

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEANING IN LIFE AND THE BIG FIVE PERSONALITY TRAITS IN YOUNG ADULTS AND THE ELDERLY*

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Abstract: The questionnaire NEO-FFI was correlated with two different meaningfulness measures: Reker's Personal Meaning Index (PMI) and Halama's Life Meaningfulness Scale (LMS). NEO-FFI and PMI were administered to two groups of subjects: university students (N = 82, mean age 21.13) and elderly people (N = 107, mean age 62.20), and NEO-FFI together with LMS was administered to two groups of similar age (N = 149, mean age 21.56, N = 67, mean age 57.3). Correlation coefficients for extraversion and meaningfulness ranged from 0.29 to 0.42, and for neuroticism and meaningfulness from -0.39 to -0.60. A close relationship was also identified between meaningfulness and conscientiousness (correlations from 0.31 to 0.57). Small but significant correlations of individual dimensions of meaningfulness measures with openness in the sample of the elderly, and with agreeableness in the sample of university students were also found.

Key words: meaning in life, big five personality traits, quality of life, personality

The problem of searching for meaning in human life has received much interest from psychologists in the last decades. It was emphasized by V.E. Frankl (e.g., 1996/1982), whose logotherapy attributes a central role in optimal mental functioning and health to meaning. Psychologists, usually using the expression meaning in life instead of meaning of life to underline its psychological aspect, have investigated meaning especially as a variable related to mental health. Its importance has been affirmed by many researches, e.g., D.L. Debats (1996) proved that meaning in life has high clinical relevance and predictive power, when he found its relationship

with positive and negative aspects of well-being, improvement during therapy as well as with psychotherapy outcome. As meaning in life is considered to be a clinical variable, the research has been focusing mostly on its relationship with psychopathology and well-being. J.C. Crumbaugh (1977) correlated Purpose in Life Test (PIL) for measuring level of meaningfulness in life with MMPI and found a significant negative correlation between meaningfulness and two MMPI dimensions: depression and psychasthenia. However, Z. Moomal (1999) in later research found significant relationships between PIL and most of the MMPI dimensions: negative with hypochondriasis, depression, psychopathic deviation, paranoia, psychasthenia, schizophrenia, social introversion, anxiety and positive with ego strength.

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G.T. Reker (1997) also found that the level of personal meaning predicts depression in the institutional elderly. Concerning addiction, J. Kokosińska (1992) found that a group of alcoholics and drug addicts had considerably lower scores in PIL than other people, and M.D. Newcomb with L.L. Harlow (1986) found that adolescents with a lower sense of meaningfulness tended to react to stress with substance abuse more frequently than those with a higher level of meaningfulness. J.L. Waisberg and J.E. Porter (1994) also found that the level of meaningfulness in alcoholics after treatment predicted successful abstinence. Positive relationship between meaningfulness and well-being has been confirmed by many studies (e.g., Zika, Chamberlain, 1992; Reker, Peacock, Wong, 1987; Shek, 1992; Balcar, 1995a; McGregor, Little, 1998). Compton (2000) even found that meaningfulness was a stronger predictor of well-being than self-esteem, locus of control or optimism. Probably this strong relationship is the reason why meaning in life is one of the constructs taken into account by positive psychology which seeks out factors contributing to quality of life (e.g., Snyder, Lopez, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Kováč, 2003).

Together with the research, a theoretical development in the area of life meaning has been achieved. Need for meaning (in logotherapy named will to meaning) has been recognized as an important part of the human motivational system, though different from biological needs. R.F. Baumeister (1991) proposed four specific needs which explain the search for meaning: need for purpose, need for efficacy and control, need for value and justification and need for self-worth. G.T. Reker and P.T.P. Wong (1989; Wong, 1998; Reker, 2000) suggested that experience of meaning in life has three components which are inter-

related and act in a dynamic and organized system. These are *cognitive component* including belief system, life framework, life philosophy and cognitive schemes providing understanding and interpretation of life events and life in general, *motivational component* implying having values, goals, plans, ideals and striving to achieve them and an *affective component* represented by feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction coming from achievement of goals as well as from a positive interpretation of life.

