



Purpose in Life as Protection Against Professional Burnout Among Catholic Priests and Religious in Italy: Testing the Insights of Logotherapy

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Abstract

Logotherapy, grounded in the insights of Viktor Frankl, suggests that meaning-making and the sense of purpose in life is central to healthy human functioning. This thesis was tested among a sample of 156 Catholic priests and religious sisters in Italy; their healthy human functioning was assessed through the two indices of positive affect (satisfaction in ministry) and negative affect (emotional exhaustion in ministry) proposed by the Francis Burnout Inventory. After controlling for personal factors (age and sex) and for psychological factors (emotionality and extraversion/introversion), the data demonstrated that higher scores on the Purpose in Life Scale were associated with both higher scores on the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and lower scores on the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry. These findings suggest that professional burnout and poor work-related psychological health among priests and religious sisters may, at least in part, be attributed to a poor sense of purpose in life. In light of this empirical evidence, therapeutic techniques developed by logotherapy may be relevant to addressing the problem of professional burnout and poor work-related psychological health among Catholic priests and religious sisters.

Keywords Logotherapy · Catholic priests · Religious sisters · Burnout · Psychological type

The Salesian Pontifical University in Rome has a long tradition of research and application within the field of logotherapy. The aim of the present study is to draw on this background in order to test the relevance of the principles of logotherapy for understanding the work-related psychological health of Catholic priests and religious sisters engaged in pastoral

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ministries. The theoretical argument of this study is developed in four steps. The first step clarifies and critiques the basic principles of logotherapy. The second step establishes the centrality of measures of purpose in life in operationalising and testing aspects of logotherapy and introduces the measure of purpose in life employed in the empirical investigation. The third step discusses the operationalisation of clergy work-related psychological health and introduces the measure of work-related psychological health employed in the empirical investigation. The fourth step discusses the rationale for introducing both personal and psychological factors as control variables.

Logotherapy and purpose in life

The constructs of purpose in life and meaning in life have received increasing attention in recent years, within the developing field of positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Diener, 1994, 2000; Emmons, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to Wong (2012), meaning in life ‘represents not only a primary intrinsic motivation for life expansion but also a powerful capacity for personal transformation’ (p. 619). Meaning in life is shaped differently according to the specific situations in the lives of individual people. Therefore, meaning in life is not conceptualized in the same way for everybody, but meaning is unique for each person. People have to discover the meaning of their particular situations for themselves.

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist and the founder of logotherapy, was one of those who have developed a theory of personality that deals explicitly with the role that meaning plays in human development. According to Frankl, ‘What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment’ (Frankl, 1985, p. 171). Logotherapy builds on Frankl’s work to shape a humanistic-existential approach of particular practical benefit when individuals are concerned with promoting and sustaining a sense of meaning in their lives (Frankl, 1969; Guttman, 1996; Lukas & Hirsch, 2002).

While some people see meaning in only some of their experiences, other people experience their entire lives as full of meaning. But what makes an experience meaningful, and what gives meaning to the whole of life? These questions are of particular importance at a time when a sense of meaninglessness, when feelings of emptiness, and when feelings of boredom are identified as core features of a number of psychiatric syndromes, including depression and dissociative disorders (Levin, 1987). Indeed, such alienation seems to be a component of many psychological dysfunctions, and one that is addressed as existential neurosis, or a sense of vacuum that characterises the lives of many people (Maddi, 1967).

Frankl (1967, 1969, 1985, 2004) maintains that people have the ability to overcome the constraints of external circumstances and of their own psychological and physical limitations. By doing so they can discover purpose in life and meaning in life, a new dimension to their existence. Frankl’s fundamental insight is that the ‘will to meaning’ resources strength to face the difficult situations. It is this ‘will to meaning’ that makes sense of and gives value to the lives that individuals live.

Frankl argues that individuals can take a stand against the variety of limiting conditions that impact their lives. In other words, these limiting conditions do not determine the response of individuals to any life situation. Since meaning in life varies from one person to

another and from one situation to another, meaning in life is as unique as the situations that individuals encounter in their lives (Frankl, 1969).

