

"Sense of Life and Happiness Index of Young Collateral Victims of Violence in Mexico"

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Summary

The objective of this study was to observe whether the violent death of relatives of the young high school graduates surveyed is related to the meaning of life, the existential emptiness and happiness index.

The research was carried out using the quantitative method. A descriptive and exploratory study was carried out by means an analysis of means. A total of 983 high school students were surveyed in the State of Sinaloa, Mexico.

The results showed that those who have close relatives who died as victims of violence have a lower sense of life and also have a greater existential emptiness and a lower happiness index than those who do not have a family member who died as a victim of violence.

Additionally, a high degree of students could have a suicidal tendency due to the existential emptiness they present. The happiness index of the young people surveyed is moderately high.

Keywords: Young people, violent death of family members, meaning of life, existential emptiness, happiness index

1. Background

The following is a discussion of some theoretical supports on the meaning of life, existential emptiness and happiness index, the school as an axiological educator, as well as some relevant aspects of the social context in which the high school students of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa develop.

1.1. Sense of life and existential emptiness

In the modern era, man has been losing his traditions, which fulfilled the mission of counterbalancing his behavior. He no longer possesses the traditions that indicated socially accepted behaviors; sometimes he even ignores what he would like to do (Frankl, 2004).

The construct "meaning of life" for Frankl (1979), is the concrete meaning of the life of each individual at a given time. The meaning of life differs from person to person and is dynamic for the same person, that is, it changes from one stage to another. Specifically, the person must seek an answer to his or her life, seek the meaning of his or her life, to find it and not to invent it; the person cannot simply give meaning to his or her life, but he must take it from it (Frankl, 1994). Frankl himself (1979) also named "existential emptiness" the absence of the meaning of life. And later, Frankl (2004) stated that the only therapy that works for existential emptiness is to give meaning to this existential emptiness, and that this emptiness manifests itself mainly in a state of tedium (boredom).

In addition, Frankl (1994) argues that the human being, upon becoming aware of his being in the world, will discover that he has the task of taking charge, in the first place, of his own life. On the one hand, there are those who consider a project to define their own existence, while, for others, it is the anguish of feeling thrown into a world under the weight of a life they did not choose. Therefore, the human being has the responsibility to take charge of his own life.

While for Fabry (1968, p. 14; cited by Velasco, 2004), the meaning of life is the search for a definition, a purpose, a destiny, a mission, and therefore, he poses the following complementary questions: How do I define myself? What are my objectives? Where am I heading? And finally, what should I do?

For his part, Rogers (1993) states that during various stages individuals ask themselves questions about the purpose of their lives, sometimes with a serene and meditative attitude, sometimes in uncertainty or despair. There are questions that individuals must ask and answer for themselves.

Rogers himself (1993) points out three characteristics of the process that identify the fully functioning person: a greater openness to experience, a tendency to existential living, and a greater trust in the organism. These three characteristics are integrated into the tendency toward full functioning, from which the following implications emerge: freedom, creativity, the basic trustworthiness of human nature and the greater richness of life. The result of this fusion is a fluid, dynamic, creative and courageous person.

Continuing with Rogers (1993), existential living means living each moment fully, in the here and now, considering each instant as unrepeatable. Mutual presence between human beings is called "being with each other".

Moreover, only between beings of the same nature can "being with" be given in a complete way. Things are not understood, they are explained; whereas human beings can understand each other (Frankl, 1994).

On the other hand, Ochoa (2016, p. 82), refers to Camus (2012, p. 68) who argues that judging whether or not life is worth living is the fundamental duty of philosophy. Noting that the individual feels like a foreigner in a world that ceases to be everyday and familiar to him. And here appears the overwhelming disappointment in the world and the hopelessness of an unrealizable aspiration for a familiar, livable world.

In addition, Ochoa (2016, p. 83) quotes Camus, who states that through dreams one seeks to find an answer that manages to save the meaning of life and combat the absurd feeling that besieges it. The concept of dream is understood as that which Camus understands as the longings and illusions that the individual constructs to face reality. Nietzsche and Camus speak of the term "absurd existence" when conceiving life as an unbearable, useless and unnecessary burden (Ochoa, 2016, p.79).

Ochoa (2016, p. 86) himself expresses that dreams have given individuals reasons to live, but they have only one true test to pass: the test of real. Some may never transform the world, but, as long as they are not devoured by the real, they will have meaning. Their impotence for the realization of their dreams places them before a hopelessness that throws them into the jaws of pessimism.

