

## THE SENSE OF LIFE AS A SUBJECTIVE SPIRITUAL HUMAN EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup> Empirical study

Ewa Ryś

### Abstract

*Man's spirituality is part of individual inner experience e.g. awareness of making one's own choices, subjectivity, aspirations, preferred values and their criteria, open-mindedness towards oneself and others, readiness to contradict evil, and striving to realize the purpose of life. The multifaceted construct of SoL embraces: 1) life affirmation, 2) self-acceptance, 3) goal awareness, 4) sense of freedom, 5) valuation of future, and 6) attitude towards death. The objective of my empirical research was to determine the intensity of SoL among students of pedagogy and to establish which components of meaning of life co-condition the level of SoL intensity. Test group : a representative group of pedagogy students at the University of Szczecin: 683 people. The designed SoL test is based on the PIL (Purpose in Life) format- Crumbaugh-Maholick Purpose-in-Life Test. The results of research prove empirical theses stated on the grounds of logotherapy and logotherapy (e.g. about the significance of the attitude towards death for the attitude towards life, and the sense of freedom as a mechanism facilitating transcendence).*

Keywords: *spirituality, sense of meaning in life, logotherapy*

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### Introduction

The spiritual dimension of man covers the person's aptitude to experience freedom and transcendence. The development of this dimension has its roots in axiological motivation. Value experiencing involves intellectual cognition, intuition, and cognition by feelings. Man's spirituality is part of individual inner experience e.g. awareness of making one's own choices, subjectivity, aspirations, preferred values and their criteria, open-mindedness towards oneself and others, readiness to contradict evil, and striving to realize the *purpose of life* (Popielski, 1999, Heszen-Niejodek, 2004). The spiritual dimension manifests itself in one's ability and capacity to define and accomplish their purpose of life. Man as a person is oriented towards making sense of life and to realize all relevant life objectives and tasks. Both, finding purpose of life and experiencing that there is *meaning in life* reflect one's desire to make their life meaningful, in other words their reflect one's search for *the sense life makes* and thus for the *sense of meaning in life* (i.e. **sense of life**, henceforth SoL).

Life can well be seen as an assigned task that man has to do by "finding purpose or meaning in one's own life" (Czeżowski, 1994, pp. 344, 350). A failure to complete the task makes life meaningless. What is more defining the sense of one's own life results in living

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a life that is “a *coherent and meaningful unity*”? Thus defining the SoL is a key to man’s normal functioning. A revealing insight and reflections on SoL offer psychologists and psychiatrists who had personally experienced extreme traumatic situations in which they suffered greatly, were humiliated and their life was threatened. Having experienced the above, some conducted research among people who had had similar experience. Psychiatrist Victor Frankl, a WW2 prisoner of Nazi concentration camps in Auschwitz and Dachau, emphasizes that man is thoroughly filled by the desire to discover meaning which entails striving for the meaning of human existence and of being human as well as helping one another to find SoL (Frankl, 1998, p.309). Similarly psychiatrist and philosopher A. Kępiński, a WW2 prisoner of the concentration camp in Miranda de Ebro, Spain, and later a physician and therapist of former prisoners of Nazi German concentration camps (KL Auschwitz-Birkenau in particular), in his profoundly deep reflections on human nature, argues that the experience of SoL is fundamental for man (Kępiński, 2005). It is the experiencing of SoL that allows man to find his/her reference “point thanks” to which one’s life is not experienced as “a tragic hollowness” (Kępiński, 2001, p. 78). Because of man’s complex and mysterious nature, man tries to fulfill his/her own psycho-physiological and social needs. The establishing of purpose in life plays a most important role in man’s life and crowns one’s needs. Thus Kazimierz Obuchowski calls it a meta-need. The strive towards finding SoL means striving to satisfy one’s need of self-realization, recognition and preserving “face”, i.e. one’s *dignity* (Ryś, 2006). Dignity is inseparable from self-respect that stems from being faithful to one’s own values, responsible for oneself and being oneself (Ingarden, 1998, p. 22, Kotarbiński, 1989, p.28, Kotarbiński, 1986, p. 48, Ossowska, 1985, p. 58).

