

# Meaning making and re-making processes in the lived experience of illness, fragility and social exclusion

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Published: March 31, 2021

Although over the last thirty years interdisciplinary studies have produced many theories and reflections on meaning-making processes concerning the experiences of illness, fragility and exclusions, many new and ancient emergency contexts remain subject to dismal focus or no exploration at all. Among them, for example, there is the condition of those who have lived afflicted with a chronic disease since their birth and throughout their existence, or of those who live immersed in an illness so intrusive and pervasive not permitting anything else but its care; besides this, the condition of those who have been hurt by a psychic or psychiatric disorder as outcome of a migratory experience; moreover, those who are troubled by difficulties facing one of the psychological and identity crisis of the human developmental path; last, the poverty as a condition that represents a more and more wide spreading, even if not unprecedented, emergency of the XXI century and, joint with this, the complex problematics that characterize the territories of our contemporaneous age where we spend our lifetime. All of these evidences lead us to take charge of some life spaces and body dimensions (still inhabited and unknown) that need, in order to be explored and understood, a reflective approach able to grasp new starting points of knowledge and meta-knowledge about spontaneous or induced meaning making processes that pervade them. Furthermore, this approach would be able to stimulate the exploration of those experiential contexts — cultural, material and symbolic — within which new ways of expression, inhibition or neglect contaminate the meaning-making process.

Beyond the approach chosen to explore the complexity of these experiences, a phenomenological paradigm will inform our analysis, based on the considerations that no event, experience or fact is evident to itself but rather is the outcome of a process in which *noema* and *noesis* are inseparable poles: *noema* mediates the intentional relation between the mental act (*noesis*) and the object; *noema* is the object as it is experienced by persons that pervade it with personal meaning-making process and by which they live their lives and give shape to their consciousness (Husserl, 2002, pp. 223–227). In addition, it is necessary to recognize that nobody can have access to the *first-personal givenness* of the lived experience:

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for this reason, the only way by which we can know it is through the mediation of the stories told by the subjects themselves (Thompson, Zahavi, 2007, p. 75). This evidence forced each of us to search for, stimulate and listen to people's voices and writing. Moreover, it is well known that every translation is a betrayal: for too long and too often the language and the words of someone (more powerful from a social, cultural or economic perspective) covered for the one's of some others (they who lived in their body the experience of limits) (McLaren, 2002); herein we attempt not to do it. Last, each story is produced by an intentionality that represents openness toward otherness, is self-transcendent and searching for a listener; nevertheless, it can contain a hidden drama as well as some of its elements could have been altered by force of social and cultural influences (McLean et al., 2018): it has been necessary to read into and not only describe the told stories of limit.

Given these considerations, the contributions collected in this issue focus on different thematic areas, that are:

- *meaning-making process as a crossing resource for vulnerable people*: Birthe Loa Knizek and his colleges, in the first contribute, focus on the meaning-making process ability to make order out of chaotic and difficult situations; moreover, the authors present some creative arts-based initiatives by which professional can help people hit by a life-threat to reorganize both their life-project and their identity.
- *illness as human experience* whose manifold variables can disrupt and transform a person's identity and life project: in this section, Stefano Benini describes the experience of limits defined by a oncological diagnosis by using the words of a person who has lived this experience; Daniele Bruzzone provides a theoretical framework to understand the meaning making processes in health contexts and analyses the ambiguity intrinsic in the existential condition of the *homo patiens* suspended between weakness or resilience; Natascia Bobbo presents a qualitative analysis of autobiographies written by four chronic ill patients, which she attempts to read and understand by using the illness condition metaphor of the phoenix; Lucia Zannini e Katia Daniele try to analyze how it could be possible to accompany relatives who have to face the "loss" of mental health in their family and support their meaning-making processes toward an acceptance that can mean freedom from pain.
- *fragility* as a possible outcome of a latent vulnerability that arises in the life cycle by force of changes or events that compromise a person's identity equilibrium is analyzed by Maria Benedetta Gambacorti-Passerini in the second section: the author attempts to understand the weaknesses and strengths of the meaning-making process by which the educational professionals inform their work preventing youth mental distress, according to Basaglia's effort that sees mental health linked to existential, educational, social and cultural elements of everyone's life conditions;
- *ancient and new poverty* as forms of social injustice as well as locus of the meaning-making process too often induced by cultural narratives is the focus of Lisa Brambilla, Matilde Pozzo e Marialisa Rizzo in the third section: the authors analyze the meaning-making process connected with the lived experiences of new poverty as an outcome of urban suffering, the tendency of human individualization and the loss of the social net of support.
- *marginality* and *exclusion* as a possible outcome of partial or stereotyped socio-cultural interpretations of reality, which often hit the foreign citizenship are the themes explored by Carlo Orefice in the fourth section: the author tries to understand how it would become possible to equip health care professionals with a non-stereotyped and trivializing reflection tool to analyze the relationship between psychic vulnerability and migratory experience.

The educational work should take care of the existential and subjective implications of these kinds of experiences since neither illness, nor fragility or marginality can be reduced to a simple and objective condition which an individual or a family experiences; rather they are facing a lived perceived impossibilities to access to world; nevertheless, the same limit experience can be lived differently by people only on the basis of their ability to face and to make sense of them.

The authors of the articles collected in this focus issue attempt to bring their contribution to the understanding of the nature and the constitutive factors of the meaning and re-meaning making process in the “first-person” in these kinds of limit experiences as well as to reflect on the emblematic areas of the process of construction and reconstruction of meaning in the contexts of health and care; last, their effort is directed towards identifying some methods and tools in order to project educational paths oriented to helping people to re-plan their existence after a limit experience. In brief, this focus issue aims to develop a reflection on the process of attribution of meaning (as an unavoidable dimension of a person’s experience), and on the process of meaning restructuring as a strategic key for those who have to face limit situations that can interfere with their personal identity and self-project.

New materials and starting points of reflection presented under this focus can be useful for professionals and educators so as to improve both their training practices and their daily actions, particularly aimed at those that would help the remission society and the suffering one (Frank, 2013, p. 9) to grasp a new voice in their life space, or support those who would welcome in the social services people who have undergone fragility and exclusion experiences, which are impregnated with significant educational repercussions.

Moreover, all the authors of this focus issue wish to support professionals and educators in learning how to merge their calculative thinking (employed to manage and face daily problems and obstacles) with a meditative thinking; mainly the second one could raise their awareness, first, of the enormous relevance of the meaning-making process in the life-path of their beneficiaries and, secondly, of the fact that their vocational choice itself is endowed with intentionality, which translates as meaningful openness to otherness.

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