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ORYGINALNE ARTYKUŁY BADAWCZE

Beata Nowak
Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw, Poland
e-mail: b.nowak@chat.edu.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9607-4500

Dominika Łysiak
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: dominikalysiak@student.kul.edu.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9287-8512

Iwona Niewiadomska
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: iwona.niewiadomska@kul.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0244-274

Mark Szejdman
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: szejdman@student.kul.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2241-9865

Mateusz Mikołajczak
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: Mateusz.mikolajczak@kul.pl
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0009-0006-2843-8452

Mirosław Kalinowski
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland
e-mail: Miroslaw.kalinowski@kul.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4611-3380

Psychological Predictors of Experiencing Existential Emptiness in Persons Serving Prison Sentences

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Abstract
This article addresses issues relating to the experience of existential emptiness by people serving prison sentences. The aim of the research was to identify psychological predictors that have a significant relationship with the experience of existential emptiness among prisoners. The existential emptiness is a very important aspect of human life and isolation conditions seem to intensify it through the specify of the individual's functioning in this type of environment. The study was conducted in a group of 716 inmates incarcerated in a penitentiary unit in the Lublin Province in Poland. The statical analyses performed showed that the sources of self-efficacy, such as the level of experienced stress and achieved success-

es, significantly correlate with the experience of existential emptiness among prisoners. The regression analysis also indicated significant links between past successes in an individual's life and stress experienced in the past with the level of perceived existential emptiness.

Keywords: existential emptiness, sources of self-efficacy, successes, increased stress, persons serving a prison sentence.

Introduction

The experience of existential emptiness – understood as a subjective loss of meaning, purpose, and values in life – constitutes one of the key issues in contemporary psychology, particularly in the context of individual functioning under conditions of chronic stress and limited autonomy. Viktor E. Frankl, the originator of logotherapy, conceptualised the human being as fundamentally oriented towards meaning, arguing that the primary existential motivation is the "will to meaning", that is, the striving to ascribe significance to one's own experiences, including suffering (Frankl, 1959; 2016; 2023). The frustration of this need leads to existential emptiness, manifested in decreased motivation, a sense of purposelessness, depressive symptoms, and disturbances in the domains of identity and the experience of reality.

Logotherapy assumes that even in boundary situations – such as terminal illness or deprivation of liberty – individuals retain the capacity to find meaning through an orientation towards values, responsibility, and self-transcendence. For this reason, Frankl's concept has been widely applied in analyses of the functioning of individuals experiencing prolonged deprivation, including penitentiary populations (Frankl, 2016; Niewiadomska & Jurek, 2023). In the context of resocialisation, educational and therapeutic interventions may provide a space not only for behavioural correction but also for the reconstruction of life narratives, identity, and the meaning of undertaken actions.

At the same time, a significant place in analyses of adaptation to difficult situations is occupied by Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their own ability to organise and execute actions required to achieve intended goals (Bandura, 1997). Empirical research consistently indicates that a high level of self-efficacy is associated with greater

resilience to stress, persistence, more effective coping, and higher psychological well-being. The classical sources of self-efficacy include mastery experiences, social modelling, verbal persuasion, and the interpretation of one's own emotional and physiological states (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Despite the growing body of research on self-efficacy and meaning in life, these constructs have most often been examined separately, and studies conducted within incarcerated populations have frequently been fragmentary in nature or based on small samples. Consequently, there remains a lack of clear empirical evidence regarding the relationships between self-efficacy and the experience of meaning under conditions of chronic penitentiary stress. This research gap provides a direct rationale for undertaking the present study.

Sources of self-efficacy and meaning in condition of isolation

In the prison environment, all classical sources of self-efficacy – mastery experiences, social modelling, verbal persuasion, and emotional-physiological states – may co-occur within educational, therapeutic, and resocialisation interventions. Polish empirical studies indicate that incarcerated individuals experience both situations that foster the strengthening of self-efficacy and conditions that limit its adaptive function (Gęca et al., 2024; Kalinowski et al., 2024; Maziarczyk et al., 2024). At the same time, it is emphasised that self-efficacy in conditions of isolation may assume compensatory or defensive forms and does not always lead to a lasting improvement in psychosocial functioning.