### Psychological construct of the meaning of life

The multifaceted construct of SoL embraces: 1) life affirmation, 2) self- acceptance, 3) goal awareness, 4) sense of freedom, 5) valuation of future, and 6) attitude towards death (Cekiera, 1994, p.188).

**Life affirmation** refers to love of life, a desire and drive to live. The word *affirmation* comes from Latin *afirmatio* and covers confirmation, agreement, consensus, approval, and recognition (Kopaliński, 1997, p.34). Life affirmation means acceptance of one’s own existence or life with what it entails. It hopefully leads to self-affirmation and overcomes SoL questioning (Stróżewski, 2005, p. 78).

**Self-affirmation** can be discussed in terms of ontic *self-affirmation* which is relatively jeopardized by fate and absolutely and eventually by death and *spiritual self-affirmation* relatively jeopardized by hollowness and absolutely by meaninglessness or senselessness, and *moral self-affirmation* relatively threatened by a sense of guilt and absolutely by sensing condemnation (Tillich, 1994, p. 47).

**Self-acceptance** is a most important regulative construct relevant to one’s concept of one’s own ego. It reflects a general evaluation of oneself, which determines the relation of a person to the self (Reykowski, 1982, p. 794). It plays an important role in maintaining one’s emotional balance and is among factors that condition man’s social functioning. Self-acceptance stems from a person’s self-reference in all personal dimensions. In the physical dimension it addresses e.g. one’s appearance or/and gender. In the psychological dimension it refers to one’s intellectual and emotional growth. In the social dimension it

covers relations with other people. In the spiritual dimension it addresses basic personal attributes, including one's ability to reason, self-awareness, self-identity and continuity or subjectivity (being the perpetrator), freedom and intentionality, responsibility, creativity (transcendence), dignity, intimacy, and privacy (the self entity and ability to make decisions about oneself) (Gasiul, 2006, pp. 382, 384). Self-acceptance directly relates to the image of oneself. The image embraces one's *experience of one's own physical and spiritual structure* or composition (Reykowski, 1982, p. 791).

**Goals and aspirations** are part of the *future vision of oneself* which relates to experiencing self esteem and SoL (Zaleski, 1989). They help design adequate strategies and support both self-mobilization and self-control. One's independence in setting goals feeds the feeling of one's inner self-steering, freedom and autonomy. Goal-setting also helps one to take responsibility for oneself and pursue informed actions adequate to goal achieving. It is a source of hope in hard situations. Goals and aspirations relate to the cognitive and emotional spheres of a person: they influence one's reasoning efficiency, the process of learning and memorizing (both positively and negatively) and one's ability to act (Yerkes-Dodson laws). They are basic categories that structure the knowledge about oneself and other people, and are superior to personality characteristics (skills and mental qualities).

**The basis for goals and aspirations** are values one recognizes and accepts. Life goals relate to what is important to people, what they desire and try to accomplish. Achieving goals translates into getting closer to achieving a state a person values. Man primarily values *his own experience*, own individual state of a subject evaluating his/her condition (the well-being of one's body), *relations with others* (the goodness of relations), *relations with non-human objects* or with people not perceived as individuals (the goodness of relations with environment) (Grzegorzczuk, 2003, p.54-55), and *relations with an entire reality*. In general, people value what they sense is positive and directly relevant to them, what relates to the states of other people and results from empathy, understanding the other, and being able to see themselves in the other's situation. People also value, however indirectly, what relates to their knowledge and imagination and conditions or gives rise to direct responses or feelings generated by appreciation/recognition of others' states or conditions.

Following M. Scheler's theory, one can distinguish two felt/sensed states, i.e. vitally valuable and spiritually valuable (*ibid.*). **Vitally valuable states** relate strongly to actions oriented toward the experienced condition of one's body, i.e. survival of the body, its health, strength, rest, fitness and satisfaction (Grzegorzczuk, 1995). They are accompanied by the lack of pain sensation and a sensation of abundance of pleasure. Thus vitally valuable states are the basis for emotional- reactive regulation of human behavior in terms of life stability and expansion (Grzegorzczuk, 2003, p 59). The emotional-reactive regulation feeds the tendency to exercise extreme behaviors. When it dominates one's pattern of actions, it usually proves the person's immaturity as it relates to a low reference to the intellectual sphere. It is in the intellectual sphere where one interprets reality and oneself as the perpetrator of an action (Ryś, Mausch, 2007). The constitution of man, thanks to its nature, makes man not only live a life of physical and emotional sensations. As Victor Frankl writes "man does not want to live at all cost, but what he really wants is to live meaningfully" (Frankl, 1998).

