

THE SENSE OF COHERENCE AS THE FACTOR DETERMINING PROGRESS OF LIFE SKILLS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S HEALTH

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Abstract: *The modern interpretation of health pays the attention to the range of individual responsibility for health. Among the factors which are favourable to elevate the health potential the life style is emphasized and within it the life skills which let the individual to cope with everyday problems and build up the positive social relations. In this context it is worthy to draw the attention to the sense of coherence as the component of personality including three elements: sense of comprehensibility, sense of manageability and sense of meaningfulness. On the base of the analysis of biographies of social activists the contents range of elements of their sense of coherence was described. The analysis shows a number of their life skills which can facilitate their potential of health.*

Key words: *potential of health, life skills, sense of coherence, social action*

The sense of coherence and life skills as favourable resources for human's health

The tendency for positive understanding of health connects with attention paid to its meaning for coping with everyday life problems but not solely with disease which becomes only one of the difficult situations a man struggles during lifetime with. Dynamic expression of health — as the potential of adaptation abilities of an organism to environment's requirements; those abilities let the individual to keep the balance between him/her and environment's requirements (Tobiasz-Adamczyk 2000, p. 23) — caused inter alia the increase in interest of possibilities of health enhancement and not only its protection. Health enhancement binds with building-up its resources and health protection with prevention of risk factors and diseases. Among direct conditions of health main groups of factors are enumerated. These are: biological predispositions, environmental factors, health care and life style. Among them the meaning of life style is emphasised but the attention is paid to its integration with the other factors (Kowalski, Gawel 2007, p. 121; Woynarowska 2008, pp. 44-45). This trend of thinking about health is connected

with attributing the responsibility for health (the own one and the society an individual lives in) to an individual. However, taking responsibility demands the special predispositions such as knowledge and skills which let to take activities proper for health in an intentional way.

Among the subjective health determinants most of all is underlined the meaning of: knowledge, health convictions and expectations, habits and attitudes connected with health, life skills (socio-psychological) and instrumental skills connected with care of health (Woynarowska 2008, pp. 103-106; Kowalski, Gawel 2007, pp. 114-115). These classifications mostly pay the attention to cognitive and behavioural determinants. At the same time emotional-motivating determinants are closely connected with them. They make some kind of 'drive' which forces an individual to take the activities which are in accordance with his/her beliefs. The determinants mentioned above make exactly the range of individual's personal resources which can be used in process of coping with everyday life problems.

Among the health determinants great meaning is paid to life skills. Life skills are defined as "skills (ability) which enable an individual positive adaptation behaviour which lets effectively to cope with tasks and challenges of everyday life" (Sokołowska 2008, p. 444). These skills serve in different ways. They let to reach life which gives satisfaction. They let an individual to know himself/herself. They help in solving the problems. They decide about aware management of decisions, choices and acts of an individual. They are also the condition of good and satisfying relations with other people. They help to create favourable conditions for engagement into social life, coping on the job market. They also help to protect and improve health, including the decrease of frequency of risky behaviour (Sokołowska 2008, Woynarowska 2001; Woynarowska 2002). This term was described mostly for health education of children and youth with the aim of giving them better possibilities to cope with different difficult situations, including many addictions. With the passing of time this term started to be used in health promotion in wider meaning.

In the literature we can find many different classifications of life skills. This differentiation was dictated by recognition that some of the functions were superior to the others. Hence, the first division done by WHO took into consideration the specificity of health problems and its prophylaxis among children and youth. Two groups were distinguished: skills basing for everyday life and special skills creating favourable conditions for managing the risk of health (Woynarowska, 2001). By contrast, in UNICEF document from 2000 there are five groups of life skills (Woynarowska 2001, Sokołowska 2008):

1. interpersonal skills (empathy, active listening, verbal and nonverbal communication, assertiveness, honesty, negotiation, solving the conflicts, cooperation, group work, relations and cooperation within community);
2. skill of awareness building-up (self-esteem, identification of strong and weak points, positive thinking, building-up the positive picture of person and body);
3. skill of creating of own value system (understanding of different social norms, beliefs and cultures, tolerance, creating of own values, attitudes and behaviours, countermeasures against stereotypes and discrimination, working for law, responsibility and social justice);
4. skill of taking the decisions (critical and creative thinking, solving the problems,

identification of risk for themselves and others, looking for alternatives, getting information and evaluation of its value, predicting of consequences of own activities, determining the goals);

5. skill of managing and coping with stress (self-control, time management, pressure, fear and difficult situations management, searching for help).

