

SOCIAL REINTEGRATION AND MISSIONARY WORK: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

*REINTEGRAÇÃO SOCIAL E TRABALHO MISSIONÁRIO: O OLHAR DA
PSICOLOGIA*

*REINTEGRACIÓN SOCIAL Y TRABAJO MISIONERO: LA MIRADA DE LA
PSICOLOGIA*

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ABSTRACT

This experience report, conducted by psychology students in Fortaleza, investigated the impact of religiosity on identity construction and coping with adversity among men in missionary training. Originating from homelessness and with a history of psychoactive substance use, the participants were engaged in a Catholic social reintegration program. Using participant observation and focus groups with the "Wheel of Life" tool, the qualitative research revealed significant improvement in fulfillment, happiness, purpose, and social life following religious engagement. The Christian organization served as a catalyst for transformation, offering support and meaning-making to the assisted individuals. It is concluded that religiosity emerges as an essential resource for alleviating suffering and re-signifying life, grounded in respect and non-stigmatization of vulnerable individuals. The field experience was fundamental for the theoretical and human development of the psychology students.

Keywords: Psychology; Religion; Focus Groups.

RESUMO

Este relato de experiência, conduzido por estudantes de psicologia em Fortaleza, investigou o impacto da religiosidade na construção da identidade e no enfrentamento de adversidades por homens em formação missionária. Originários de situação de rua e com histórico de uso de substâncias psicoativas, os participantes estavam em um programa de reintegração social católico. Utilizando observação participante e grupo focal, com a ferramenta "Roda da Vida", a pesquisa qualitativa revelou melhora significativa em plenitude, felicidade, propósito e vida social após o engajamento religioso. A organização cristã funcionou como catalisador de transformação, oferecendo suporte e ressignificação aos sujeitos assistidos. Conclui-se que a religiosidade emerge como um recurso essencial para o alívio do sofrimento e a ressignificação da vida, pautado no respeito e na não estigmatização de indivíduos em vulnerabilidade. A experiência de campo foi fundamental para a formação teórica e humana dos estudantes de psicologia.

Descriptores: Psicología; Religión; Grupos Focales.

RESUMEN

Este informe de experiencia, realizado por estudiantes de psicología en Fortaleza, investigó el impacto de la religiosidad en la construcción de la identidad y el afrontamiento de adversidades en hombres en formación misionera. Originarios de situación de calle y con historial de consumo de sustancias psicoactivas, los participantes estaban inmersos en un programa católico de reintegración social. Utilizando observación participante y grupo focal con la herramienta "Rueda de la Vida", la investigación cualitativa reveló una mejora significativa en plenitud, felicidad, propósito y vida social tras el compromiso religioso. La organización cristiana actuó como catalizador de transformación, ofreciendo apoyo y ressignificación a los sujetos asistidos. Se concluye que la religiosidad emerge como un recurso esencial para el alivio del sufrimiento y la ressignificación de la vida, fundamentado en el respeto y la no estigmatización de individuos en situación de vulnerabilidad. La experiencia de campo fue fundamental para la formación teórica y humana de los estudiantes de psicología.

Descriptores: Psicología; Religión; Grupos Focales.

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INTRODUCTION

Religiosity is a phenomenon of historical and cultural relevance, observed since ancient civilizations, extending to contemporary social configurations. Their role in the construction of personal identity, in the promotion of a sense of group belonging and in the attribution of meaning to existence has been widely recognized. In addition, religious practices are configured as an element of significant influence on the human experience, requiring critical analysis for the apprehension of their social, cultural, and political dimensions¹.

Thus, individuals who face states of anguish, in the search to resignify their experiences, can resort to religiosity as a coping mechanism in the face of existential dilemmas. This phenomenon points to the therapeutic function that religiosity has, as it offers emotional support and contributes to psychological well-being. Furthermore, faith helps to reframe suffering, provides emotional and social support, contributes to the attenuation of anxiety, and facilitates the attribution of purpose and meaning to life¹.

Deepening this understanding, the intersection between religious experience and situations of vulnerability gains relevance in social reintegration programs, in which the reconstruction of identity and social ties is fundamental. In view of this, this article aims to share the experience acquired by Psychology students from a certain university in Fortaleza, from a field project that consisted of conducting a focus group with adults. The authors chose people inserted in a social reintegration program, focused on homeless people and individuals with psychoactive substance use, who live in a Catholic rehabilitation institution. Considering that religious practice is a pillar of the institution's proposal to rescue the dignity, the present field study sought to describe and analyze how faith and religiosity influenced the resignification of the lives of men involved in training to become missionaries.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research, structured as an experience report. Qualitative research seeks to understand complex phenomena, exploring meanings, experiences, and contexts, without focusing on quantification. In this scenario, the experience report is configured as a descriptive study modality, which narrates experiences, interventions, or professional/academic practices, focusing on the perception and learning of the authors².