In spite of extensive research in the area of life meaning, not much research was done on the relationship between meaningfulness and basic personality traits. One of the reasons could be an original assumption of V.E. Frankl's logotherapy, which emphasized that meaning in life can be found by everyone regardless of his or her intelligence or other characteristics considered to be inborn in that time. As basic personality traits (especially temperament) have been generally considered to be biologically and physiologically fixed and therefore stable and almost unchangeable, the possible results and relationships would have lacked an interpretational framework. Earlier and later research on the relationships between meaning and personality variables focused on constructs related to mental health and optimal functioning. G.T. Reker (1977) found a very high correlation between meaningfulness and internal locus of control. This strong relationship was later confirmed by other studies, e.g., S. Zika and K. Chamberlain (1987) and G.T. Reker (1992). Similarly, a positive relationship was found between meaningfulness and self-esteem (Reker, 1977; Lindeman, Verkasalo, 1996), and this relationship was confirmed both in a sample of adolescents and elderly in our previous research (Halama, 2002a). Other

personality variables were also examined. G.T. Reker (1977) correlated Edwards' Personality Inventory with Purpose in Life Test for measuring meaningfulness and found a positive relationship between meaningfulness and dimensions "plans and organizes things" (person has work carefully organized and planned, keeps things neat and orderly, enjoys being assigned to plan something) as well as carefree (satisfied with the things accomplished, not disturbed when unexpected things happens). K. Balcar (1995b) found no correlations between meaningfulness measured by Logo-test and Leary's Interpersonal Check List dimensions of love and power. On the other hand, P. Halama (2003) correlated Personal Meaning Index with Spielberger's State-Trait Personality Inventory (STPI), specifically with its trait part, and found a positive correlation of meaningfulness and curiosity, and a negative one with aggressiveness, anxiousness and depressiveness. K. Balcar (1995b) also found a weak but significant correlation between meaninglessness and the dimension novelty seeking from the Cloninger Temperament Inventory. However, researches on the relationship between meaningfulness and basic personality traits as expressed in most known trait theories are not very frequent. K. Popielski (1994) compared groups with highly and lowly developed noetic dimension (which is characterized especially by high and low meaningfulness in life) in scores of Cattell's personality factors. He found that persons with high meaningfulness had higher scores in factors A (interpersonal warmth), C (emotional stability), E (dominance), G (conformity), H (boldness), Q3 (self-discipline), and lower scores in dimensions O (insecurity) and Q4 (tension). K. Balcar (1995b) and Z. Moomal (1999) found negative correlations between meaningful-

ness and neuroticism as measured by Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire. Balcar even found significant negative correlations between meaningfulness and other EPQ dimensions - psychoticism, and no correlation between meaningfulness and extraversion. Concerning the currently dominant trait theory - big five factors - we can mention a recent study by J. Stempelová and A. Čmáriková (2004). They correlated the Existence Scale, developed by A. Längle which can be considered as indirect measure of meaningfulness, with NEO-FFI and they found positive correlations of this scale with extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and negative with neuroticism.

In this study, the relationship between basic personality traits as expressed in the big five factor theory and sense of life meaningfulness is investigated. On the basis of previous research results, the following assumptions can be formulated:

- * life meaningfulness will negatively correlate with neuroticism;

- * life meaningfulness will positively correlate with conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness.

As previous research did not reveal any correlations between meaningfulness and variables which are similar to openness, it is not included in our assumptions.

METHOD

Research sample

Our research was conducted as analysis of data from four different samples. Every sample was given a set of questionnaires including measures of meaningfulness and big five traits. And for purposes of this research, only data obtained from these measures were processed. Sample 1 consisted of 149 university students at Comen-

ius University, mean age 21.56 years, 34 of them were males and 115 females. Sample 2 also included undergraduates, from the University of Trnava, counting 82 subjects of mean age 21.13 (19 males, 63 females). Samples 3 and 4 were formed of elderly subjects, students of university programs for seniors at Comenius University in Bratislava. Sample 3 consisted of 67 subjects, mean age 57.3 years (3 males, 64 females), and sample 4 of 107 subjects, mean age 62.2 (11 males, 94 female, 2 missing). Subjects in samples 1 and 3 filled out NEO-FFI and Personal Meaning Index and subjects in samples 2 and 4 filled out NEO-FFI and Life Meaningfulness Scale.

Measures

To measure the big five personality traits, we used the *NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI)*, a questionnaire developed by R.R. McCrae, and P.T. Costa (Hřebíčková, Urbánek, 2001), translated into Slovak by I. Ruisel. The questionnaire has 60 items (12 for every dimension) and measures five personality traits as defined in the Five-factor theory, namely neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience. In samples of the elderly (samples 3 and 4), an abbreviated version of NEO-FFI with 40 items was used. Reduction of the items was done by selection of 8 items with highest factor loadings from every dimension, which permits to consider these two versions to be equivalent.

