



Exploration of existential meaning in qualitative interviews and discussion groups with old people

Fried S and Heimonen S

Helsinki, Finland

8th International Conference on Cultural Gerontology

12.4.2014

Meaning in Old Age (RAY 2011–2014)

- Knowledge and Tools for Supporting the Psychological Well-Being of Older People

Meaning in Old Age – A Summary

- Encourage old persons to participate in reflection about mental well-being (workshops)
- Produce material to support the strengthening of mental well-being (guide)
- Develop a discussion group process (guide and training for supervisors)
- Disseminate and implement logotherapeutic approach in dementia care (training for care workers)

Defining meaning

- Implicit or definitional meaning refers to
 - Personal significance
 - Assigning or structuring meaning
 - *Meaning of experience*
- Existential meaning or meaningfulness
 - Attempt to understand the larger context of life
 - Process of creation and discovery
 - *Experience of meaning*
- Reker & Chamberlain 2000

Will to meaning over the life-span

- Continuous process
- Changing circumstances
- Shifting value orientation
- Renewed aspirations
- Reker & Chamberlain 2000

Discussion groups

- Three discussion groups:
 - early stages of dementia
 - family caregivers and
 - persons with a general sense of meaninglessness
- Ten meetings, closed groups
- Independent work between meetings
 - Questions for reflection
 - A journal for taking notes

The Bridge of Mental Well-Being



Exploration of meaning

Descriptions of
meaning: interviews



```
graph TD; A[Descriptions of meaning: interviews] --> B[Meaningfulness and vulnerability; process of finding, discovering and creating: discussion groups]; B --> C[Conclusions];
```

Meaningfulness and
vulnerability; process of
finding, discovering and
creating: discussion groups

Conclusions

Conclusions

- Meaning in life relevant to large proportion of old people, some struggle with it
- Contingent and existential aspects of ageing
 - Baars & Phillipson 2013
- Working with existential meaning supports living with the existential, unavoidable issues of ageing
- Participants in groups showed resilience – process of enduring difficulties, recovering from them, and growth

Key references

- Reker G & Chamberlain K (eds.) (2000) Exploring existential meaning. Optimizing human development across the life span. SAGE.
- Baars, Dohmen, Grenier & Phillipson (eds.) (2013) Ageing, meaning and social structure. Connecting critical and humanistic gerontology. Bristol: Policy Press.
- E.g. Dannefer & Lin (2013) Commentary: contingent ageing, naturalisation and some rays of intellectual hope, 181–195.
- Wong & Fry (eds.) (1998) The Human quest for meaning.
- Wong (ed.) (2012) The Human quest for meaning. 2. edition.

Thank you!



suvi.fried@ikainstituutti.fi