The experience took place in a Catholic rehabilitation house in Fortaleza. The institution states that its activities are free and maintained exclusively by donations from people who support the cause. This space, in addition to the initial reception, aims to prepare homeless people with a history of psychoactive substance use for social reintegration. To this end, it offers a structured complex with professional courses, psychological and social support, spiritual formation and living spaces, seeking reintegration into the labor market and the reconstruction of family and community ties. In addition, the program enables those welcomed to engage in a journey of formation and service and can become missionaries in the Christian organization itself. In this

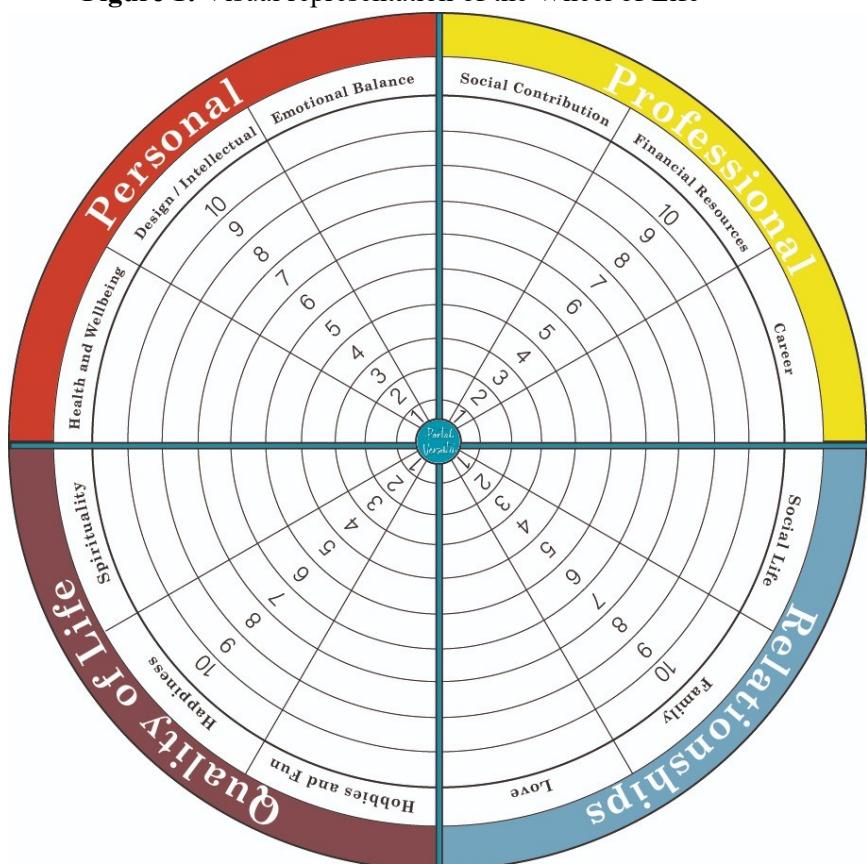
way, an engagement in the recovery process is expected and, for those who wish, continuous dedication to voluntary service and evangelization.

The data was collected from August to October 2024. During the meetings, different data collection techniques were used. Especially in the first visits, participant observation² was used, which implied the immersion of the students in the observed context, seeking to share the daily life of the participants to apprehend their perceptions of the lived experience. In addition, informal conversations were held to facilitate mutual knowledge and initial exploration of the participants' narratives.

In the last visit, a focus group² was conducted, understood as a moment of sharing that stimulates interaction among participants and facilitates the emergence of multiple points of view and reflections on a theme³. At that time, the "Wheel of Life" tool was used, a self-assessment system created by Paul J. Meyer in the 1960s, widely used to map and promote self-knowledge in relation to the main areas of life⁴.

Structured in 12 spheres arranged in a circle, in which the center represents 0% satisfaction and the end 100%, the Wheel of Life organizes these areas into four main triads: Quality of Life (which includes Hobbies and Fun; Happiness and Spirituality), Personal (covering Health and Well-Being; Intellectual Development and Emotional Balance), Professional (focused on Fulfillment and Purpose/Career; Financial Resources and Social Contribution) and Relationship (composed of Family; Love Relationship and Social Life)⁴, as shown in the following figure.

Figure 1: Visual representation of the Wheel of Life



Source: Portal Versátil⁵

The Wheel of Life, a visual tool for self-reflection to identify areas of self-transformation⁴, was applied in two versions: before and after the beginning of the missionary journey. The subsequent discussion on perceptions of change, combined with this qualitative approach, allowed an in-depth understanding of the resignification of these men's lives, emphasizing the role of religiosity in their life history.

RESULTS

The data collection process began with telephone contact and a first visit to the institution. After communicating with the psychologist responsible for the management of the institution, a face-to-face meeting was held to present the objectives of the research and get to know the physical space, as well as the missionaries in training. The group of interest for this study was composed of men in the final phase of institutional care, who expressed the desire for future engagement in missionary activities in the organization itself.

In the first days of the visit, informal care was established with the missionaries in preparation. The interaction was marked by remarkable receptivity, attention and respect from the participants. From the first moment, the relevance of knowing and apprehending the life trajectories of these individuals became evident, characterized by experiences in social contexts of extreme vulnerability and distant from the reality of the researchers. Attentive listening and our presence in the space were configured as facilitating elements in the construction of the bond and in the validation of the participants' experiences.