Personal Meaning Index and Life Meaningfulness Scale were used to measure sense of life meaningfulness. The *Personal Meaning Index (PMI)* was developed by G.T. Reker (1992) and it is a part of the bigger Life Attitude Profile - Revised. It measures a level of meaningfulness in life

and its two dimensions - Purpose (referring to having life goals, having a mission in life, having a sense of direction) and Coherence (referring to sense of order and reason for existence, logically integrated understanding of self, others and life in general). It was used in several previous researches in Slovakia and shows satisfactory reliability (Halama, 2002a, 2002c). *Life Meaningfulness Scale (LMS)* (Halama, 2002b) is an original Slovak measure drawn from Reker and Wong's three-component model of meaning mentioned above. It has 18 items and measures the general level of meaningfulness as well as three dimensions - level of meaning in cognitive, motivational and affective area. Equivalence of these two scales was assumed on the basis of a previous high mutual correlation (0.77) found in the Slovak samples (Halama, 2002b).

Cronbach alpha was used to estimate reliability of the measures used in the research. The estimation was done for every sample. Cronbach alpha for Personal Meaning Index was 0.85 for sample 2, and 0.94 for sample 4. Life Meaningfulness Scales similarly show a high consistency, alpha for sample 1 was 0.87, and for sample 3 it was 0.77. For the original version of NEO-FFI, the values of alphas were as follows: for sample 1, neuroticism = 0.81, extraversion = 0.79, openness = 0.64, conscientiousness = 0.85, agreeableness = 0.64; for sample 2, neuroticism = 0.80, extraversion = 0.82, openness = 0.61, conscientiousness = 0.85, agreeableness = 0.53. Abbreviated version of NEO-FFI showed the following values for alpha: sample 3, neuroticism = 0.62, extraversion = 0.73, openness = 0.63, conscientiousness = 0.57, agreeableness = 0.64; for sample 4, neuroticism = 0.72, extraversion = 0.65, openness = 0.57, conscientiousness = 0.56, agreeableness = 0.65.

RESULTS

To examine the relationship between the big five traits and meaningfulness, Pearson correlation coefficients between NEO-FFI and meaningfulness scale were computed. Table 1 presents correlations in the samples of university students. It shows that both meaningfulness scales and their dimensions significantly correlate with neuroticism (correlations from -0.35 to -0.60) and conscientiousness (from 0.25 to 0.46). All meaningfulness dimensions and overall scores apart from PMI - Coherence, significantly correlate with extraversion (coefficients form 0.25 to 0.45). Two individual dimensions - LMS affective and PMI coherence have lower but significant correlations with

agreeableness. Table 2 shows correlations between meaningfulness scales and NEO-FFI in the samples of the elderly. The results show quite a similar pattern. All dimensions and overall scores of meaningfulness scales have significant correlations with conscientiousness (ranging from 0.28 to 0.57) and extraversion (from 0.25 to 0.42). All these dimensions and overall scores, apart from LMS - motivational, have significant negative correlations with neuroticism (from -0.36 to -0.43). In these samples, lower significant correlations of LMS - affective, PMI and its dimensions with openness to experience, were revealed.

To represent the results graphically and to integrate the results with different meaningfulness scales, subjects in every sample were divided into three subgroups - sub-

Table 1. Correlations between NEO-FFI and meaningfulness scales in university students

	Extraversion	Neuroticism	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Openness
Sample 1, university students, N = 149					
LMS - overall score	0.37**	-0.60**	0.16	0.39**	0.06
LMS - cognitive	0.27**	-0.55**	0.10	0.25**	0.02
LMS - motivational	0.25**	-0.53**	0.08	0.45**	0.09
LMS - affective	0.45**	-0.41**	0.23**	0.25**	0.09
Sample 2, university students, N = 82					
PMI	0.30**	-0.44**	0.19	0.46**	0.00
PMI - Purpose	0.40**	-0.48**	0.06	0.45**	0.02
PMI - Coherence	0.18	-0.35**	0.29**	0.41**	-0.01

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 2. Correlations between NEO-FFI and meaningfulness scales in the elderly