Seeking SoL in vital values, though connected with experiencing sensual pleasures, is quite risky. It is risky because it is a restricted search domain which lacks the option or

potential of transcending into the world of spiritual values. It is risky because it lacks experiencing freedom.

**Spiritually valuable states** relate to the realization of esthetic values, i.e. goodness, truth and sacred values. Those values can be experienced through direct sensation of *cognition* (Grzegorzczuk, 2003, p. 73). In this way cognition can stipulate searching and defining one's purpose in life. Spiritually valuable states are also experiences of *self-control*, inner *harmony and order* of thoughts and actions, in other words - cohesion of reasoning and acting. Those experiences are accompanied by the sense of self-dignity. A person experiences spiritually valuable states also while implementing *values* that bring a special dimension to *interpersonal relations*.

Referring to those values and their implementation one can mention the concept of justice, respect for human rights and caring for the wellness of others. Implementation of the above helps build relationships based on equality, respect and kindness. The spiritual regulation of behavior is accomplished by *contemplation, creativity and bearing witness* (*ibid.* p. 72). In consequence of having and realizing needs and goals, a person experiences happiness. Thus goals appear to be a factor conducive to happiness (Czapiński, 2005, p.253).

**Freedom** is interpreted as (Galarewicz, 1992): *independence, creativity, choice, self-determination, value*.

Man as a being furnished with spirituality is able to think in both causative and prospective ways, to transgress and transcend and make himself an object of his own reflection. These properties make man try to understand and explain facts, phenomena, and processes observed in himself and the environment. Living their lives, man becomes aware of the passage of time and temporality his existence (Makselon, 1990, p. 30).

Gradually a person becomes aware of what can happen to him or her during their lifetime and starts asking not only *how to live* but also *what will happen later, what awaits me, what happens after death?* Confronting such situations reveals not only uncertainty of one's very existence but also ambivalence of human existence (Makselon, 1990, p. 30). The ambiguity of life and self valuation stems from the person's seeing and thinking about their fragility, limitations of lifetime and fate to die and, on the other hand, from thinking that man does not *fully* die, is destined to permanently grow and that the laws of matter (e.g. death) do not apply to the spiritual sphere.

An individual having thought out the above issues and found his emotional attitude towards them has a starting point to construct his *sense of the meaning of life* which is **regulative** and it conditions: (i) behavior stability, (ii) individual's autonomy that shows in self-distancing from biological, psychological and social dimensions and in self-reference to spiritual values of higher order while facing problems (e.g. to sacred values of saints or laymen, to the truth, goodness, beauty), (iii) independence from the environment, (iv) growth and creativity (transgression and transcendence), and (v) the actual experience of meaningfulness and strength in dealing with crisis or hard situations (Lech, 1982, pp. 17-18).

The intensity of SoL is associated with a range of somatic alignments. Spiritual-noetic disorders (lowered SoL) are accompanied by somatic disorders, what confirms the thesis about the bio-psycho-socio-spiritual unity of man's personality (Mausch, 2007).

## Research: students' sense of meaning of life

The objective of my empirical research was to determine the intensity of SoL among students of pedagogy and to establish which components of meaning of life co-condition the level of **SoL intensity**.

Test group: a representative group of pedagogy students at the University of Szczecin: 683 people: females - 91%, males - 9%; average age: 25 years.

### Main research question:

*What relations hold between levels of experiencing the sense of meaning in life and attitudes towards components of the meaning of life?*

### Detailed research questions:

1. *What intensity levels of the sense of meaning in life do the students of pedagogy declare?*
2. *What attitudes toward the meaning of life components do the students have?*
3. *What statistically valid relations between attitudes towards the meaning of life components and intensity levels of the sense of meaning in life hold in the test group?*

### Hypothesis:

*There is a high statistic dependence between the intensity level of the sense of meaning in life and attitudes towards death and freedom experience.<sup>2</sup>*

### Research method

The designed SoL test is based on the PIL (Purpose in Life) format. The test consists of 20 statements, each of which is rated on a 7-point scale. Respondents rated statements on the scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement, 4 indicating a neutral stand, and 7 indicating strong agreement.