Whereas in WHO document from 2003 are mentioned only three groups of life skills (Sokołowska 2008):

1. communication and interpersonal skills (verbal and nonverbal communication, assertiveness, empathy, cooperation, advocacy);
2. taking the decisions and critical thinking (information getting, evaluation of the solution and its consequences, analysis of values and attitude influence on motivation and action);
3. self-management (building-up of self-esteem, self-consciousness, goals determining, management of emotions, coping with stress).

Both of these classifications pay the attention to the so-called basic life skills, which enable solving different difficult situations which arise during everyday life. Therefore they include range of indispensable sources which are to a considerable degree cognitive-instrumental. It seems, after all, it doesn't run out process of coping with difficult situations during the lifetime.

More and more research on dispositions favourable for better coping with difficult life situations has come out recently. In the beginning the research was about to find the best model of risky behaviour prevention. That model should have been grounded on improving of personal traits. Currently the goal is to look for the personality which helps to reach good physical and mental state and personal life success (Kowalski, Gawel 2007, p. 141). In psychology of health the attention is paid to many personal and social resources which could help to cope with different difficult situations. Among personal resources we can find: formal traits of personality linked with temper, characteristics of 'I' structure (inter alia self-acceptance, self-esteem, sense of identity, sense of (personal) agency, sense of control location, optimism, sense of coherence), life competences including cognitive, emotional and social ones. While among social resources the role of social support is stressed (Heszen, Sęk 2007, pp. 161-171). Among the trends of modern research in psychology of health particularly dominate these dedicated to coping with stress. In that research attention is paid to subjective conditions including cognitive, personal and instrumental factors which enable coping with stressful situations (Heszen, Sęk 2007, pp. 142-159).

Both personal and social resources favour building of health potential, what means building of range of psychological dispositions which help to cope with difficult life situations. The salutogenetic conception of A. Antonovsky refers to this trend (Antonovsky 2005; Heszen, Sęk 2007, pp. 76-89). This sociologist assumed in his theory that the normal state of functioning for a man is state of unsteady (fragile) balance. A man constantly meets different stressing stimuli in life which he/she must struggle with. An individual's reaction is to adapt to requirements of surrounding and keep the dynamic balance of life processes on certain optimal level. The level of health depends on the

skill of meeting the internal and external requirements. It also depends on the ability to keep the balance and limit the state of entropy or, at least, its negative influence on organism. The level of man's health depends on cooperation of a few factors: generalised resistance resources, stressors, sense of coherence, life style and behaviour. In author's understanding generalised resistance resources mean individual's characteristics and traits of socio-cultural surrounding which help in coping with stressors. They could be compared to personal and social resources described above in the paper. On the other hand the stressors in the concept of salutogenesis indicate internal and/or external requirements for which the individual has not ready and automatic reactions. And because of this the state of tension arises within an individual. The stressors, however, can play negative threatening role and also positive one, which favours progress and health. Concerning the life style the attention is mostly paid to behaviour which enables progress of immunological resources and sense of coherence. The last element is the main factor which, according to Antonovsky, helps man's health.