An increasing number of studies indicate that self-efficacy lacking grounding in meaning and a system of values may be ambivalent in nature and, under certain conditions, even destructive. Individuals who are capable of acting effectively but do not ascribe meaning to their actions or future are particularly vulnerable to experiencing existential emptiness and reduced well-being (Steger & Frazier, 2005; Steger et al., 2011). This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as instrumental self-efficacy- focused on action and control, yet devoid of a meaning-making dimension (Martos & Konkolÿ Thege, 2011).

The significance of the relationship between self-efficacy and meaning becomes particularly evident in conditions of penitentiary isolation which – according to Stevan E. Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory – constitute an example of chronic, systemic stress leading to the gradual erosion of psychological resources such as agency, hope, and future orientation (Hobfoll, 1989; 2012). Penitentiary stress is temporally extended and encompasses past experiences (e.g., poverty, marginalisation, violence), current conditions (surveillance, control, stigmatisation), as well as the anticipation of the future associated with uncertainty regarding social reintegration (Sykes, 1958; Liebling et al., 2011; Folkman, 2013).

Under such conditions, even objective successes – such as completing an educational programme, vocational training, or therapy – may lose their adaptive function if they do not contribute to the reconstruction of meaning, a genuine sense of agency, or social bonds. Self-efficacy, although strengthened through experiences of success, does not always translate into a subjective sense of the meaningfulness of one's actions, which may intensify existential frustration and a sense of meaninglessness.

Integrating Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy with Viktor E. Frankl's logotherapy allows for a complementary understanding of individual functioning under extreme and isolating conditions, in which agency and meaning are treated as interrelated adaptive resources. This approach is also supported by Polish theories of stress and difficult situations, which emphasise the role of cognitive appraisal and the meanings ascribed to experiences (Reykowski, 1922; Tomaszewski, 1975). From an applied perspective, this implies the need to integrate interventions aimed at strengthening self-efficacy (the cognitive-behavioural component) with work focused on values, meaning, and identity (the existential-logotherapeutic component).

Method

Research problem and hypotheses

The aim of the present study was to answer the following research question: What are the relationships between the sources of perceived self-efficacy and the experience of existential emptiness among individuals serving a custodial sentence? A review of the relevant literature on the subject made it possible to formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a correlation between the perception of success and attitudes towards existential emptiness.

H2: There is a correlation between the intensity of stress and attitudes towards existential emptiness.

H3: Sources of self-efficacy related to the past constitute predictors of the experience of existential emptiness.

Research procedure

The study was conducted between November 2024 and February 2025 in correctional facilities located in the Lublin Province, Poland. The participants completed questionnaires prepared by students participating in the Master's seminar "Prevention of Social Pathologies", led by Professor Iwona Niewiadomska. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research.

Characteristics of the study sample

A total of 716 incarcerated individuals participated in the study, of whom 96.8% were men, while only 1.8% of the participants were women. At the time of completing the questionnaires, all respondents were serving custodial sentences in one of three correctional facilities located in Chełm, Lublin, and Potulice in Poland. The characteristics of the study sample were developed on the basis of data included in the demographic section, such as age, level of education, marital status, place of residence registration, religious affiliation,

number of convictions, applied resocialisation measures, and affiliation with the prison subculture.

The respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 80 years, with a mean age of 39.06 years. In terms of educational attainment, the largest groups consisted of individuals with secondary education (31.7%) and vocational education (31.0%). Slightly smaller proportions were represented by those with primary education (22.3%) and higher education (10.5%). Only 0.8% of participants reported lower secondary (gymnasium) education, while post-secondary education was declared by 0.1%. The majority of respondents identified themselves as single (45.8%). Other groups included divorced individuals (24.6%), those in marital relationships (22.8%), and widowed participants, who constituted 3.9% of the total sample. With regard to place of residence registration, participants originated in relatively similar proportions from different environments: rural areas (23.7%), small towns (22.6%), medium-sized cities (26.3%), and large cities (25.0%). In terms of religious affiliation, as many as 51.1% of respondents declared themselves to be believers who do not practise, 28.2% identified as practising believers, while 16.5% reported being non-believers. Considering the number of convictions, 30.7% of respondents indicated that they were serving a custodial sentence for the first time. A slightly lower percentage comprised individuals incarcerated for the second time (22.1%), whereas the smallest groups were those imprisoned for the third time (12.7%) and those with more than three convictions (17.7%).