Total scores can range from 20 (low) to 140 (high). Normal, healthy persons score above 100 and high scores are those above 111. Clinical groups score under 100, e.g. persons who attempted suicide score 66, drug addicts score 77 and alcoholics 95 (Cekiera, 1994, p. 188).

### Results<sup>3</sup>

- 1) **Average score** of in the test group was **109.5** (threshold score of well-being)
- 2) 23% experienced a very high level of SoL (121-140 points)
- 3) 31% a high level (111 – 120 points)
- 4) 22% a lower level (101-110 points)
- 5) 24% a low level (up to 100 points)

<sup>2</sup> The hypothesis was established on the basis of the SoL research conducted earlier among 382 teachers in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, Poland. Statistical analyses proved that there is a high statistical dependence between the intensity level of SoL and attitudes toward death and freedom experience (Ryś 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Programs for statistical calculations were developed by B. Gębski from the Institute of Sociological Research Methods and Techniques of the University of Szczecin. Programs in C++ language were compiled with the aid of BORLAND compiler. The calculations were conducted using PC IBM Pentium IV 4.5.

Interactions between variables: the level of intensity of experiencing the sense of the meaning in life and attitude toward its components, i.e. 1) life affirmation, 2) self-acceptance, 3) goal awareness, 4) experiencing the sense of freedom, 5) positive future valuation, 6) attitude towards death.<sup>4</sup>

Among respondents who experience very high, high and lowered levels of SoL, 100% affirm their life whereas among respondents (24%) whose SoL level is low (up to 100 points), 61% affirm life highly, 30% have an ambivalent attitude toward it and 9% have a negative attitude. Among people who experience very high and high levels of SoL, 100% have a high **self-acceptance** level. Of respondents who experience lowered SoL, 91 % have a high self-acceptance level and 9% have low self-acceptance. Among respondents who experience low intensity of the sense of life 53% have a high level of self-acceptance, 33% have an ambivalent attitude to self-acceptance and 14% lacked self-acceptance.

Among respondents who experience a very high level of SoL, 99% have a strong **awareness of a goal in life** and 1% have an ambivalent attitude. Among people experiencing a high level of the sense of life, 98% have a strong awareness of their goal in life and 2% have an ambivalent attitude. Of respondents who experience a decreased level of the sense in life, 95% have high awareness of their goal in life, 4 % have an ambivalent attitude and 1% have a low awareness of having a goal in life. Among respondents who experience low intensity of the sense life makes, 50% have high awareness of their goal, 38% have an ambivalent attitude and 12% have low awareness of a goal in their life.

Among respondents who experience a very high level of SoL, 99% have a high **sense of freedom** and 1% have an ambivalent attitude to it. Among people who experience a high level of SoL, 96% attribute high sense to freedom and 4% have an ambivalent feeling about it. Among respondents with a lowered level of SoL, 82% value freedom highly, 16% have ambivalent feelings and 2% have a low sense of freedom. Of respondents who experience a low level of SoL, 42% experience and value freedom highly, 16% have an ambivalent attitude and 20% have little positive experience of freedom.

Among people who experience a very high level of SoL, 100% have a positive **attitude towards future**. 99% of respondents who experience high and lowered levels of SoL have a positive attitude towards future and 1% have an ambivalent attitude. Among respondents who experience a low level of SoL, 82% have a positive attitude towards future, 14% feel ambivalent about it and 4% have a negative attitude.

Among respondents who experience a very high level of SoL, 84% have a positive **attitude towards death**, 13% have an ambivalent attitude and 3% have a negative attitude. Of respondents who experience a high level of SoL, 63% have a positive attitude towards death, 31% an ambivalent attitude and 6% a negative one. Among respondents with a lowered level of SoL, 48% have a positive attitude toward death, 32% have an ambivalent attitude and 20% a negative attitude. Among respondents experiencing a low level of SoL, 31% have a positive attitude towards death, 38% an ambivalent attitude and 31% a negative attitude towards death.