Empirical studies have demonstrated a strong relationship between psychological and physical well-being and meaning in life or purpose in life. Meaning in life or purpose in life is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes, such as stable mood, less psychological distress, more proactive and sociable behavior, and favorable attitudes toward life and the self (Melton & Schulenberg, 2008; Reker, 1994; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Savolaine & Granello, 2002; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Meaning in life or purpose in life are linked with self-transcendence values, good social adaptation, and clear life goals (Park & Folkman, 1997; Yalom, 1980). On the other hand, the absence of meaning in life or purpose in life are linked with risk factors for mental health such as depression, anxiety (Debats et al., 1993), and mental disorders (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Frankl, 2004). A lack of meaning in life or purpose in life is linked with mental retardation and developmental disabilities (Hingsburger, 1990; Schulenberg, 2003), problems associated with aging (Kimble, 2000a), difficulties within family relationships (Crumbaugh & Henrion, 2004; Winters, 2002), and work-related issues (Pattakos, 2004).

Measures of purpose in life

The growing empirical basis underlying logotherapy (Schulenberg, 2004) has been facilitated by a variety of tools introduced to quantify and study the construct meaning in life or purpose in life (Batthyany & Guttman, 2006). The most influential of these instruments is the Purpose in Life Test (PILT) developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964, 1969). This is a thoroughly researched measure (Guttman, 1996; Hutzell, 1988), working within the framework proposed by logotherapy (Schulenberg & Melton, 2010).

The PILT was designed with three parts: Part A comprises 20 items using a seven-point Likert-type scale; Part B comprises 13 incomplete sentences; and Part C requests the respondent to compose a paragraph. In quantitative studies, the focus tends to be on Part A, since these data can easily be examined psychometrically. Higher scores reflect good levels of meaning in life or purpose in life. Acceptable psychometric properties have been reported for the PILT across a range of studies (Reker, 2000). Good convergent validity has been established with measures of well-being and distress, together with good internal consistency reliability (e.g., $\alpha=.91$; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Significant associations have been shown between scores recorded in the PILT and social attitudes, depression, and subjective well-being (Hutzell, 1988; Melton & Schulenberg, 2008; Robak & Griffin, 2000; Schulenberg, 2004).

Robbins and Francis (2000) introduced the Purpose in Life Scale (PILS) as an alternative measure of purpose in life that intentionally differed from the PILT in two ways. First, the PILS was designed to assess a much more tightly focused notion of purpose in life. Second, the PILS comprises 12 Likert-type items rated on the conventional 5-point scale ranging from *agree strongly* (5) through *not certain* (3) to *disagree strongly* (1). In the foundation study, conducted among 517 first-year undergraduate students, Robbins and Francis (2000) reported an alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) of .90, with the correlations between each item and the sum of the other items varying between .41 and .76, demonstrating good internal consistency reliability. Further evidence on the psychometric properties have been pro-

vided by Francis et al. (2010), Sillick and Cathcart (2014), Poteat et al. (2015), Crea (2016), Chow (2017), and Francis et al. (2017).

Work-related psychological health

The Maslach Burnout Inventory proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1986) offers a well-established conceptualisation and operationalisation of work-related psychological health. The Maslach Burnout Inventory assesses work-related psychological health across three domains that characterise professional burnout by high scores of emotional exhaustion, high scores of depersonalisation, and low scores of personal accomplishment. The key theoretical problem posed by the Maslach operationalisation of burnout concerns giving an account of the relationship between the three components (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and lack of personal accomplishment). According to Maslach (2003) this relationship is seen in terms of a sequential progression, whereby emotional exhaustion leads to depersonalisation, and depersonalisation leads to lack of personal accomplishment.

