

## *Society's Impact on Individual Choices: A Sociocultural study of 'Veronika Decides to Die' by Paulo Coelho*

**Lecturer: Hanan Ali Hussein Al-Shammri**  
**Ministry of Education- Babil Education Directorate**  
Shahrazad596@gmail.com

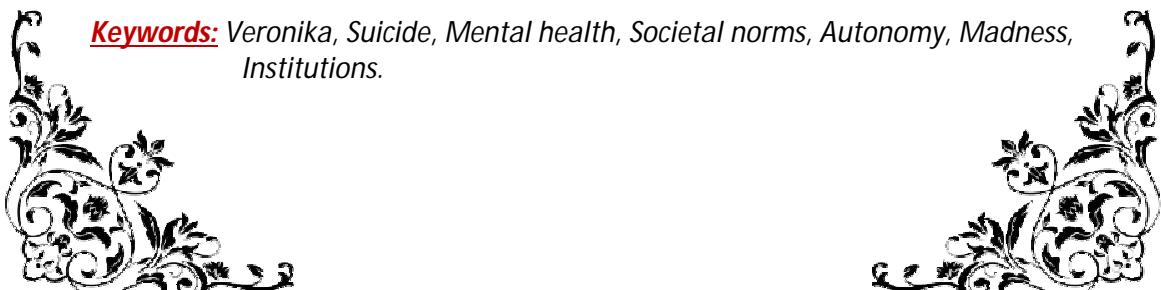
### **Abstract:-**

*Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho is a touching exploration of free will, societal norms, and mental illness. It is both a novel and, more conveniently, a focus for the study of more general sociocultural processes. The narrative revolves around Veronika, a young Slovenian girl who makes a suicide attempt and wakes up in Villette, a mental hospital, where she has been told she has only a few days left to live due to cardiac failure. During her stay there, Veronika meets many other patients, each with their own unique kinds of psychological problems, while Dr. Igor, the head psychiatrist, concocts the bizarre scheme of convincing Veronika of her impending death to sow the desire to live.

Veronika's life becomes intertwined with that of others. She goes through the labyrinths of love, hatred, and self-discovery to finally realize the paradox—the mad should inherit the earth, for, in the name of sanity, the collective madness is often camouflaged. The mental hospital serves as a microcosm of the whole world, where cultural standards determine the options available to everybody, creating ultimatums for them to bear. This paper builds upon Coelho's narrative to expound and analyze the interaction between societal influence and personal agency, applying sociocultural theory, normative conformity, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. In analyzing Veronika's transition from despair to self-actualization, the conflict between cultural values and self-determined living is evident.

Real-life case studies are now referenced, illustrating how structured societal and psychological frameworks influence free choice. The work solicits readers' attention to balancing a tightrope of sanity and madness, stigma with mental health, and authenticity in a world of conformity. Ultimately, *Veronika Decides to Die* serves as a revealing case-study where the individual agency is at the behest of the restraints by society while trying to better understand the forces behind human behavior.

**Keywords:** Veronika, Suicide, Mental health, Societal norms, Autonomy, Madness, Institutions.



## تأثير المجتمع على الخيارات الفردية: دراسة اجتماعية ثقافية

### رواية "فيرونيكا تقرر أن تموت" للكاتب باولو كويلوا

م. حنان علي حسين الشمري

وزارة التربية - المديرية العامة للتربية بابل

#### الملخص:-

هذه الرواية استكشافاً عميقاً للإرادة الحرة للكاتب باولوا كويلوا وأيضاً للمعايير الاجتماعية والمرض النفسي. إنها ليست رواية فحسب بل تمثل محوراً مناسباً لدراسة العمليات الاجتماعية- الثقافية العامة. تدور القصة حول فيرونيكا شابة سلوفانية تحاول الانتحار، لستيقظ في "فيلي" وهي مستشفى للإمراض النفسية، حيث يخبرونها أنها لن تعيش سوى أيام قليلة؛ بسبب تلف في القلب. داخل هذا الإطار المغلق، تواجه فيرونيكا مرضي آخرين يعانون من صراعات نفسية خاصة بهم، بينما يقوم الطبيب النفسي إيفور بتجربة غير تقليدية: إذ يقوم الدكتور النفسي إيفور بوضع خطة غريبة تقضي بإيقاع فيرونيكا بأنها تحضر رغبة منه في زرع الرغبة في الحياة مجدداً داخلها.