<sup>4</sup> Scores of 5-7 points proved a positive attitude toward a dimension of SoL, 4 points – an ambivalent attitude, 1-3 points negative a attitude toward certain spheres of life.

## Summary of results

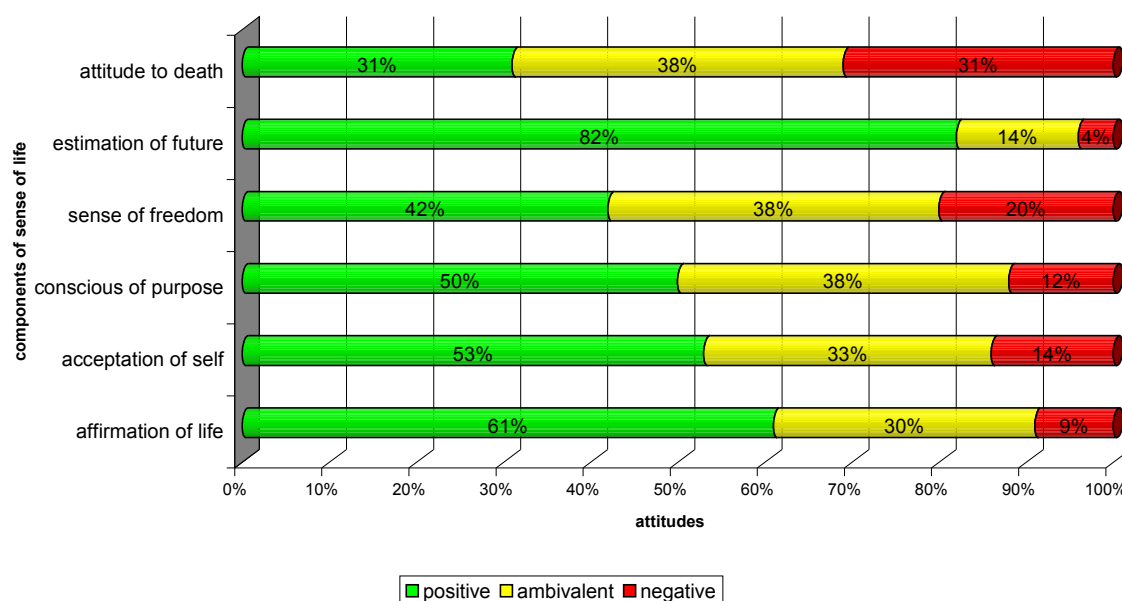
1) Persons who experience a very high level of the sense of meaning in life may have spiritual problems reflected in a negative attitude towards death, i.e. 13% have an ambivalent attitude towards death and 3% a negative one (Fig. 4).

2) Persons who experience a high intensity of SoL have more spiritual problems with their attitude towards death, i.e. 31% have an ambivalent attitude and 6% a negative one (Fig. 3).

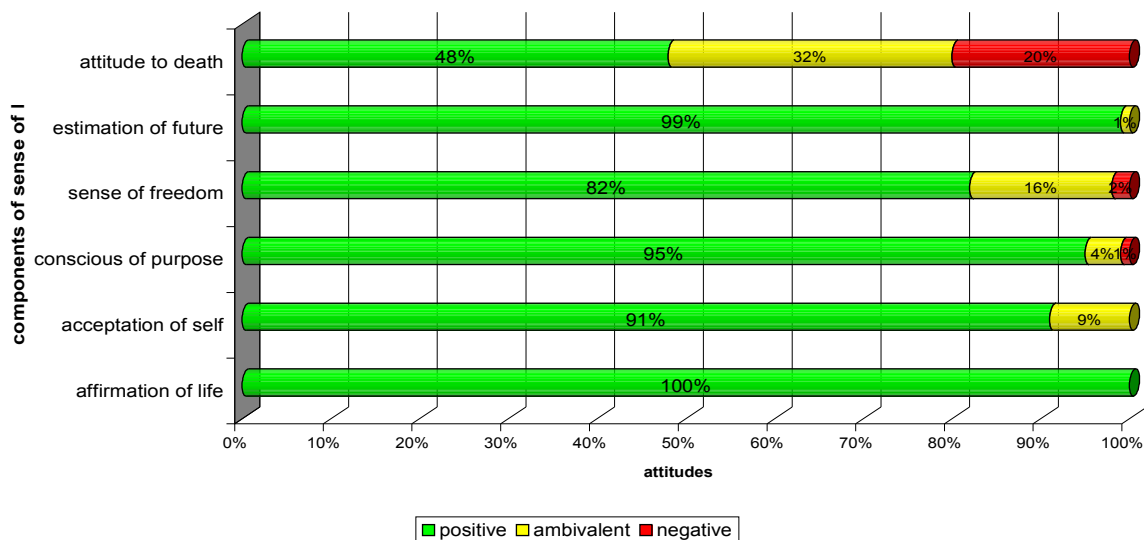
3) Persons who experience a lowered level of intensity of SoL have spiritual problems concerning their attitudes to (i) death, i.e. 32% of them have an ambivalent attitude and 20% a negative one, (ii) freedom, i.e. 16% are ambivalent about the value of freedom in their life and 2% lack a sense of freedom), (iii) the goal in life, i.e. 4% have an ambivalent awareness of a goal and 1% have no awareness, (iv) self-acceptance, i.e. 9% have an ambivalent attitude to self-acceptance (Fig. 2).