The sense of coherence it is "global human orientation expressing degree in which this man has got dominating, lasting, although dynamic, sense of certainty that (1) stimuli coming during lifetime from internal and external environment have structured, predictable and explainable character; (2) the resources which let him/her to meet the requirements done by these stimuli are available; (3) these requirements are for him/her the challenge worthy of effort and engagement" (Antonovsky 2005, p. 34). The sense of coherence includes three elements closely connected to each other. These are: sense of comprehensibility, sense of manageability and sense of meaningfulness. Sense of comprehensibility has got a cognitive character. Thanks to that a man sees coming but also predictable stimuli as cognitively sensible, understandable, consistent and organised. Sense of manageability has got a cognitive-instrumental character. Thanks to that a man sees available stimuli — both his/her as these ones which are in the surrounding — as sufficient to meet the requirements. It means he/she feels he/she can manage in a certain situation. In turn sense of meaningfulness has got emotionally-motivating character and it describes to which degree a man sees life situations as sensible, being the challenge worthy of effort and engagement. According to Antonovsky the latest element plays the superior role. It holds the other elements together; when it is strong the others are also increasing (Antonovsky 2005, pp. 32-37; Heszen, Sęk 2007, p. 82). Sense of coherence is a personal variable similarly as some part of immunological resources but it is isolated because of that reason its character is more complicated. And to great degree sense of coherence decides about the extent of usage separate resources for taking certain activities to cope with requirements which are met by the internal and external stimuli. Sense of coherence gives the individual some global orientation in the world. It has got a cognitive structure, hence, it makes a system of beliefs thanks to which a man knows about relations in the world, about himself/herself and also about the resources which are available for him/her. It also encourages a man for taking the activity — on base of available resources — which let him/her to meet the requirements. We can acknowledge that sense of coherence constitutes peculiar complex element of personality which enables a man to manage in difficult life situations and in this way to keep him/her healthy and progressing.

Therefore it can be perceived some relation between sense of coherence and life

skills as the basic resource which an individual possesses. The skills distinguished and described above have, to great degree, cognitive character. They let to determine both the variables concerning of own person (process of self-knowledge and building-up of self-awareness), and knowing and understanding other people and environment and also the prediction of the consequences of actions done by an individual and others. The skills have also got the instrumentally-behavioural character because they let to take the decision about the direction of action, about the choice of the most suitable way of managing, limitation of fear and stress. Finally, they have social character because they let to build and keep personal relations. So their range is very wide and in this way they play a special role in process of coping with certain problem situations during the lifetime. However, possessing of such skills it is not enough to manage the life problems. The ability to change and adjust them to the particular situation is necessary.

It is worthy here to take a stance to the process of managing or coping with the difficult life situations itself. According to H. Şek, coping with critical life events means “complex and dynamically changing group of psychological processes and actions heading to shape new ways of meeting the requirements and achieving the goals in the situation when internal and external requirements essential for an individual cause mental strain and the state of disturbing of individual’s adaptive resources” (Şek 1991, p. 34). The resources possessed by a man can in this way appear insufficient to cope with requirements in a difficult life situation. They can require the transformation, changes or looking for a new ways of coping in a creative way. But in this process a certain factor is needed which let a man to merge these processes and integrate them and include into the current structure of own life activity. It seems that precisely the sense of coherence — as generalised life orientation, which let a man to realise about himself/herself and his/her relations with surrounding — could be that factor bringing together the processes of using many life skills during the struggle with difficult life situations.

The relation of sense of coherence and life skills – the analysis of life’s stories

The interest in a connection of life skills and sense of coherence was conceived during the research on the meaning of social activity taken by the regional activists for their self-development. The qualitative analysis of their biographies have showed many interesting relations and have also given a rise to the question about the superior argument of giving the meaning to the activity taken for self-development in regional association.

The present paper is the part of a wider research. And its goal wasn’t describing the degree of sense of coherence of the activists but the contents range of separate elements of their sense of coherence paying the special attention to the connection of developing and using life skills in coping with difficult life situations. The analysis included 14 biographies of social activists undertaking the social activity in regional associations in Silesia (Poland). The stories of their life concentrate on course and meaning of social activity during the lifetime. But simultaneously show the whole life experience within the most important areas of their life activity. The biography analysis was taken within the life stories, including: content and narrative analysis. The content analysis of col-

lected material was taken in the context of distinguishing the categories describing the elements of sense of coherence which were shown by A. Antonovsky. The next step of analysis was to determine the range of life skills which are used by the participants of the research in different everyday life situations.

To distinguish categories which describe separate elements of the sense of coherence firstly the definitional properties, pointed out by Antonovsky, were used. Next, based on 'mapping sentence', which was procedure for making the research tool for him (Antonovsky 2005, pp. 80-83), single questions from SOC-29 (Life Orientation Questionnaire) were analysed. It was done in order to isolate and name separate categories which characterise the elements of the sense of coherence. Then, the stories of the examined people were analysed to point out the separate categories which describe the elements of the sense of coherence. And these elements were analysed in content range concerning the kinds and ways of using different life skills.