With regard to participation in resocialisation activities, work was the most common form of engagement, with as many as 57.5% of inmates declaring involvement. Educational activities were attended by 20.8% of respondents, sports activities by 28.4%, and cultural and educational programmes by 20.5%. Rewards were received by a notable proportion of participants (22.8%), while 75.6% reported that they had not been awarded any. In terms of disciplinary sanctions, 9.9% of respondents had experienced such measures, whereas 88.4% had not been subjected to disciplinary punishment. Therapy was relatively infrequently utilised, with only 6.1% of respondents participating in this form of intervention, while 92.2% did not engage in therapeutic programmes. Membership in prison subculture was declared

by only 8% of participants, whereas a substantial majority (71.4%) did not identify with any subcultural group.

Psychosocial measurement tools

To verify the proposed hypotheses, the *Self-Life Assessment Questionnaire* developed by Iwona Niewiadomska (2007) and the *Life Attitude Questionnaire* were used. The latter is the Polish adaptation of the *Life Attitude Profile* developed by Gary T. Reker (1981), adapted by Ryszard Klamut (2010), and is designed to measure the sense of meaning in life and its components. The first of these instruments is used to assess the subjective perception of quality of life and to identify individual resources and deficits. The tool applied in the present study does not measure effectiveness understood as objective performance nor the level of self-efficacy as a generalised belief. Its purpose is to diagnose the sources of self-efficacy, in accordance with the concept proposed by Albert Bandura (1997), including experiences of success and failure, social persuasion, and experiences of difficult situations. The first part of the instrument focuses on difficult situations that lead individuals to experience stress. These include deprivation of psychological and biological needs, physical and/or psychological overload, internal conflicts, a sense of threat, significant obstacles in goal attainment, and difficulties in understanding newly emerging stimuli.

Each of these refers to events from the individual's past, present, and future. Respondents are required to indicate their agreement with each statement by selecting an answer on a five-point Likert-type scale reflecting the frequency of occurrence. A response of 1 indicates *never*, 2 – *very rarely*, 3 – *sometimes*, 4 – *often*, and 5 – *very often*. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, calculated on a sample of 716 inmates, and amounted to 0.75 for the assessment of perceived difficult situations in the past, 0.72 for the present, and 0.73 for the future.

The next part of the questionnaire refers to the successes achieved by the individual, described across four domains: personal, family, occupational, and social. Each of these domains is considered within three temporal per-

spectives: past, present, and future. Respondents are asked to indicate their responses to each statement using a five-point scale reflecting the frequency of occurrence of specific situations in their lives: 1 – *never*, 2 – *very rarely*, 3 – *sometimes*, 4 – *often*, 5 – *very often*. The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha), calculated on a sample of 716 incarcerated individuals, was 0.65 for past situations, 0.69 for current experiences, and 0.65 for anticipated future successes.

The third part describes inmates' subjective perceptions of failures occurring across four areas of their lives: personal, family, occupational, and social. Each of these domains is considered within three temporal perspectives: past, present, and future. Respondents provided their answers using a five-point scale indicating the frequency of occurrence of a given situation in their lives: 1 – *never*, 2 – *very rarely*, 3 – *sometimes*, 4 – *often*, 5 – *very often*. The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the sample of 716 prisoners was 0.66 for past failures, 0.71 for the intensity of current failures, and 0.64 for failures that may occur in the future.