تشابك حياة فيرونيكا مع حياة الآخرين. تمر عبر متأهات الحب، والكرامة، واكتشاف الذات، لتصل في النهاية إلى إدراك المفارقة: يتبين أن يرث المجانين الأرض؛ لأن الجنون الجماعي غالباً ما يُمْوَأه باسم العقل. يشكل مستشفى الأمراض النفسية نموذجاً مصغرًا للعالم بأسره، حيث تحدد المعايير الثقافية الخيارات المتاحة للجميع، مما يخلق إنتزارات نهائية يتحتم عليهم مواجهتها. تبني هذه الورقة على سرد كويلو لتحليل وتفسير التفاعل بين تأثير المجتمع والقدرة الفردية على اتخاذ القرار، من خلال تطبيق نظرية علم النفس الاجتماعي الثقافي، والتطابق مع المعايير، والوجودية، والتحليل النفسي. ومن خلال تحليل انتقال فيرونيكا من اليأس إلى تحقيق الذات، يتجلّى الصراع بين القيم الثقافية والعيش وفقاً لما يحدده الفرد لنفسه.

تُسْتَشَهِدُ الْآن بحالات واقعية لتوضيح كيف تؤثِّرُ الأطْرُ الاجتماعية والنفسيَّة المنظَّمة على حرية الاختيار. يستدعي هذا العمل انتباه القراء إلى أهمية تحقيق التوازن بين العقل والجنون، والوصمة والصحة النفسية، والصدق مع الذات في عالم يسوده التوافق والانصياع. في النهاية، تُعد رواية "فيرونيكا على وشك الموت". دراسة حالة كاشفة، تُظهرُ كيف تكون الإرادة الفردية خاضعة للقيود التي يفرضها المجتمع، وذلك في محاولة لفهم القوى الكامنة وراء السلوك البشري بشكل أعمق.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** فيرونيكا، الانتحار، صحة عقلية، العرف الاجتماعي، التشريح، الجنون، مؤسسات.

## Research Objectives:

- Examine the representation of social relationships within the context of the novel and their impact on the main characters .
- Analyses the influence of social factors on the characters' decisions and orientations .
- Understand how social interaction evolves in the story to affect the psychological growth and transformation of the characters.

## Methodology:

Literary Analysis: We'll conduct a thorough literary analysis of the novel, examining key themes, character development, and narrative techniques. This analysis will serve as the foundation for our insights . . . Review of critical research on the impact of social relationships in literary works.

## Introduction to Sociocultural Studies and Literature Analysis

Paulo Coelho's Veronika Decides to Die describes mental health, societal norms, and individual freedom. In this study, I examine how social relationships and cultural aspects inform characters' courses of action, through the theoretical lens of normative conformity, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. In checking the leaps made by Veronika, I will show the tug-of-war between what society demands and invokes in terms of human freedom (Coelho, 1998, p. 3). Sociocultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field in which the wisdom of cultural and social sciences is combined. This, therefore, scrutinizes the complexities of the processes involving society members and their linguistic practices in a community .

Culture is a concept that carries many meanings and has various connotations. Cultural politics argue that cultural phenomena have always been and remain influenced by the social and political currents that exist. Taste, on the other hand, reflects a clear marker of lifestyle and social stratification, serving mainly to articulate the formation of power and social hierarchy. The cultural politics suggest a postulate representation of culture that is both pragmatic and encompassing and hence the need to relate this perspective to social existence as well (Foucault, 1977, p. 25). The analysis over this discourse intends to show the societal manifestation over an individual exercise of choice as aligned in Veronika Decides to Die.



The power structure is a way in which the social control of individuals is described in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. One would generally call this enlightening control, henceforth making a space to underpin such control.