Challenging the adequacy of the empirical foundations for this sequential model and recognising the apparent independence of personal accomplishment from the other two components (emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation), Francis et al. (2005) revisited the insights of the classic notion of ‘balanced affect’, as proposed by Bradburn (1969), in order to give an alternative account of burnout and of poor work-related psychological health. Employing the notion of balanced affect, they proposed a model of work-related psychological health whereby positive affect and negative affect operate as two separate continua, rather than as opposite ends of a single continuum. According to this model, it is conceivable that individuals may experience at one and the same time high levels of positive affect and high levels of negative affect. According to this model of balanced affect, poor work-related psychological health and burnout occur when *high* levels of negative affect coincide with *low* levels of positive affect.

Francis et al. (2005) tested this balanced affect approach to work-related psychological health and burnout in an international study conducted among 6,680 clergy serving in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. For research designed specifically among clergy, they operationalised the notion of negative affect as emotional exhaustion (measured by the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry: SEEM), and the notion of positive affect as ministry satisfaction (measured by the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale: SIMS). Put together, these two 11-item scales form the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI).

The internal consistency reliability and construct validity of the two component scales of the Francis Burnout Inventory were tested and supported in a study among 744 clergy serving in The Presbyterian Church (USA) by Francis et al. (2011). This study has tested and supported the balanced affect model of work-related psychological health by demonstrating how high levels of positive affect serve to offset high levels of negative affect in order to maintain a form of psychological equilibrium. Although a relatively new measure, the Francis Burnout Inventory has already been included in a number of studies concerning clergy work-related psychological health, including work reported by Francis et al. (2008, 2009, 2012, 2013a, b, c, 2015, 2019, 2021), Robbins and Francis (2010, 2014), Brewster et al. (2011), Robbins et al. (2012), Barnard and Curry (2012), Randall (2013a, b, 2015), Sterland (2015), Durkee-Lloyd (2016), and Francis and Crea (2018, 2021).

Introducing control variables

Studies exploring individual differences in work-related psychological health and burnout among clergy have consistently drawn attention to the importance of key personal and psychological factors (Francis, 2018). Among personal factors, age emerges as the most important. Older clergy are less likely than younger clergy to report high levels of emotional exhaustion, either as the consequence of an aging effect (older clergy may have acquired better skills at managing psychological resources) or of a cohort effect (younger clergy experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion may have exited from active ministry). While sex differences are less consistently reported, sex nonetheless remains a personal factor of significance. Among psychological factors, neuroticism (or high emotionality) and introversion emerge as the most important. Clergy recording high scores on the measure of neuroticism (or emotionality) and low scores on extraversion are more likely to report high levels of emotional exhaustion (see, for example, Francis et al., 2004, 2008, 2009, 2013c; Francis & Rutledge, 2000; Randall 2007; Rutledge & Francis, 2004; Turton & Francis, 2007). It is for these reasons that the present study controls for personal factors (age and sex) and for psychological factors (extraversion and emotionality) before exploring the effects of purpose in life on measures of work-related psychological health.

Research question

Against this background, the present study was designed to test the two hypotheses that, after controlling for personal factors (age and sex) and for psychological factors (emotionality and extraversion), there is a positive association between purpose in life scores and scores of satisfaction in ministry and a negative association between purpose in life scores and scores of emotional exhaustion in ministry.

Method

Procedure

In the context of programmes operated in Rome for Catholic priests and religious sisters (who were broadly engaged in religious ministry within the community) on the topic of personality and spirituality, participants were invited to complete a questionnaire covering issues relevant to the programme. Participation in the study was voluntary, and responses to the questionnaire were confidential and anonymous. Full data were provided by 156 participants (61 women and 95 men).

Participants

The mean age of the 61 religious sisters was 50.6 years ($SD=13.5$), with a range between 24 and 74. The mean age of the 95 priests was 55.8 years ($SD=15.0$), with a range between 27 and 86. Of the total participants, 33 were non-graduates and 123 were graduates, among whom 20 held doctoral-level qualifications.

