual's undertaking and course of the self-education process. Inclusion of self-educational objectives, important, creative ones, postponed in time may give meaning to one's life. Research on this subject was conducted by, e.g., Ryszard Klamut, whose results show that the most meaningful is a goal defined by someone as the most important for them, although the importance of particular goals has no influence on the feeling of sense. The author reached a conclusion that it is not the goal importance, but the possibility of achieving it and the engagement in its realisation that have an influence on the feeling of sense as a result of a purposeful activity (Klamut R., 2002, p. 131). In such a context, self-education goals may be sense-forming. However, it is worth attempting to examine how the pursuance of life goals other than personal ones affects an individual's self-education activity.

General sense of the meaning of life depends not only on selected objectives, following the defined values, but also on the balance of present life experience. The positive result of the balance is related with the feeling of satisfaction and happiness. These feelings are some of the components of general life satisfaction which, instantaneously, confirm one's condition in terms of the capability of coping with

life difficulties, about one's adaptation capacities. In this study, the students assessed the value of their life by means of a 7-grade scale. The component consisted of 6 statements, so it was possible to obtain at least 6 points, and 42 points at the most (Chart 3).

Chart 3. One's own life assessment in the group of respondents with different self-education activity levels



Data in % for N=48 respondents with high, 37 with average and 45 with low self-education activity levels

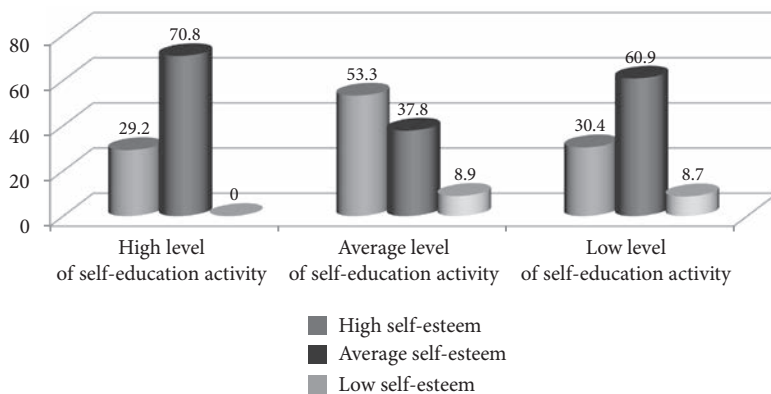
Source: own study (AAS and J.C.Crumbaugh's Meaning of Life Sense Scale)

As results from the above chart, the students demonstrating a high self-education level assessed quite positively the value of their own life. Only a few individuals admitted that their life was of low value (2.1% of the respondents with a high self-education activity level). Slightly lower assessment of their own life value appeared among the students with an average level of activity directed towards self-development. The sense of contentment of the present life has an impact on the optimistic approach towards future and one's own development, it helps overcome the feeling of emptiness, life monotony and disenchantment (Mariański J., 1998, pp. 314-315). Different results were obtained in the last group of respondents 52.2% of the students with a low self-education activity level also assessed negatively the value of their own life, in particular in terms of statements 2, 5 and 11. Life seems sombre and monotonous to them, a question often appears concerning a more profound purpose and meaning of life. Such a pessimistic approach may diminish the motivation to act, also in terms of working on one's own development, confidence in the possibility to pursue self-education goals,

life objectives and it may significantly hinder the proper functioning of a given individual in the world.

The general sense of the meaning of one's existence is related to positive self-esteem, understood as a group of certain judgements of axiological character, which refer to proper "I" by each human. Such judgements and opinions concern emotional, cognitive, intelligence, creativity, motivational development as well as external features and interpersonal relations. (J. Koziellecki, 2002, pp. 77–78). The following chart presents a percentage summary of the respondents' opinions about themselves. This component comprises 6 statements concerning the sense of self-acceptance, freedom, responsibility and control. They were assessed with the use of a 7-grade scale. The respondents could obtain from 6 to 42 points (Chart 4).