The next part of the instrument concerns the intensity of social persuasion, described across ten categories: overcoming major obstacles in goal attainment, coping with experienced fears, resolving conflicts that evoke negative emotions, achieving personal success, enduring physical or psychological pain with dignity, achieving family success, achieving occupational success, achieving social success, satisfying needs, and performing various tasks effectively. Each of these categories is considered within three temporal perspectives: past, present, and future. Respondents provide their answers on a five-point scale used to describe the frequency of occurrence of these situations in their lives: 1 – *never*, 2 – *very rarely*, 3 – *sometimes*, 4 – *often*, 5 – *very often*. The internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) for the sample of 716 prisoners was 0.82 for the intensity of past social persuasion, 0.77 for current social persuasion, and 0.83 for the anticipated intensity of future persuasion from others.

The second instrument used in the study was the *Life Attitude Questionnaire* (Reker & Peacock, 1981), designed for self-report and the assessment of an individual's existential orientation. It measures the level of experienced

meaning in life as well as the motivation to search for meaning and to ascribe purpose to everyday activities. It is the Polish adaptation of the *Life Attitude Profile–Revised* developed by Gary T. Reker. The questionnaire consists of 48 items, to which respondents provide answers on a seven-point scale: 1 – *completely untrue*, 2 – *untrue*, 3 – *rather untrue*, 4 – *undecided*, 5 – *rather true*, 6 – *true*, 7 – *completely true*. It enables the analysis of life attitudes across six primary scales: Purpose in Life (PL), Internal Coherence (IC), Life Control (LC), Death Acceptance (DA), Existential Vacuum (EV), and Goal Seeking (GS). In addition, it includes two composite scales: Personal Meaning (PM) and Life Attitude Balance (LAB), which provide a generalised and integrative assessment based on the remaining dimensions. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the individual scales range from 0.70 (EV) to 0.87 (PM), indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Statistical methods applied

To examine the relationships between inmates perceived sources of self-efficacy and their attitudes towards existential emptiness, Pearson's *r* correlation coefficient was applied. Additionally, in order to determine whether the sources of self-efficacy could serve as predictors of existential emptiness, linear regression analysis was conducted.

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (IBM Corp., 2024). The study received ethical approval (No. KEBN 31/2023) from the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology on 16 January 2024.

Results

The results of the correlation analysis between inmates' perceptions of the four sources of self-efficacy (intensity of stress, successes, failures, and social persuasion) and their attitudes towards existential emptiness are presented in Table 1. These findings enabled the verification of the proposed hypotheses, which assumed that attitudes towards existential emptiness are significantly

associated with perceived successes (H1) and the intensity of stress (H2). They also allowed for the verification of the hypothesis that sources of self-efficacy constitute predictors of the experience of existential emptiness among individuals serving custodial sentences (H3).

Table 1. Correlation results between the sources of self-efficacy across three temporal perspectives and attitudes towards existential emptiness among individuals serving custodial sentences (N = 716)

Sources of Self-Efficacy	Attitude towards existential emptiness		
	Past	Present	Future
Intensity of experienced stress	0.24***	0.15***	0.14***
Intensity of experienced successes	0.17***	0.15***	0.13**
Intensity of experienced failures	0.04**	0.12**	0.03
Intensity of experienced social persuasion	0.18***	0.17***	0.16***

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Source: Authors' research.

The correlation analysis results presented in Table 1 indicate that both the first and second hypotheses were confirmed. H1 assumed that there are statistically significant relationships between the perception of successes and attitudes towards existential emptiness among incarcerated individuals. The conducted analyses revealed positive correlations between the experience of existential emptiness and the intensity of successes in the past ($r = 0.170$; $p < 0.001$), present ($r = 0.150$; $p < 0.001$), and future ($r = 0.130$; $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that the greater the intensity of successes in the lives of inmates, the higher the level of existential emptiness they experience.