But all is not over, there is hope. As a response mechanism to the hopelessness that man faces, Camus (2012, p. 75; cited by Ochoa, 2016, p. 86) proposes that the aesthetic remedy can save him. The aesthetic contemplation, which makes the dreamer of the world reveals it in all its amplitude. It is no longer necessary to deny the world as such so that my sufferings can disappear, because they are faced from the dream that gives meaning to life, without the need for it to be real. A new representation can save man: the aesthetic vision of all existence.

1.2. Happiness index

According to the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy, happiness is a state of pleasant spiritual and physical satisfaction.

While Diener (2013) argues that subjective well-being or psychological well-being is equivalent to being happy and refers to people's affective and cognitive evaluation of their own lives.

For his part, Saavedra (2020) states that happiness corresponds to the area of psychology linked to positive health. Emotions such as happiness, contentment or enjoyment expand the repertoire thought-action of people at a given moment, therefore, they constitute more lasting personal resources and would serve to prevent and treat problems rooted in negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression or others related to stress.

On the other hand, according to Thivissen (2018), the path to happiness seems to have two directions: avoiding discomfort and achieving a purpose, a meaning in life. Hence, in the same author points out that happiness and sense of life are two intertwined constructs and describes four characteristics of the meaning of life: significance –feeling that what is carried out matters-, belonging -feeling that one has a place in the world-, coherence -what happens in life is harmonious and congruent-, and orientation -knowing the values and objectives that one defends-; mentioned that other authors also include generosity -creating something beneficial for later generations-.

In relation to the measurement of happiness, Saavedra (2020) states that the Happiness Report conducted by the United Nations General Assembly uses two questions to estimate happiness in the countries ("Overall, all things considered, how happy would you consider yourself to be?"; and "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole at present?" Hence, happiness can be measured and constituted as an indicator of development social.

1.3. School and axiological formation

In the prevailing reality in the 21st century, it is observable that primary socialization (in the family) and secondary socialization (initially at school) are being carried out with external forces that are very different from those of yesteryear. It is quite possible that in the formal school takes for granted that their students come axiologically prepared from the family to live in a healthily way in the classroom and that families (given the scarce family socialization) are delegating axiological training to teachers. This circle of linkage seems to be open and that both social entities have not found a point where they agree that both have the responsibility to promote values: at home and at school. This task is neither exclusive to the family or the school, that is to say, it belongs to both.

To complement the above, reference is made to Lafarga (2013), who argues that it is necessary to rethink the educational system and suggest an education that includes feelings, affections, attitudes and values based on respect and transparency. Although the same author states that more than talking about values, emphasis should be placed at school on putting values in daily life through the example of teachers, managers and administrative staff of educational institutions. This situation coincides with that expressed by Velasco (2004), when he states that the educational task should promote emotional, axiological and transcendental formation, since they are very relevant aspects of a human being. And in this task, according to Cobos (2009), the figure of the teacher is fundamental since, in the development of education in values, the teacher's belief system influences the shaping of values and therefore the behavior of his students.

An integral education cannot leave aside the human aspect of learning by learning knowledge, relying more and more on the use of technologies, it must go further in the formation of individuals who understand the reasons for their existence and who know how to discern what is what is important in their lives in order to coexist healthily with other individuals to whom the world also belongs. In this way, society will be able to have more useful and healthy citizens (Velasco, 2004).

As Velasco himself (2004) expresses in conclusion in his master's thesis "I have the firm human and professional conviction that it is through educational actions that we can best influence the process of becoming healthy and useful people". The same author mentions that the sense of life of adolescents will be strongly influenced and shaped by the perceptions and evaluations they make of themselves and the environment around them, while the educational task should promote emotional, axiological and transcendental formation, since they are very relevant aspects of a human being.

1.4. Social contextualization of high school students from Sinaloa

Although drug trafficking has very diverse economic, political and social impacts, one of the most terrifying is the wave of violence that it generates with the large number of deaths that are attributed to the relationship with this activity. Ayala (2016) states that violent death, under any circumstances, is heartbreaking. From the experience of death there are painful internalizations in individuals that accompany forever the life of citizens: uprooting, insecurity, distrust, nostalgia, helplessness, anguish, among others, configuring from there part of the individual and collective existential problem. How can one live like this in our communities? Asks the author, perhaps expecting an answer from some of his readers.