4) Persons who experience a low level of intensity of SoL have spiritual problems concerning their attitudes to (i) death, i.e. 38% have an ambivalent attitude and 31% a negative attitude), (ii) freedom, i.e. 38% have an ambivalent attitude and 20% lack a sense of freedom, (iii) goal in life, i.e. 4% have ambivalent awareness and 12% lack the awareness of a goal), (iv) self- acceptance, i.e. 33% have ambivalent self-acceptance and 14% low self- acceptance, (v) life affirmation, i.e. 30% have an ambivalent attitude towards the affirmation of life and in 9% life affirmation is low, (vi) future valuation, i.e. 14% have an ambivalent attitude to a positive valuation of future and 4% attribute a negative value to future (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Low level of sense of meaning of life  
and components of sense of life



**Fig. 2. Lowered level of sense of meaning of life and components of sense of life**



**Fig. 3. High level of sense of meaning of life and components of sense of life**

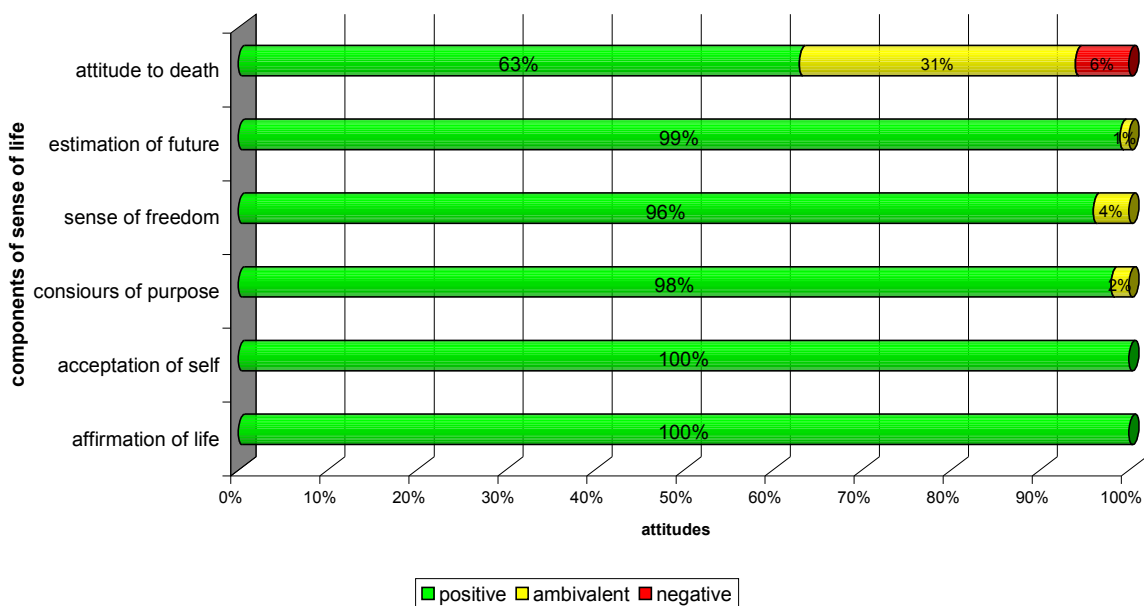
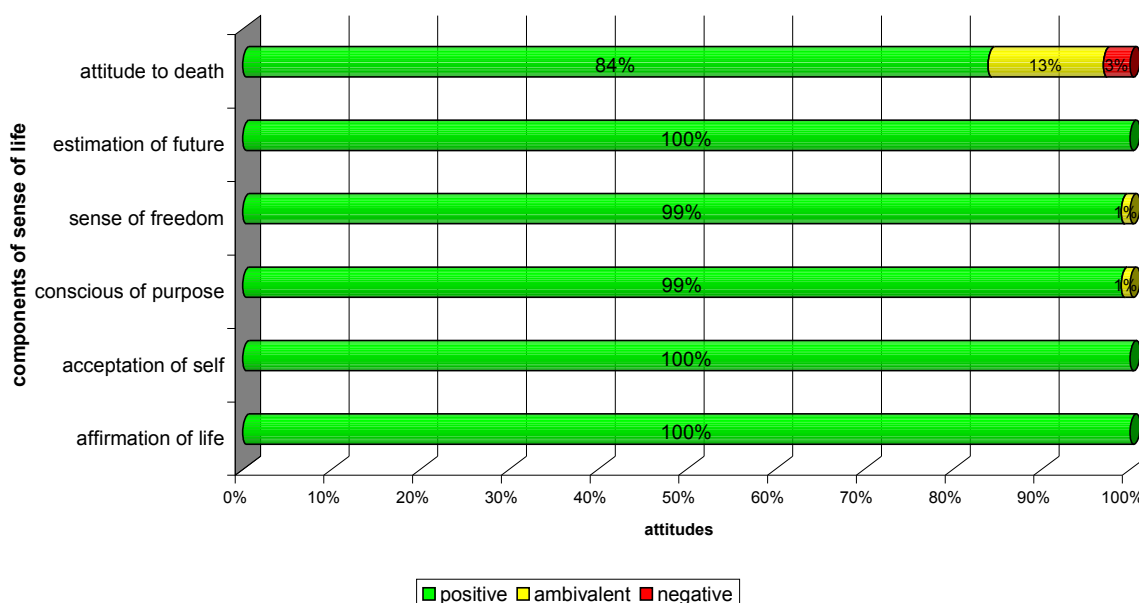


Fig. 4. Very high level of sense of meaning of life and attitude to components of sense of life



The results show **dependence between the intensity level of the sense of meaning in life and particular spheres of life**, i.e. affirmation of life, awareness of goal, experience of freedom, valuation of freedom, and attitude towards death.

Statistical analyses have demonstrated that there is (i) a medium statistical dependence between the intensity level of experiencing the sense of meaning in life and the affirmation of life, self-acceptance, goal awareness, and valuation of future, (ii) a **strong statistical dependence** between the **intensity level of the sense of meaning in life** and (a) **the sense of freedom** (Hellwig = 0.501) and (b) **attitude towards death** (Hellwig = 0.504).