	Extraversion	Neuroticism	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Openness
Sample 3, elderly, N = 67					
LMS - overall score	0.42**	-0.39**	0.15	0.57**	0.12
LMS - cognitive	0.35**	-0.36**	0.07	0.55**	0.04
LMS - motivational	0.25*	-0.20	0.14	0.43**	-0.07
LMS - affective	0.41**	-0.43**	0.19	0.46**	0.32**
Sample 4, elderly, N = 107					
PMI	0.29**	-0.40**	0.09	0.31**	0.22*
PMI - Purpose	0.26**	-0.38**	0.09	0.33**	0.26**
PMI - Coherence	0.32**	-0.40**	0.09	0.28**	0.21*

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

jects with high meaningfulness, subjects with low meaningfulness and subjects with middle level of meaningfulness. The criterion used for dividing was position of subject on the distribution of meaningfulness scale which he or she filled out. The subject was placed into the group with high meaningfulness if his or her meaningfulness score was at least one standard deviation from the mean. Similarly, if his or her score was at least one standard deviation under mean, he or she was sorted into the group with low meaningfulness. Other subjects were treated as group with middle level of meaningfulness. In further analysis, personality profiles of subjects with high and low meaningfulness were compared. As the scores of five personality traits did not have the same mean and standard deviation, they were first transformed into z-score in order to be mutually

comparable, and subsequently into t-score. Figure 1 displays personality profiles in university students of high and low meaningfulness. It can be seen that the biggest difference is in the neuroticism scores, and in scores of conscientiousness. A clear difference is also in extraversion scores, smaller in agreeableness scores, and almost no difference is in scores of openness. Figure 2 shows that elderly with high and low meaningfulness substantially differ in conscientiousness scores, to a lesser extent in neuroticism, extraversion, openness and agreeableness. The differences were tested by t-test for two independent samples. Results for university students are shown in Table 3 and those for seniors in Table 4. They show that in both age groups, significant differences were found in the factors neuroticism, extraversion and conscientiousness.

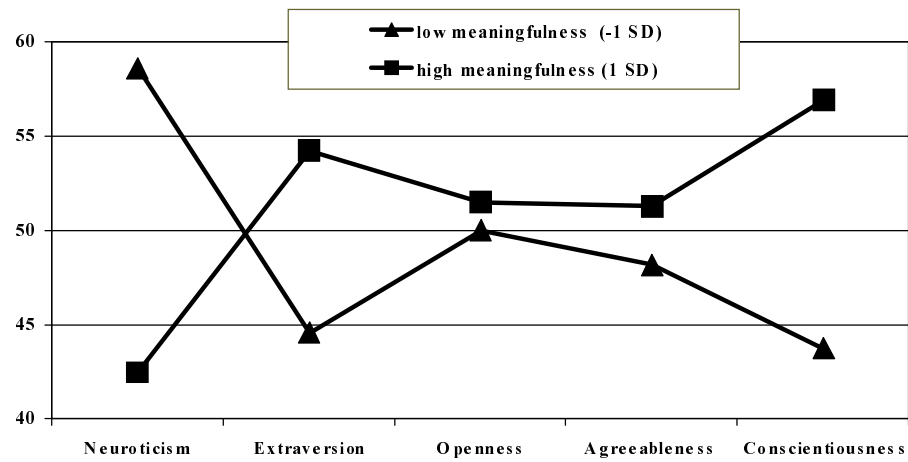


Figure 1. Personality profiles of university students with low and high meaningfulness in life (t-score)

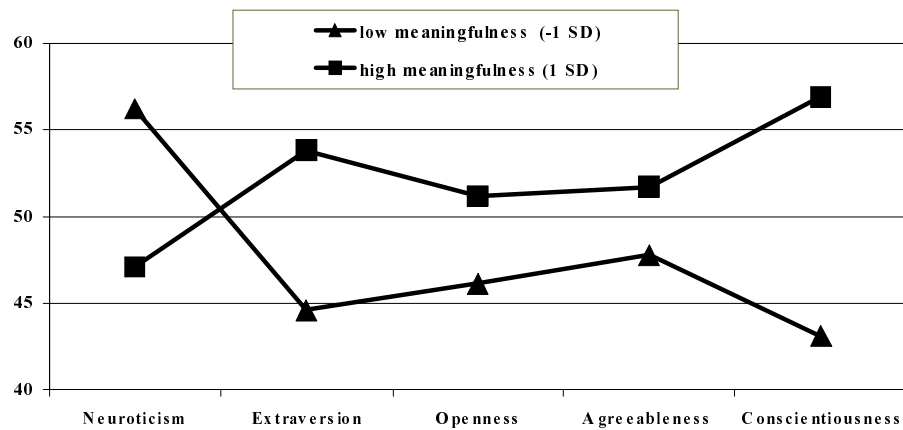


Figure 2. Personality profiles of the elderly with low and high meaningfulness in life (t-score)