The sense of coherence has got global character and constitute kind of flexible orientation. Which means it isn't reaction for the specific situation but rather the predisposition for some ways of behaviour in many situations concerning different areas of life activity. The description of separate elements of the sense of coherence is rather general, to be used for research in differentiated social and cultural groups, but in case of the individuals it takes on diverse exemplifications. In the presented paper the specification of these categories in people's experience becomes the goal. The most important conclusions are shown below.

Sense of comprehensibility seems to be the initial element in the description of own life for the examined activists. In their stories appear following categories of this element of the sense of coherence: the evaluation of own life in the context of arrangement, clarity and predictability, the evaluation of own behaviour in unknown situation, the evaluation of own skill of solving difficult problems (the choice of solution), the evaluation of own emotions — in the context of their clarity, mark, degree of approval, especially those emotions which are unwanted and mixed (ambiguous), the evaluation of own skill of appropriate evaluation of events and situations and the evaluation of being understood by others. All these categories concern three time perspectives: past, present and future.

Sense of comprehensibility has got the cognitive character and in case of presented stories expresses itself in a shape of some tendency for analysis own life situation the most often in a wider socio-cultural context. The analysis of own situation bases on looking for an explanation of life situation. Whereby, in the most number of cases there is the tendency to the widest explanation taking into consideration factors which concern own person, other people and different points of view. Examined people try to describe the norms, values or rules which are the base of some activities or situations in which they occurred. They try to identify the factors which have an impact on situation and explain their meaning and predict the consequences. Even in situations which they evaluate as personally unfavourable, they try to recognise and explain their sources and reasons. The described tendency is connected with using different ways of getting information and acquire knowledge. The need of improving knowledge in different areas is strongly emphasised by examined people. The need of prediction of the consequences of activities (taken personally or in a group) is also very well visible in the told stories.

In process of explanation of life situations examined people pay the attention to different strategies of critical thinking. Considering the emotional reactions the cognitive attitude is connected firstly with auto-reflection and self-awareness of own feelings, with the ability to name them and analyse them. This tendency can be found in most of the cases but in different range. Taking into consideration the identification of solving the difficult situations people's reactions are the most often connected with looking for the different possibilities of actions. Generally sense of comprehensibility in the told stories is the most often expressed as attitude of reflection and auto-reflection taking into account different points of view.

Looking at described kind of activities taken by examined people we can notice that they concern following categories of life skills distinguished by UNICEF, which I've already mentioned (Sokołowska 2008, p. 445): building-up of self-consciousness, building-up of the own system of values, taking the decisions. Outlined sort of activities, however, goes beyond described categories.

The next element of the sense of coherence, which is sense of manageability, combines closely with sense of comprehensibility. It forms with general evaluation of possibilities of using different external and internal resources to cope with difficult situations. In stories of the activists we can point out the following categories of this element: optimistic point of view; the evaluation of own skill of overcoming troubles in important areas of life, the evaluation of own skill of coping with negative emotions, the evaluation of influence of external situations on own life and emotions; the evaluation of own emotional attitude to unpleasant situations, the evaluation of the sense of being unjustly treated by others, the evaluation of possibility of relying on others, balance of the sense of being the loser or the winner in different life situations. The described categories also concern mostly all three time perspectives.

Sense of manageability has got instrumentally-behavioural character because it is connected with taking the certain activities to find the solution of problematic situation. But it bases on cognitive analysis of this situation, hence the base here are skills about which I have mentioned during the description of sense of comprehensibility. The starting point of action is in this case understanding of the situation and the place a man takes within it. Generally in the analysis of the stories told by the activists we can see the picture of a man as a person who can manage in different situations. In the stories appeared the descriptions of different difficult situations. Characteristic were those stories in which critical events (sometimes even very traumatic) were described. Those events were changing their life situations, were evoking strong negative emotions and feeling of strain. Very often they caused the sense of harm and injustice. But it is very important that in the perspective of story such a traumatic event from the past were evaluated in the wider context. Examined people noticed their wide context, differentiated factors influencing the whole situation and their place within it. They also noticed many different consequences including the positive ones. This approach to show wide context of events indicates the aspiration to sense of comprehensibility. In turn, the description of process of coping with traumatic events itself indicates that examined people looked for the different possibilities to solve the problems. Temporary breakdowns or inability to act were overcome in the different ways. The most often it was connected with: looking for the support in environment and getting it; looking for possibilities for independent action or