The statistical analyses of statistically highly important interactions between the intensity level of the sense of meaning in life and the sense of freedom and the attitude toward death revealed also that:

- the higher the level of the experienced **sense of freedom**, the higher the positive attitude towards death (Góralski, 1974, p. 31) where  $h$  for the sense of freedom variable = 0.484 and for the attitude towards death variable = 0.856)<sup>5</sup>;
- among people with a high sense of freedom, 62% had a positive attitude towards death, 26% had an ambivalent attitude and 20% had a negative attitude towards death;
- among people with an ambivalent sense of freedom, 39% had a positive attitude towards death, 41% an ambivalent attitude and 20% a negative attitude towards death;
- among people with a low sense of freedom, 29% had a positive attitude towards death, 41% had an ambivalent attitude and 34% a negative attitude towards death (Fig. 11).

<sup>5</sup> Góralski's classification index of relative dispersion: 
$$h = \frac{2}{k-1} \sum_{j=2}^k j-1 \cdot C_{[j]} \quad (\text{Góralski 1974, p. 31})$$

Results of my research correspond to PIL research results of Popielski as they confirm the importance of the sense of freedom and a positive attitude towards death to the intensity level of experiencing the sense of meaning in life and Borowska's (1998, p.125) results which demonstrated that Polish students' average score was 108.9 and that 23% of tested students had a low intensity level of PIL (compared to 2% of Swedish students who experienced the same intensity level) and 27.6% of Polish students experienced a low level feeling of the sense in life (14.9% of Swedish students).

