

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEANING IN LIFE
AND OPTIMISM

by

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*may my heart always be open to little
birds who are the secret of living
whatever they sing is better than to know
and if men should not hear them men are old*

*may my mind stroll about hungry
and fearless and thirsty and supple
and even if it's Sunday may i be wrong
for whenever men are right they are not young*

*and may myself do nothing usefully
and love yourself so more than truly
there's never been quite such a fool who could fail
pulling all the sky over him with one smile*

e. e. cummings
Untitled
Selected Poems 1923-1958



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Abstract

For many decades now the emphasis within psychology, psychiatry and related human science fields has been on disease, disorder and deficit. This has been referred to as the disease model (Lampropoulas, 2001) or vulnerability/deficit model (Ickovics & Park, 1998).

In recent times the stirrings of an alternative way of viewing human beings and human functioning is emerging. This new world-view may be referred to as positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology offers a way of viewing people that emphasises the positive in respect of health - both mental and physical - in as much as individuals, inter-personal functioning and groups are concerned. Positive psychology thus serves as an antidote to the traditional emphasis on pathology and deficits. Ickovics and Park (1998) suggest that this change in focus from illness to health represent nothing less than a paradigmatic shift in theoretical psychological thinking.

Several authors (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Strümpfer, 1995; Lightsey, 1996) make reference to diverse aspects of human beings that are thought to function as psychological or, resistance, resources. Typically these resistance resources are thought to help protect the individual against the effects of stressors in life and to have positive consequences for the individual in terms of physical and other areas of health (Antonovsky, 1979). It is this writer's contention that both the constructs of interest in this study, optimism and meaning in life, are just such resistance resources and therefore readily belong to the new, affirming vision of man represented by positive psychology.

This study will add to the empirical data needed to support the emerging science of strength and resilience, thereby assisting to divert psychology from its historical obsession with disease and malaise. Another of the more general aims of this study is to contribute towards the field of salutogenesis by adding new constructs to the existing framework of GRRs and to further understand these constructs. It will also help in encouraging the attitudinal shift that will be necessary to reorient the discipline back to its neglected missions of "making normal people stronger and more productive and making high human potential actual" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 8).

The more specific aim of the study is to investigate the existence of, and nature of, the relationship between two variables, optimism and meaning in life.

The results of the study indicate that a high positive correlation does indeed exist between the two constructs of interest, optimism and meaning in life.

In conclusion, the value of having and maintaining both meaning in life and optimism in life was supported. This and future research into human strengths and psychological resources, as identified by Antonovsky (1979, 1987), Lightsey (1996), and others, serves to deepen and expand our understanding of the roles played by these vitally supportive and succourative factors in human functioning and well-being.



Opsomming

Oor die afgelope paar dekades het die klem in sielkunde, psigiatrie en verwante menslike wetenskappe hoofsaaklik geval op versteurings, tekortkominge en siektes. Persone binne die genoemde velde het hierna verwys as die siekte model (Lampropoulas, 2001) of die tekortkominge/kwesbaarheidsmodel (Ickovics & Park, 1998).

Onlangs het daar egter 'n alternatiewe denkwysse aangaande mense en menslike funksionering die lig gesien. Hierdie nuwe denkwysse word bestempel as positiewe sielkunde (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positiewe sielkunde bied aan ons die geleentheid om te fokus op die positiewe aspekte van individue, interpersoonlike funksionering en groepe, veral sover dit fisiese en verstandelike gesondheid aangaan. Dit is holisties en omvattend van aard en dien ook as 'n teenmiddel vir die tradisionele siening wat fokus op patalogie en tekortkominge. Volgens Ickovics en Park (1998) is die verandering in fokus van siekte na gesondheid verteenwoordigend van niks minder as 'n paradigma verskuiwing in teoretiese sielkundige denkwyses.

Verskeie outeurs (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Strümpfer, 1995; Lightsey, 1996) maak melding van die mens se diverse eienskappe wat in der waarheid beskou kan word as hulpbronne wat weerstand bied. Hierdie bronne word ingespan om die mens te beskerm teen die stressors van die alledaagse lewe. Op die wyse oefen dit dan 'n positiewe invloed uit op die mens se fisiese, maar ook algehele gesondheid (Antonovsky, 1979). In hierdie studie is daar twee konstrunkte van belang; optimisme en betekenis in die lewe. Volgens die skrywer kan beide hierdie konstrunkte gesien word as bronne van weerstand wat vanselfsprekend geplaas kan word binne die nuwe, goedkeurende denkwysse wat positiewe sielkunde aangaande die mens handhaaf.

Hierdie studie sal 'n bydrae lewer tot die empiriese data wat benodig word as ondersteuning vir die ontwikkelende wetenskap wat fokus op die mens se vaardighede en sy vermoë om weerstand te bied. Hierdie bydrae sal ook 'n invloed uitoefen op die verandering van sielkunde se historiese obsessie met siekte en ongesteldheid. Een van die ander algemene doelwitte wat deur die studie nagestreef word, fokus op die bydrae wat dit kan lewer tot die veld van salutogenesis. In die verband poog die skrywer om nuwe konstrunkte te voeg by die bestaande raamwerk

van algemene weerstands-hulpbronne en ook om die konstrukte te begryp. Verder ondersteun dit ook die paradigma verskuiwing wat nodig is om die dissipline terug te neem na sy verwaarloosde missie wat fokus op die bekragting van mense sodat hulle meer produktiewe lewens kan lei, waarin menslike potensiaal geaktualiseer word.

Die meer spesifieke doelwit van die studie fokus op die bestaan en die aard van die verhouding tussen twee konstrukte; optimisme en betekenis in die lewe.

Volgens die resultate van die studie is daar 'n definitiewe positiewe korrelasie tussen die twee konstrukte van belang, naamlik; optimisme en betekenis in die lewe.

Ten slotte, is die waarde van optimisme en betekenis in die lewe deur die bevindinge van die studie ondersteun. Hierdie en toekomstige navorsing aangaande menslike en sielkundige hulpbronne, soos geïdentifiseer deur Antonovsky (1979, 1987), Lightsey (1996) en ander, speel 'n baie belangrike rol in die versterking en uitbreiding van ons begrip aangaande die bydrae wat ondersteunende faktore lewer tot die mens se funksionering en welstand.



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