with others, another interpretation of situation. Sometimes the strategy was waiting for the end or the change of external conditions and/or the change of way of thinking about the situation. There were many used strategies. Generally the participants of research showed active attitude in difficult situation. It means they looked for the personal resources but also external ones which could help to find the solution in a certain situation. Except this, in coping strategies described by examined people we can see the tendency for analysing the situation, for identifying the risk and consequences of the certain acts for the activists and other people. We can also find optimistic but at the same time quite realistic attitude to ability of meeting the requirements. It is quite interesting fact that examined people describe many negative feelings which accompanying these situations, also the defeats. However, they point out the ways of coping with these emotions, mostly cognitive ones. These are for example: the change of interpretation of situation, downgrading the meaning of emotions, new goals. At the same time the optimistic attitude to own abilities for managing in different life situations is connected with seeing own failures and successes and analysing them. Many activists pointed out the need to develop the ability to manage not only the failures but also the successes what has got emotional results too. The very common way of coping with emotional consequences of difficult situations is for the examined activists the concentration rather on further goals of act but not only on the results which are at the exact moment. Activists described also many difficult situations relating to the interpersonal relationships. In the such cases solving was connected with shaping the interpersonal skills, especially the skill of listening, empathy, communication, assertiveness, negotiation and cooperation.

Relating the described kind of skills used by the examined activists in the context of sense of manageability we can notice they concern following categories of life skills: taking the decisions, coping and managing stress, building-up of self-awareness and interpersonal skills. Separate actions, which are mentioned in these categories, are after all connected to each other.

Summing up it is worthy to emphasize the categories connected with sense of meaningfulness. According to A. Antonovsky, it is the element of the sense of coherence which plays the dominating role in giving the direction and meaning to the other components. The significance of sense of meaningfulness is very well seen in the stories of the examined activists. The following categories of this element can be shown: the evaluation of own life as interesting and engaging, the evaluation of everyday activities and occupations as giving satisfaction and happiness, establishing own goals and aspirations (from the closest to distant ones), the evaluation of own interest in things around, the evaluation of own activities as meaningful and intentional, the general evaluation of own life in the context of meaning and goal. Also all these categories appear in all time perspectives.

Sense of meaningfulness has motivating character, hence, it plays such a crucial role. Seeing own activities in categories of interest, goal and meaning causes that a man has got a motivation to act and so to cope with troubles. The starting point of the described categories can be taken the tendency to see own life situations as arousing the interest. They are treated as an adventure, some challenge. The important area of taken activities described by the participants of research were life goals. It is typical for the stories that social activity which they take is seen by them as something what gives the

meaning to life. A few people were describing their goals in this area in the context of a calling or a mission. All of examined people described many social goals. The next important area of activity was building-up of own hierarchy of values and following it within acting. In this hierarchy the social goals took very important place. The whole was also connected with seeing the relation between value and meaning of taken activities and building-up of the picture of own person. For the participants crucial meaning of taken acts was connected with two the most important motives: serving the others and leaving some own tracks. Both motives indicate the need of giving the meaning to own life. It is the principal category which motivates an adult to take activities, especially the social ones. Generally, sense of meaningfulness was expressed in the stories in some tendency to shape and give continuity to own life. The life goals orient their life activity on confessed values. During the lifetime we set some stable direction of life engagement, it is connected with looking for own place in the world and aspiration for self-description. In the case of the examined activists the leading area of their life activity and engagement was social activity for their town (place). The remaining areas of activity were concentrated around it. With this area they also bind the meaning of own existence, seeing the value of own person through the prism of realised tasks. Sense of meaningfulness, therefore, outlines the direction of done outcome of life.

Describing the range of life skills as part of sense of meaningfulness on the base of the stories it is possible to show that they come from the following categories: building-up of the own system of values; taking the decisions, building-up of self-awareness. It seems, however, described skills needed in building of sense of meaningfulness definitely go beyond the skills pointed out within the frame of life skills conception.