### Interpretation of the results

The results of my research prove empirical theses stated on the grounds of logotherapy and logotherapy (e.g. about the significance of the attitude towards death for the attitude towards life, and the sense of freedom as a mechanism facilitating transcendence). The lack of the sense of freedom inhibits acts of transgression and transcendence and thus is a mechanism that blocks one from living in the world of spiritual and sacred values. To discover the sense of one's own existence, one has to overcome his limitations and search for values that refer to and define his or her destiny or vocation (Ryś, 2006, p.170). The lack of experiencing freedom is a factor important in defining one's attitude towards death. The fear of death is overcome by relating to values, God, the Absolute. Many agree that in life the most important areas for an individual include one's most secret feelings, direct relations with other people, main occupation and having an attitude towards existential problems like death, failure, conflict and isolation (Mausch, 2006, p. 92).

One's low level ability to overcome the fear of death can be linked to the now prevailing cultural model of taming the death (Ostrowska, 2005, Hinc, Jaworski, 2005). This model is mostly associated with abandonment of faith, secularization of culture and characteristic for this attitude prioritizing of individualism, youth and vitality, consumerism, urbanization or progress in medicine. Modern patterns of spatial development have moved cemeteries from centers of towns to suburbia. In small nuclear families one hardly witnesses aging and dying. Death comes in special institutions, i.e. retirement houses, hospitals and hospices that isolate death from family life. Modern medicine provides life saving and supporting techniques like resuscitation and reanimation and redefines the borders between life and death (Ryś, Mausch, 2006). The above distorts the perception of death as a natural and ultimate phenomenon. Instead, an illusion of hope to cheat the death is offered (*ibid*.p.33).

Modern peoples' attention is diverted from dying and death, the notions of which are being eradicated from people's consciousness. This results in a paradoxical attitude of modern civilization towards life and death. There is no place for natural death. There is hardly a space for death that is treated as something embarrassing, unpleasant, and very personal. Instead modern civilization dazzles its participants with death due to tragedies, accidents and catastrophes. This distorted image of unreal, virtual death is propagated in news, movies or computer games where death has become a part of a game (Hinc, Jaworski, 2005). Indifference to this image of death translates into death being a taboo of modern culture or a new pornography that needs censorship (Ostrowska, 2005, p. 27).

Consequently death can not be domesticated as it is an unknown, hidden, negative phenomenon. It increasingly gives rise to anxiety, dread, fear and an urgent need to escape from thinking about it. Life events are interpreted as senseless and incidental.

Difficulties a person faces assigning importance to those experiences cause anxiety, dread and fear, and physical and mental suffering (Mausch, 2007a, p. 31; Mausch, 2000; Mausch, 2007 b). According to Fromm, modern times have created feelings like loneliness, being lost and lack of sense of freedom, all of which increase the fear of death. An interesting point of view was presented by A. Kępiński who differentiated the following kinds of fear: biological, social, moral, and disintegrating, which all come down to the fear of death that is the background against which man lives (Mausch, Ryś, in print 2008; Mausch, 2007c; Mausch, 2007d). The pace of modern life strongly contributes to decreasing one's stamina and immunity. This gives rise to fears. That is why the man of today experiences a stronger fear of death and tries to overcome it by developing defensive mechanisms. Tillich writes that the fear of death is an existential fear and the one that is most basic, universal and unavoidable (Tillich, 1994, p.48). It stems from threats to one's physical and spiritual existence and is born by the increasing risk of illnesses, suffering, weakness, and accidents in both physical and spiritual spheres (Mausch, 2007a).

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**About author:** Dr Ewa Ryś, Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology, University of Szczecin, Poland. Interests: spirituality and social work.

**Contact:**

email: [rys.ewa@op.pl](mailto:rys.ewa@op.pl)

address: Uniwersytet Szczeciński, Instytut Pedagogiki i Psychologii, 71-343 Szczecin, ul Ogińskiego 16/17, Polska.

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