Table 3. T-test for differences between groups of university students with low and high meaningfulness in the big five factors

	Low meaningfulness (N = 43)		High meaningfulness (N = 42)		t-value	Significance
	M	SD	M	SD		
Neuroticism	58.67	10.50	42.49	10.11	7.71	0.000
Extraversion	44.51	10.11	54.27	8.32	-4.80	0.000
Openness	50.01	9.30	51.52	9.27	-0.74	0.457
Agreeableness	48.10	9.63	51.39	11.61	-1.42	0.158
Conscientiousness	43.67	10.92	56.99	8.41	-6.28	0.000

Table 4. T-test for differences between groups of elderly with low and high meaningfulness in the big five factors (t-score)

	Low meaningfulness (N = 25)		High meaningfulness (N = 27)		t-value	Significance
	M	SD	M	SD		
Neuroticism	56.28	10.09	47.07	9.47	3.39	0.001
Extraversion	44.07	9.89	53.83	10.21	-3.28	0.002
Openness	46.02	11.61	51.25	11.14	-1.64	0.107
Agreeableness	47.72	10.72	51.72	9.21	-1.43	0.159
Conscientiousness	43.09	10.64	56.91	9.96	-4.74	0.000

DISCUSSION

The results supported the assumption arising from previous research on personality and meaningfulness, that the level of meaningfulness is not independent of the basic personality traits. As the results show, the best personality predictors of high meaningfulness are low neuroticism and high extraversion and conscientiousness. Assumption of inverse relationship between neuroticism and meaningfulness

came up from previous findings by K. Balcar (1995b) and Z. Moomal (1999) who found a negative correlation between meaningfulness and neuroticism as measured by Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire and this was also confirmed when neuroticism from the big five perspective was considered. It seems that high neuroticism, experienced as a high level of negative emotions, emotional lability or self-doubts can block the way to meaningful life. However, size of correlations between neuroticism and dimensions of

meaningfulness differs in our age groups. In the group of university students, neuroticism correlates most highly with cognitive and motivational components, which suggests that neuroticism can disturb a positive worldview and goal striving. On the other hand, neuroticism in the group of the elderly correlates most highly with affective components which can point to a disturbance of the ability to experience satisfaction and happiness.

Our assumption of relationship between meaningfulness and extraversion was also confirmed. Almost all correlations between extraversion and meaningfulness scales were significant which points to a positive relationship between these two constructs. It can be suggested that high extraversion expressed in high positive emotions, high sociability and vivacity can increase the ability of a person to see his or her life as meaningful, to have a positive worldview, high engagement in life goals and experience fulfillment in life. Size of correlations in both groups of the young and the elderly shows higher correlation of extraversion with affective dimension of meaningfulness implying significance of extraversion for increasing and enhancing feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction.

The third of the big five traits highly related to meaningfulness is conscientiousness. This finding is consistent with earlier research by G.T. Reker (1977) mentioned above, who found positive correlations of Purpose in Life Test with dimensions "plans and organizes things" of Edwards Personality Inventory, which is described very similarly to conscientiousness. Conscientiousness is a trait characterized by such facets as order, achievement striving, self-discipline, dutifulness, etc. These characteristics have a great potentiality to contribute to the sense of meaningfulness especially in the motivational area, because

persons with high conscientiousness are more engaged in goals and they invest more energy in their achievement. This interpretation is supported by the higher correlation between conscientiousness and motivational dimension of LMS. However, this higher correlation was found only in the sample of young adults, not in the elderly.

Our assumption about positive relations between meaningfulness and agreeableness formulated on the basis of previous researches by K. Popielski (1994), who found that persons with high meaningfulness had a higher score in the A factor (interpersonal warmth) in Cattell Personality Questionnaire, and J. Stempelová and A. Čmáriková (2004), who found positive correlations between The Existence Scale and agreeableness, was not confirmed. Only two individual dimensions - LMS affective and PMI coherence have significant correlations with agreeableness, but these correlations were quite small, and were found only in the group of university students. On the other hand, unexpected significant correlations of similar size were found between openness and meaningfulness, but only in the group of the elderly. These age differences can be interpreted and explained by taking into account the different developmental tasks of these phases as suggested in different developmental theories (e.g., Erikson, 2002/1950). In young adulthood, the main developmental task is to establish close relationships, and agreeableness can be helpful in a successful fulfillment of this task. In this way, agreeableness can contribute positively to an overall sense of meaningfulness. This is important also for the elderly; however, there are also different tasks. The elderly are being more and more restricted in physical and social activities, and successful adaptation to this life period de-

depends on the ability to preserve an active and engaged life. High openness to experience can help to replace old and already non-functioning sources of meaning with new ones.