Ayala (2016) states that Mexico, and especially the state of Sinaloa, where he is originally from, is experiencing the barbarity of violence with its specific nuances that cause collective pain and despair unknown until today, crossed by an experience of death whose patent shrouds despair, resentment and uncertainty as conditions that take hold in memory and predisposes to more violence.

Related to the above, Angulo (2016, p.58), expresses that it is unsustainable that, in huge sectors of the population, in entire communities, *fear exists as a way of life*. This fear, undoubtedly, is an element that paralyzes society to go in search of solutions to this social problem, where drug trafficking seems to be winning the war and the culture of death is something *normal* for society in general and for the government itself, which seems to have no solution to this phenomenon.

To address the above social effects from the academic trench, it is pertinent to quote the following question posed by Ayala (2016 A): How to open this world to change, to a guideline that gives another ethical sense to life, changing the morality of the disenchantment for a world of hope? In view of this, he proposes: to combat poverty as a source of violent dynamics in peripheral communities and to promote a culture of non-violence that contains nodal aspects of citizen attention for prevention and value formation.

Additionally, the same Ayala (2016), in view of the previous Sinaloan reality, suggests that we must add to the philosophical work an apex of ethical horizon and then we will be able to offer from our intellectual sphere the security that our existence requires, put in question by the marginalization and barbarism of the contemporary world, but still possible to be rescued.

2. Problem Statement

Researchers Zazueta and Pardini (2011), state that pressured by a materialistic culture rooted in certain social groups in the State of Sinaloa, students could be losing interest in being formally educated in school.

However, it is common knowledge that in the State of Sinaloa the violent death of its citizens has marked thousands of homes over the years, so that young people can be considered as collateral victims of violence, since death from a close relative can mark their lives from childhood or youth for the rest of their existence.

In view of the above problem, the idea was to carry out this research to identify the perceptions that high school students have about themselves, the meaning of their lives and their degree of happiness. With the objective of observing possible differences and similarities, the research contemplated two study groups: students who do not have family members who have died violently and those who have family members who has lost their lives in a violent manner.

2.1. Research questions

With the development of this research, the following questions were answered:

1. Is there any relationship between the "death-marked" family history of high school students and the meaning of their lives?
2. Is there any relationship between the "death-marked" family history of high school students and existential emptiness?
3. Is there any relationship between the "death-marked" family history of high school students and the self-perceived happiness?

3. Methodology

This research was carried out using the quantitative method, a descriptive and exploratory study was performed by means of an analysis of means.

Pearson's correlation was used to observe possible relationships between variables.

3.1. Design and application of the research tool

To carry out this research, a research instrument was designed to collect information on constructs such as sense of life, existential emptiness and happiness index. Items were elaborated with Likert-type responses, supported by various authors such as: Frankl (2004), Rogers (1993), Lafarga (2013), among others. Data were collected on demographic variables such as: sex, age and school level. An item was asked to find out if the respondent had direct relatives who had died as a result of the wave of violence in Sinaloa and Mexico as a whole.

The sample was selected randomly, without the application of a statistical formula, trying to survey, in their classroom, face to face, the largest number of students who were willing to participate in the research. The survey was applied without the presence of a teacher, to a total of 983 high school students at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa, Mexico.

With regard to the gender variable, the sample of students surveyed was made up of women with 54.9% (540 participants) while men accounted for 45.1% (443 participants).

Regarding the age of the respondents, the variability of years completed is between 15 and 19.

The present research was conducted between May and July 2019.

4. Results and discussion

The results of this research are presented below:

Important dimensions in the life of the individual

In carrying out this research, a tool was developed in which items related to the following important dimensions in the life of an individual were located:

- Sense of life
- Existential emptiness
- Self-perception of happiness

4.1.1. Sense of life

To evaluate the *sense of life* dimension, two items (5 and 10) were proposed. In the tabulation of the responses to item 5: "I feel that the life I am living is worth living," it was observed that 14.7% of respondents who have relatives who have died violently disagree with the expression, while 10.3% of those who do not have relatives who died in the wave of violence disagreed with it.

Regarding the responses to item 10: "I have many dreams and I have set out to achieve some goals in the coming years", it was noted that 6.7% of respondents without family members who have died violently expressed disagreement with the expression, while 4.8% of those who do not have a family that has died violently expressed disagreement with it.