Measures

Psychological factors were assessed by the Francis Psychological Type and Emotional Temperament Scales (FPTETS) developed from the instrument originally proposed by Francis (2005). This 50-item instrument comprises five sets of 10 forced-choice items related to emotionality and to each of the four components of psychological type: orientation (extraversion or introversion), perceiving process (sensing or intuition), judging process (thinking or feeling), and attitude toward the outer world (judging or perceiving). A number of studies have demonstrated this instrument to function well in church-related contexts. For example, Francis et al. (2018) reported alpha coefficients of .83 for the extraversion or introversion scale, .79 for the sensing or intuition scale, .76 for the thinking or feeling scale, and .83 for the attitude toward the outer world scale. Participants were presented each pair of characteristics and asked to ‘check the box next to that characteristic which is closer to the real you, even if you feel both characteristics apply to you. Tick the characteristics that reflect the real you, even if other people see you differently.’ The Italian translation of this instrument originated within the Salesian Pontifical University, employing the conventional practice of translation and back translation. Only the extraversion and emotionality scales were employed in the present analysis. The translated instrument achieved acceptable alpha coefficients (Francis & Crea, 2016).

Work-related psychological health was assessed by the two scales proposed by the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI: Francis et al., 2005). This 22-item instrument is comprised of the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (SEEM) and the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (SIMS). Each item is assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from *agree strongly* (5) to *disagree strongly* (1). The Italian translation achieved alpha coefficients of .79 for SIMS and .81 for SEEM (Francis & Crea, 2015).

Purpose in life was assessed by the Purpose in Life Scale (PILS) developed by Robbins and Francis (2000), a twelve-item instrument designed to assess a unidimensional construct. For example, a core item reads, ‘My personal existence is full of purpose’. Each item is assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from *agree strongly* (5) to *disagree strongly* (1). The Italian translation achieved an alpha coefficient of .90 (Crea, 2016).

Data analysis

The data were analysed by means of the SPSS statistical package using the reliability, correlation, factor, and regression routines.

Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the alpha coefficients, means, and standard deviations for the five scales employed in the present study, namely, the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry, the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale, the Purpose in Life Scale, the Extraversion Scale, and the Emotionality Scale. All five scales reported Cronbach’s (1951) alpha coefficients in excess of .70. Table 2 presents the bivariate correlation coefficients between each pairing of these five scales and between each of the five scales and both age and sex. Four features of the correlation matrix merit commentary. First, sex is significantly associated with emotionality:

Table 1 Scale properties

	N items	Alpha	Mean	SD
Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry	11	.85	22.72	6.72
Satisfaction in Ministry Scale	11	.88	43.97	6.18
Purpose in Life Scale	12	.92	53.08	6.60
Extraversion Scale	10	.74	5.08	2.53
Emotionality Scale	10	.71	3.46	2.27

Table 2 Correlation matrix

	Sex	Age	SEEM	SIMS	PILS	Ext
Age	-.18*					
SEEM	.10	-.24**				
SIMS	-.11	.09	-.57**			
PILS	.08	.08	-.59**	.69***		
Extraversion (Ext)	.01	.05	-.15	.05	.15	
Emotionality	.23**	-.10	.40***	-.39**	-.32**	-.09

Note. SEEM=Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry; SIMS=Satisfaction in Ministry Scale; PILS=Purpose in Life Scale

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

women recorded higher scores than men on the Emotionality Scale. This finding is consistent with the consensus from studies employing other indices of emotionality or neuroticism (see, for example, Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). No significant differences, however, were recorded between men and women on the Extraversion Scale, the Purpose in Life Scale, the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry, or the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale. Second, age is significantly associated with emotional exhaustion in ministry: younger participants recorded higher scores than older participants on the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry. This finding is consistent with earlier studies (see, for example, Francis, 2018), although it remains unclear whether this finding reflects older priests and religious learning to manage emotional exhaustion more effectively or reflects those younger priests and religious experiencing higher levels of emotional exhaustion having exited from their vocation. No significant correlations, however, were recorded between age and scores recorded on the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale, the Purpose in Life Scale, the Extraversion Scale, or the Emotionality Scale. Third, no significant correlations were reported between the Extraversion Scale and any of the other four scales. On the other hand, scores recorded on the Emotionality Scale were significantly correlated with emotional exhaustion, satisfaction in ministry, and purpose in life: participants recording high scores on the Emotionality Scale also recorded higher scores on the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry, lower scores on the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale, and lower scores on the Purpose in Life Scale. Fourth, scores recorded on the Purpose in Life Scale were highly correlated both with scores recorded on the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (negatively) and with scores recorded on the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale (positively).