Another problem coming from research on the relationship between meaningfulness and basic personality traits is the question of meaningfulness as trait or state. There is question of whether experiencing meaning in life is stable in time and can be considered as a trait or it is a specific situational experience, that is state and whether the state meaning and trait meaning are viable constructs (e.g., Schulenberg, 2003). Correlations of meaningfulness and basic personality traits revealed in our research give indirect support to the trait approach to meaningfulness - if there is a correlation of some constructs with stable personality traits, there is a high probability of stability of such constructs. However, these considerations are only preliminary and specific research is needed to answer this question. S.E. Schulenberg (2003) asks for longitudinal research on meaning, which could contribute to an understanding of this problem.

Previous interpretations were based on the assumption that basic personality traits are stable and unchangeable, and they influence human behavior and experiences, including that related to meaning in life. This assumption is widely accepted by a great number of personality psychologists. However, several studies came to the conclusion that the big five traits could be changed. R.L. Piedmont (2001) investigated changes in the big five personality traits after an outpatient drug rehabilitation program. He found that there were changes in all the personality dimensions, and changes in neuroticism (decreasing), agreeableness and conscientiousness (increasing) remained stable also 15

months later. Such results allow the opposite direction of influence to be considered - changes in life meaningfulness can affect scores in personality questionnaires. From this perspective, increasing life meaningfulness could lead to lower neuroticism and higher conscientiousness and extraversion. This is supported by the experiences of therapists, especially those existentially oriented, who emphasize a positive role of meaning in personality functioning (e.g., Frankl, 1996/1982; Yalom, 1980). In fact, the correlational nature of our research does not allow solving this problem. We can also hypothesize that the relationship of meaningfulness and some of the big five traits can be caused by other variables. One such source of common variance could probably be the general level of psychopathology or, formulated positively, general level of well-being. This is supported by the fact, that both meaningfulness as well as the big five traits correlate with well-being. Research by N. Hayes and S. Joseph (2003), who found that the best of the big five predictors of well-being are neuroticism, extraversion and conscientiousness, also give much support to the assumption that relationship of meaningfulness and these big five traits is a side effect of the degree of well-being. However, the question of causal influence seems to be more complicated and further research based on different methodology could provide more explanation to this problem.

At the end, it should be mentioned that this research is not without limitations. The main one is the structure of the sample. In both groups - university students as well as elderly people - the majority of the subjects were women, in the second group of the elderly, there were very few men. This was caused by the nature of the sample, because in Slovakia, students of humanis-

tic and social sciences are largely women. For that reason, generalization of the results could be somewhat questionable. In spite of this limitation, our study has brought findings which can encourage further research in this area.

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VZŤAH MEDZI ŽIVOTNOU ZMYSLUPLNOSŤOU A PIATIMI VEĽKÝMI OSOBNOSTNÝMI FAKTORMI

P. H a l a m a

Súhrn: Autor skúmal vzťah medzi piatimi veľkými osobnostnými črtami a prežívaním zmyslu života. Dotazník NEO-FFI bol korelovaný s dvoma dotazníkmi na meranie zmysluplnosti Rekerovým Indexom osobného zmyslu (PMI) a Halamovou Škálou na meranie životnej zmysluplnosti (LMS). NEO-FFI a PMI boli administrované dvom skupinám probandov: vysokoškolským študentom ($N = 82$, vekový priemer 21,13) a skupine starších ($N = 107$, vekový priemer 62,2). NEO-FFI spolu s LMS boli administrované dvom skupinám podobného veku: teda univerzitným študentom ($N = 149$, vekový priemer 21,56) a starším ($N = 67$, vekový priemer 57,3). Korelačné koeficienty medzi extravertiou a zmysluplnosťou sa pohybovali od 0,29 do 0,42, a medzi neurotizmom a zmysluplnosťou od -0,39 po -0,60. Bol tiež identifikovaný blízky vzťah medzi zmysluplnosťou a svedomitosťou (korelácie od 0,31 po 0,57). Nízke, ale signifikantné, korelácie niektorých dimenzií škál na meranie zmysluplnosti s otvorenosťou boli zistené na vzorke starších osôb, a s prívetivosťou na vzorke univerzitných študentov.