The interaction creates overlapping power roles in a kind of dialect-effectual relation between dominant and dominated entities. The power relations, however, an eternal dual nature of causing one dependent or dominated entity to transcend beyond the original task set forth by the other. These powers are expressed, however, in almost political, historical, theoretical, and economic settings. On the level of the mind and cognitive consciousness itself, such a power might legitimately factor in the ideas of causing domination, change, or repair. But along these lines also, power tends to borrow characteristics of obstinacy and authoritarianism that, as one recognizes, relate to oppressive factors. Operating surreptitiously and silently. Such dominion uses the modality of discourses and construction of cultural artifacts to govern and control the subjects (Durkheim, 1897, p. 102).

### **Analysis of 'Veronika Decides to Die' by Paulo Coelho**

Paulo Coelho's Veronika Decides to Die is a novel, first published in 1998, that presents rather stirring reflections on mental health, social conformity, and personal choice. Its protagonist, Veronika, is a somewhat young woman who, one fine day, attempts to take an overdose of sleeping pills in order to put an end to the bitterness she holds in her heart-hand. She wakes, however, after the attempted suicide, still alive although attended to inside a mental hospital by a psychiatrist. Toussaint examines Veronika's self-discovery along with the pressures societal and personal that led her to take a leap toward the brink of despair—a wondrous book (Maslow, 1943, p. 373) , As well as , Veronika attempts suicide in despair and a complete disillusion with life. The next time she regains consciousness in the hospital, a psychiatrist tells her the damage from the overdosing of pills on her heart is permanent. She has only one week to live. This sets the stage for Veronika's internal journey throughout the confines of the hospital, mingling and interacting with its other patients. While staying in the hospital, Veronika doubts her perceptions of life and death and, then, later begins to question the societal expectations responsible for her identities (Frankl, 1959, p. 45). A mental hospital, taken as a small model of society, gives Veronika the opportunity to travel into



her own grievances and fears, leading her to discover a new appreciation for life.

### Thematic Exposition and Sociocultural Analysis

Within Veronika Decides to Die are grounded complexities of themes appropriate for sociocultural analysis. Criticism of social ideals also comes forth as one community orientation of the book. However, the juxtaposition of the initial despair of Veronika stems from her alienation from a society that worships materialism and superficial appearances. The book puts readers in a position of examination as to whether or not these kinds of standards that society places hold any value; it begs the submission of the need for individual authenticity (Fromm, 1941, p. 88). Other concepts dealt with in the book center around mental health and stigma associated with mental illnesses.

Veronika's experience in a mental hospital demonstrates both the challenges of treatment in mental health and the conflicting sets of experiences of people labeled as "crazy." The ongoing difference of how Coelho uses a hospital setting allows spell-binding comments about the arbitrary nature of that label and the humanity often forgotten amongst these same people tolerated by society. It also elaborates on the aspect of power and control. The doctor's resolve to confine Veronika within the mental hospital despite her protests truly illustrates how authority figures controlled the lives of individuals (Goffman, 1961, p. 31). (

This power dynamic is always present in Veronika, given that she interacts with other patients, as they each try to assert their freedom and self-determination. Cultural industry and standardization On the basis of concepts provided by cultural theorists, the novel could also be said to critique the cultural industry and cultural standardization. Coelho articulates that the cultural industry can shape the values and perceptions of society, generally at the price of individualism and critical thinking(Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, p. 94).. The mental hospital becomes a factory into which insanity is introduced and perpetuated through the rigid imposition of norms and repression of dissent.

That, then, begs the question of the ways in which commodified culture is bent into the mold of those experimentally testing the waters to command the attention of others(Foucault, 1977, p. 25).. With its portrayal of the mental hospital as a microcosm of society, the novel represents just

one of many examples of how pervasive industries in culture are in the shaping of individuals' lives as well as identities. Interpersonal dynamics and character construction. This concern surrounds the role of interpersonal dynamics in designating a character. Researchers have shown that social relationships often play a crucial role in the emotional and psychological growth of literary characters.

The relationship trajectory in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy is decisive for their individual character arcs. Scholars have maintained that their interactions, misunderstandings, and eventual mutual respect illustrate how these social relations can change identities (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Likewise, in those lines, relationships of the protagonist with other characters, particularly Daisy Buchanan and Nick Carraway, are essential to revealing the complexities of their motivations in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The critical analyses reveal how Gatsby's social life, with its accompanying quest for the American Dream, eventually leads to his destruction, blending personal ambition with the surrounding cultural context (Fromm, 1941, p. 88).