Table 3 builds on the bivariate correlations presented in Table 2 to construct two regression models. Taking emotional exhaustion in ministry and satisfaction in ministry as two separate dependent variables, these regression models have entered the following variables

Table 3 Regression models

	increase				Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <
	<i>r</i> ²	<i>r</i> ²	F	<i>p</i> <			
<i>Exhaustion</i>							
Sex	.01	.01	1.45	NS	.06	0.98	NS
Age	.06	.05	8.27	.01	−.17	−2.75	.01
Extraversion	.09	.03	4.16	.05	−.06	−1.02	NS
Emotionality	.21	.13	24.53	.001	.19	2.88	.01
Purpose in life	.44	.23	60.18	.001	−.51	−7.76	.001
<i>Satisfaction</i>							
Sex	.01	.01	1.73	NS	−.12	2.09	.05
Age	.02	.01	0.80	NS	.00	0.01	NS
Extraversion	.02	.00	0.52	NS	−.06	−0.89	NS
Emotionality	.16	.14	20.27	.001	−.16	−2.20	.01
Purpose in life	.51	.36	111.35	.001	.65	10.55	.001

Note. NS=not significant

in fixed order: two personal factors (sex and age), two psychological factors (extraversion and emotionality), and purpose in life as the final factor. Both models demonstrate that, after taking the personal and personality variables into account, purpose in life scores provide strong prediction of lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of satisfaction in ministry. Additionally, the beta weights demonstrate that higher levels of emotional exhaustion are associated with higher emotionality scores and being younger and that higher levels of satisfaction in ministry are associated with lower emotionality scores and being male.

Conclusions

The present study was designed to test the two hypotheses that, after controlling for personal factors (age and sex) and for psychological factors (emotionality and extraversion), there is a positive association between purpose in life scores and scores of satisfaction in ministry and a negative association between purpose in life scores and scores of emotional exhaustion in ministry. These two hypotheses were tested among a sample of 156 Catholic priests and religious sisters in Italy who completed the Purpose in Life Scale (Robbins & Francis, 2000); the two measures that comprise the Francis Burnout Inventory, that is, the Satisfaction in Ministry Scale and the Scale of Emotional Exhaustion in Ministry (Francis et al., 2005); and the Francis Psychological Type and Emotional Temperament Scales developed from the instrument proposed by Francis (2005). These data supported both hypotheses, demonstrating that Catholic priests and religious sisters in Italy experienced high scores of purpose in life as protection against professional burnout.

These findings are of considerable theoretical interest in light of the way in which they link two somewhat different research domains that concern well-being in two distinct fields: work-related psychological well-being, and personal psychological well-being. The question of work-related psychological well-being (and professional burnout) among clergy and religious has tended to focus attention on aspects of the work-related context and to seek solutions by addressing professional or structural matters. By drawing on a core measure from the domain of personal psychological well-being (purpose in life), the present study

has refocused attention on the personal life of the religious professional and suggested that solutions to poor work-related psychological well-being may be sought by addressing personal and individual matters.

The findings are also of considerable practical significance for those holding responsibility for the work-related psychological health of clergy and religious professionals and for those working in the field of clergy well-being and support. The findings offer specific empirical support for the applications of the therapeutic approaches associated with logotherapy among clergy and religious professionals, as suggested for example by Kimble (2000b) in his discussion of 'logotherapy and pastoral counselling' and by Thannickal (2005) in his discussion of 'logotherapy and Catholic pastoral action'.

The limitation with the present study is that the findings are based on a relatively small sample (95 priests and 61 religious sisters) associated with one church tradition (Catholic) and serving in one national context (Italy). These are limitations that can be addressed by the systematic replication and extension of the present sample among other samples of clergy and religious professionals serving in other national contexts and associated with other church traditions.

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