Chart 4. Self-esteem of students with different self-education activity levels



Data in % for N=48 respondents with high, 37 with average and 45 with low self-education activity levels

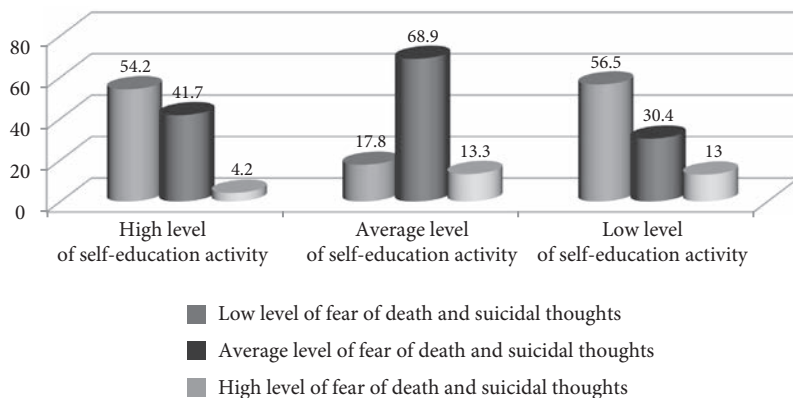
Source: own study (AAS and J.C. Crumbaugh's Meaning of Life Sense Scale)

The data presented in Chart 4 indicate poor differentiation of the results concerning self-esteem of the students demonstrating high, average and low levels of self-education activity. Generally, in the examined population, average and high self-esteem dominated. In the group of students demonstrating a high self-education activity level there was no person with low self-esteem, in other groups a small percentage of respondents with low self-esteem occurred. It may also be noticed that the students with a low self-education activity level scored their sense

of achievement the least, assuming that they direct and control their own life only in a small part. In addition, they admitted that they felt lost in the modern world. A low sense of possibility to control one's own life, constituting a significant element of an individual's sense of subjectivity, may contribute to decreasing the students' sense of life and influence negatively their activity in different life areas, including self-education.

The last component conditioning the meaning of life overall system is the approach towards death and suicide. It comprised only two statements, also those assessed by means of a 7-grade scale. The respondents could obtain 2 at the least, and 14 points at the most (Chart 5).

Chart 5. Approach towards death and suicide by the respondents with different self-education activity levels



Data in % for N=48 respondents with high, 37 with average and 45 with low self-education activity levels

Source: own study (AAS and J.C. Crumbaugh's Meaning of Life Sense Scale)

While analysing the data shown in Chart 5, it can be noticed that the majority of students, regardless of their self-education activity level, have no fear of death and do not think about suicide. Although the lowest level of such a fear appeared in the group of students demonstrating a high level of self-education activity, differences in percentage indicators in comparison with other groups were not significant. It is worth mentioning that among the respondents declaring average self-education activity it was the average level of the fear of death and suicidal thoughts that were predominant. However, the component does not seem to be significant in the self-education process.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that there is a correlation between students' self-education activity and their sense of the meaning of life. It is proved by differences in the sense of the meaning of life among the respondents with high, average and low self-education activity levels. Such differences are most visible in the group of students demonstrating a low level of such an activity. In the analysed group, a low meaning of life sense level was predominant, and a relatively low number of respondents demonstrated a high level of the sense of the meaning of life. More detailed analyses of its components led to the conclusion that the first two: the sense of the meaning of one's own life and assessment of one's life value may be significantly related to the self-education process. The students demonstrating a high self-education activity level simultaneously presented a higher level of the meaning of life as well as life assessment in comparison with the respondents with a low level of self-education activity. The third component of the sense of the meaning of life: self-esteem in terms of self-acceptance, freedom and responsibility seems not relevant for the self-education process. Only in the area of control, the results of the respondents with a low level of self-education activity were much lower than those of the students qualified to other groups. Apart from that, in the study no significant differences in terms of the approach towards death and suicide (the last component) were noticed. In all the groups, among the students demonstrating high, average and low self-education activity levels, it was possible to notice low and average levels of the fear of death and suicidal thoughts. The obtained results seem interesting and worth verifying in further, wider and more profound research on mutual relationships between the self-education process and the sense of the meaning of life.

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