Based on the analysis of the regional activists' stories I described the range of the most important life skills which were used by examined people in course of coping with everyday life situations. The range of such skills differentiated the individual biographies. I tried to get the attention to the most important ones. Each of elements of sense of coherence connected with specific life skills belonging to all described previously categories. Only little differences in range among examined people occurred. So we can come to a conclusion that solving different problems of everyday life is always connected to the need of using diverse life skills. It is hardly possible to point out the specific pattern. Essential seems to be the fact that in whole biography (especially in cases of summing up the whole life) some regularity can be perceived. The skills used in specific situations are to some degree submitted to tendency to giving the sense and order to own life. It is also the tendency to unite own life as a certain whole. Just this tendency finds the expression in sense of meaningfulness, which becomes crucial category of the own life's description.

Summary

Positive expression of health concerns to wide understood well-being and quality of human's life. Among the dimensions of psychological well-being the attention is paid to self-acceptance, personal development, autonomy, life goal, environment-control and positive relations with other people (Ryff, Singer 2005). The characteristic of these dimensions shows a number of personal and social resources which can be in

favourable for individual's well-being and health. Among them many life skills can be pointed out.

Based on the analysis showed above I tried to described the content range of separate elements of the sense of coherence and their degree of 'saturation' of life skills which are described in the literature. The examined activists use in their life experience many life skills and they overcome everyday problems with the use of them. The attention is paid, however, to an aspiration (common for all of them) to give the sense to life, to sort out the telling story in the direction connected with higher goals and engagement to fulfil the aims. The appealing to the sense of coherence category lets to interpret these life stories as some general life orientation orientated towards realization of superior values and goals. The author of salutogenesis pays the attention that sense of meaningfulness is the core category for understanding of the sense of coherence because this term organizes the whole past experience and anticipates definite order of reality and in such a case the sense of happiness and satisfaction.

This way of thinking is confirmed by the research on connection of psychical well-being and health. The challenges linked with 'engaged life' and struggle with them constitute the core of individual's sense of happiness. They are the fundamental elements of health and quality of life (Ryff, Singer 2005). People, who are engaged in some areas of the reality, even if it causes the trouble, have the sense of satisfaction because of this reason. They are generally more happy and satisfied with themselves and life. Engagement, treating the difficult situations as the challenges, establishing goals and looking for the meaning are the indicators describing sense of meaningfulness according to Antonovsky. Research on connection of the sense of coherence and life satisfaction shows that "the higher is subjective sense of meaningfulness of taken activities the stronger is conviction about resourcefulness and acting" (Sitarczyk 2006, p. 297). The other words, if we feel that our acting has got meaning, at that time it is easier for us to take the challenge, struggle with trouble and look forward into the future with hope. Sense of meaningfulness giving the direction and value to life can simultaneously release the tendency for looking for better ways of coping with life difficulties. In a way it is possible to acknowledge that the sense of coherence could make one of crucial conditions developing and using life skills in process of coping with troubles of everyday life. The essential role in this process plays the sense of meaningfulness. The analysis of this connection demands, however, further research.

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SOUZNĚNÍ JAKO FAKTOR URČUJÍCÍ VÝVOJ ŽIVOTNÍCH DOVEDNOSTÍ V SOUVISLOSTI S LIDSKÝM ZDRAVÍM

Abstrakt: Moderní výklad zdraví zdůrazňuje míru zodpovědnosti jednotlivce za zdraví. Mezi faktory, které zvyšují zdravý potenciál patří životní styl v rámci životních zkušeností, což napomáhá jedinci zvládat každodenní problémy a umožňuje budovat si pozitivní sociální vztahy. V těchto souvislostech je nezbytné se zaměřit na souznění jako součást osobnosti čítající tyto tři faktory: porozumění, řízení a smysluplnost. Na základě rozboru životopisů sociálních aktivistů byla popsána míra jejich zastoupení. Z analýzy vyplývá množství životních zkušeností zúčastněných ve výzkumu, což může pomoci jejich zdraví.

Klíčová slova: potenciál zdraví, životní zkušenost, souznění, sociální aktivity