When correlating both items related to the *sense of life* of the respondents, in the total sample of N=983, a Pearson correlation of 0.293** was presented (Significant at the 0.01 level). This indicates that the greater the value of life for the individual, the greater will be the illusions to draw dreams and goals to achieve them in the future.

The above results show the negative impact of the death of family members on the sense of life of the respondents.

4.1.2. Existential emptiness

Three items (1, 6 and 11) were used to evaluate the *existential emptiness* dimension. In the tabulation of the responses to item 1: "My life is a disaster. It would have been better not to have been born" it was observed that 5.7% of the respondents with family members who died violently agree to some degree with the expression, while 3.7% of those who have not suffered the violent death of a family member agreed with it.

Regarding item 6: "Sometimes I would prefer to be dead", the tabulation of the responses showed that 13.8% of the respondents with family members who have died violently expressed some degree of agreement with the expression, while 8.8% of those who do not have a family member who has died violently expressed agreement with the same item. Additionally, in item 11: "Sometimes I feel that my life is tedious and boring", it was observed that 42.7% of the respondents who have relatives killed by violence expressed some degree of agreement with the expression, while a 38.1% of those who do not have relatives killed by violence expressed some degree of agreement with the statement.

4.1.3. Self-perception of happiness

Three items (2,7 and 12) were proposed to evaluate the dimension *self-perception of happiness*. In the tabulation of the responses to item 2: "I consider that at this moment in my life I am very happy", it was observed that 82.7% of the respondents without family members who died violently expressed some degree of agreement with the expression, while 76.8% % of those who have relatives who died violently expressed that they have some degree of agreement with the expression.

On the other hand, in item 7: "I feel that in the future I will be immensely happy", it was observed that 90.5% of the respondents who do not have family members who have died violently stated that they agree to some degree with the expression, while the 89.5% of those who have relatives who have died violently expressed agreement with the expression.

Finally, in item 12: "I think that in the past I was happier than at this moment in my life", it was noted that 45.5% of the respondents with family members who have died violently said that they agree to some degree with the expression, while 38.1% of those who do not have relatives who have died violently expressed agreement with the statement.

When contrasting the results of the 3 previous items, it can be observed that death is tarnishing the happiness of the people surveyed, since those who have a family member who has died as a victim of the violence that plagues Sinaloa's society have a lower degree of happiness than those who do not have family members who are victims of violence.

The results of item 12 show that the respondents were happier in the past than they are today, which could indicate that the young respondents consider this to be the case because in that past their deceased relatives were still alive.

5. Conclusions

The following are the conclusions of this research based on the results.

- I. Having family members who have died violently has a negative impact on the *sense of life* of Sinaloa's high school students.
- II. Having family members who have died violently has a negative impact on the *existential emptiness* of Sinaloa's high school students.
- III. Having relatives who have died violently has a negative impact on the *happiness index* of Sinaloa's high school students.

- IV. A high number of students (13.8% and 8.8%) could have suicidal tendencies, according to the responses to the item "Sometimes I would rather be dead".
- V. In addition, a high percentage of students has a tedious and boring life (42.7% and 38.1%), which is alarming, since the age of the sample ranges between 15 and 19 years.
- VI. The degree of happiness of high school students is moderately high (82.7% and 76.8%).

6. Recommendations

The following are some strategic recommendations to be implemented in high schools in the State of Sinaloa, Mexico, with the objective of promoting values, increasing the sense of life and happiness index and reducing existential emptiness:

- I. With the support of the Educational Guidance Department in Sinaloa's high schools, implement a daily test to evaluate existential emptiness, sense of life and happiness index at the beginning of the school year for all students, with the objective of detecting warning poles and attending them with professionalism and timeliness.
- II. That in the same test the collateral victims of the wave of violence in Sinaloa (students with family members who have died violently) be identified and given special treatment to counteract the effects of death on their sense of life, existential emptiness and happiness index.
- III. That workshops be permanently implemented that promote the axiological and transcendental formation of high school students, with the objective, as Frankl (1979) states, of searching for mechanisms that give meaning to their lives, that is, to find "reasons" to live, with which they feel that their lives are worthwhile and to move away as far as possible from what the same author called "existential emptiness".
- IV. Strategically promote art, science and sport as distractors and promoters of the sense of life, in order, as Rogers (1993) maintains, to fully live each moment in its entirety, in the here and now, considering each instant as unrepeatable.

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