The participants reported that their involvement with missionary work and their experience in the institution promoted significant changes in their lives. They highlighted the development of greater patience and tolerance in dealing with others, as well as a conscious effort to practice active listening, devoid of judgments and respect for different perspectives in life. The presence of group cohesion and mutual support among the members of the house was markedly observed.

On the last trip to the field, a focus group was held, using the "Wheel of Life" ⁵ dynamic, to elicit and visualize the participants' perceptions of their lives before and after the missionary journey. However, an unexpected challenge arose: some of the missionaries lacked reading and writing skills. The immediate methodological adaptation consisted of verbalizing each area of the Wheel of Life so that non-literate participants could paint them. Despite the initial tension, the adaptation was successful, and everyone completed the activity with engagement and overcoming, with the support of the facilitators.

After completing the individual filling, space was opened for group discussion. Many participants shared their reflections, pointing out significant differences when comparing the two representations of the Wheel of Life. A clear perception of improvement was noted in several areas, with greater completion in the segments that represented Happiness (Quality of Life component), Purpose and Social Contribution (both in the Professional domain), as well as Social Life (in the Relationship domain). These areas, which often showed less filling in the circles that represented pre-

missionary life, exhibited a significant increase in post-engagement representation, illustrating the transformative impact of the new journey. At this moment, the discourse on the importance of religiosity and gratitude to the organization for the welcome and opportunities for resignification emerged as a central and recurring theme in the participants' speeches.

DISCUSSION

Among the most striking and unanimously shared observations by the participants, the vision of the Christian organization as a catalyst for profoundly positive transformation in their lives stood out. During the activity, reports emerged that expressed a feeling of emptiness or insignificance in their previous existences, with the realization that previous social relationships were superficial, often limited to interactions focused on the use of psychoactive substances and devoid of true support.

These testimonies underscore a notable lack of authentic connections and support in their past trajectories, a scenario that echoes the dynamics of contemporary society. This, in turn, reflects the liquid modernity referenced by Bauman⁶, in which the dissolution of solid social ties and the rise of an exacerbated individualism cultivate a self-centered culture. However, for the survey participants, this 'liquidity' manifests itself as an aggravating factor of their social vulnerability. The fragility of the bonds and the uncertainty inherent to this modernity leave them deprived of the minimum support networks, intensifying distancing, intolerance and segregation, and solidifying their position on the margins of a society that offers them fewer and fewer foundations.

Another circumstance reported by the missionaries in formation is the feeling of social stigmatization, intrinsically linked to the use of psychoactive substances. In fact, socially, there is a strong aversion associated with these people, who are conventionally approached from a moralizing perspective, being frequently blamed and associated with criminality and violence, in addition to being perceived as uncommitted or resistant to treatment. This scenario reinforces the view that these individuals are treated as "less legitimate" citizens in accessing their rights, which compromises adherence to treatment and the effectiveness of public policies, culminating in social exclusions, discrimination, and stereotyping that marginalize them⁷.

In this context, faith and religious community are established as a path of connection and care, filling the existential and relational vacuum left by the superficiality of social interactions, by offering a sense of purpose and meaning⁸. Psychology reinforces this idea by emphasizing that religiosity and community engagement can be potentiators of adaptive coping strategies, especially in times of adversity⁹.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in the field of psychology, the discussion about the use of psychoactive substances is strengthened in different approaches. Harm reduction has gained prominence as an indicated strategy in the search for minimizing the risks and negative consequences of substance use, understanding that immediate cessation is not always possible or preferable for all individuals and that any step towards safety is an advance¹⁰. However, a prominent feature in the narratives of the participants in this research was the emphasis on total abstinence, which they saw as the

only effective path to recovery. This "zero tolerance" perspective, aligned with moral and spiritual principles, was essential in rebuilding their lives, providing the structure and support needed to overcome the challenges of the past.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This experience report demonstrated that religiosity emerges as a significant and transformative resource for the resignification of life and the relief of individual suffering, as evidenced by the improvement observed in areas such as plenitude, happiness, purpose and social life of the participants of the aforementioned institution. The Christian organization, in the context studied, acted as a powerful catalyst for transformation, providing support and resignification in the face of the social stigma of "addicts". Notably, despite the recognition of harm reduction in psychology, participants in this study prioritized total abstinence as a path to their life reconstruction, an aspect that underlines the diversity of approaches and the importance of considering individuals' perspectives in their recovery process.

In this way, the research reinforces the imperative need for psychological care that is intrinsically based on respect and non-stigmatization of vulnerable individuals. It is essential that psychological practice recognizes and understands the different avenues through which support and reframing can occur, including religious engagement, and that public health policies reflect a responsible and humanized approach, going beyond criminalization to focus on facilitating access to resources and follow-up.

Finally, the integral conduct of this field project - from planning to the application of material and discussions - proved to be of fundamental importance for the theoretical and human formation of the authors. Being the first opportunity to carry out a practical group activity within the scope of the academic discipline, the experience provided a rich integration between academic knowledge and practical reality. This immersion not only consolidated professional skills, but also fostered a deep ethical and empathetic development, consolidating the perception of psychology as an area of activity with genuine potential for social transformation.

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