The second hypothesis assumed the existence of significant relationships between the intensity of stress and attitudes towards existential emptiness among prisoners. The results of the correlation analyses confirm this hypothesis by demonstrating positive correlations between the experience of existential emptiness and the intensity of stress in the past ($r = 0.241$; $p < 0.001$), present ($r = 0.147$; $p < 0.001$), and future ($r = 0.130$; $p < 0.001$). These findings

provide a basis for concluding that higher levels of stress among prisoners are associated with a higher level of experienced existential emptiness.

The final hypothesis was also confirmed. It assumed that the sources of self-efficacy constitute predictors of the experience of existential emptiness. The verification of this hypothesis was carried out using linear regression analysis, the results of which are presented in Table 2. The analysis was conducted using two variables: stress experienced in the past and past successes, as only these variables yielded a statistically significant linear regression model.

Table 2. Results of the linear regression model predicting attitudes towards existential emptiness based on experienced stress and past successes among individuals serving custodial sentences (N = 716)

	B	SE	β	t	p
F=19,60; p<,001; =0,08					
(Constant)	16.93	2.44		6.96	<0.001
Intensity of experienced stress – past	0.45	0.09	0.23	5.03	<0.001
Intensity of experienced successes – past	0.43	0.13	0.15	3.21	0.001

Source: Authors' research.

The results of the conducted regression analysis explain 8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.08$), indicating that only 8% of the variability in the sense of existential emptiness can be accounted for by the influence of stress and successes experienced in the past. However, the model is statistically significant ($p < .001$), which means that the analysed variables have a real, albeit modest, effect on the sense of existential emptiness among incarcerated individuals, and that the observed result is not due to chance. These findings allow for the conclusion that an increase in stress experienced in the past is associated with a higher level of existential emptiness ($B = 0.45$), and that a greater intensity of past successes is likewise associated with a higher sense of existential emptiness ($B = 0.43$). It is worth noting that variables related to the intensity of experienced failures and social persuasion in the past were also initially included in the model. However, their effects on existential emptiness were

not statistically significant and, therefore, they were not retained in the final version of the model.

Discussion

The results obtained from the study allow for the conclusion that an increase in the intensity of past successes in an individual's life, as well as stress experienced in the past, is associated with a higher level of existential emptiness among incarcerated individuals. This phenomenon may be interpreted on the assumption that both excessive stress and experiences of success – if not grounded in higher values – can lead to a loss of meaning in an individual's life. This finding is also consistent with Viktor E. Frankl's concept of "tragic optimism", according to which both suffering and achievements, when deprived of a reference to meaning, may lead to an inner sense of emptiness (Frankl, 1985).

The relationship between past successes and an increase in existential emptiness may be explained by the loss of their meaning and adaptive value in conditions of social isolation. These successes may serve as reminders of what the individual was able to achieve in the past; however, when contrasted with the current situation of incarceration, they may evoke a sense of hopelessness and lack of satisfaction, thereby contributing to an increased level of experienced existential emptiness.

The finding related to past stress among inmates can be explained by the fact that experiencing chronic or intense stress in the past significantly affects the foundations of an individual's identity and sense of meaning, which may not have previously been as salient. Unprocessed past traumas or deeply embedded emotions tend to become activated under conditions of isolation, leading to the emergence of emotional emptiness and an internal sense of disorientation.

In summary, the findings presented in this article clearly indicate that resocialisation interventions, including the education of incarcerated individuals, cannot be limited solely to strengthening personal self-efficacy (e.g., through skills training or motivating behavioural change). Rather, they must

adopt an existentially complementary approach – one that incorporates work on values, life goals, and identity. Viktor E. Frankl (2016) emphasised that even the smallest sense of meaning, rooted in an individual's personal system of values, can fundamentally transform human functioning. In this context, penitentiary education and rehabilitation may be viewed not only as tools of discipline or vocational readaptation but also as potential sources of meaning. Educational programmes delivered by teachers, educators, and therapists may serve as spaces for the reconstruction of meaning, thereby supporting the reduction of existential emptiness and enhancing motivation for learning and change. At the same time, the obtained results point to the need for further research that would include moderating variables, such as age, as potential factors influencing the relationship between self-efficacy, meaning in life, and functioning under conditions of penitentiary isolation.

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