### **Social Relationships and Thematic Exploration**

The research is also concerned with the aspect of how social relationships contribute to the broader exploration of themes in the text. Some relationships have allowed the authors to explore some problems of power, class, gender, and morality. Examples of this include Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where relationships among characters such as Sethe, Paul D, and Denver form the very prism through which trauma, memory, and legacies of slavery are examined in the novel (Frankl, 1959, p. 45).

Researchers have noted that these connections reflect how individuals are linked through shared experiences and reveal their potential for personal growth. It is widely acknowledged that Orwell, in *1984*, critiques totalitarianism and its effects on human relationships by exposing the manipulation of social structures. Notably, the complex relationship between Winston and Julia illustrates how government interference can distort and damage personal bonds. Various studies have explored how Orwell uses these relationships to highlight themes such as dehumanization, resistance, and the influence of surveillance on the development of human connections (Goffman, 1961, p. 31.)

The role of social context in framing relationships within literature is a master key area of research emphasizing how historical events, institutional forces, and cultural norms impact individual interaction. However, it is important to notice that 1984 and Gabriel Garcia Marcus' 100 Years of Solitude differed significantly in their approaches and themes..

### Comprehensive Overview of Author Paulo Coelho's Novel Veronika Decides to Die

Veronika Decides to Die is an existential journey of a young woman from Slovenia very much into the whole youth-beauty-stability concept. — but feels her life lacks meaning (May, 1983, p. 112). Driven by this void, she attempts suicide and wakes up in Villette, a mental hospital, where she is told she has only days to live due to irreversible heart damage. The novel follows her interactions with other patients, each grappling with their own mental health struggles and societal pressures. Through these encounters, Veronika re-examines her beliefs about life, society, and herself, leading to a profound transformation where she finds a new appreciation for life and a renewed sense of purpose.

The novel delves into several profound themes. Coelho explores existentialism, emphasising the search for individual meaning and the importance of personal freedom and choice. Mental health is another critical theme, as the book challenges societal stigmas and portrays the diverse experiences of those with mental illnesses. (Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007, p. 76) Themes of conformity and rebellion are also evident, with Veronika's initial suicide attempt and subsequent journey reflecting her struggle against societal norms and her pursuit of authentic self-expression. The concepts of life and death are central to the narrative, prompting readers to reflect on the value of existence and the significance of the choices we make. "Existentialism plays a key role in Veronika's transformation.

Initially, she sees life as meaningless, but through her interactions and self-reflection, she creates her own meaning. For example, her decision to play the piano again, despite her limited time, symbolises her newfound

appreciation for life." Set primarily in Villette, the mental hospital serves as a microcosm of society, allowing Coelho to explore various social and psychological themes through the lives of its patients and staff. Characters like Dr. Igor, Zedka, Mari, and Eduard provide different perspectives on

mental health, personal struggles, and the impact of societal expectations. Veronika's journey from vanishing despair to hope, shaped by her relations with these characters, highlighted novel's theme of human resilience of the human spirit and the significance of finding one's purposes despite societal chains or slandered. Coelho's "Veronika Decides to Die" is offers a powerful look into the life's meaning, mental health, and the quest for personal true-self-expression. (Wong, 2016, p. 34.)

Sociocultural theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky, highlights the crucial role of social interactions and cultural context in shaping a person's thinking and behavior. According to this framework, human development is a collaborative process, shaped by societal norms, values, and expectations of the society. In the context of "Veronika Decides to Die," Veronika's suicide attempts and her eventual transformation can be interpreted through the framework of sociocultural theory. The societal pressures she faces, including the expectation to conform to conventional standards of success and happiness, contribute significantly to her feelings of disillusionment and despair (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The novel shows how Veronika's interactions with other patients in Villette, who each bring their own sociocultural backgrounds and experiences, help her to re-evaluate her beliefs and find new meaning in life. This theory focuses on the profound influence of society on individual decisions and stressed the importance of social support and cultural context in personal growth.

### Normative Conformity and Societal Expectations

Normative conformity is evident in Veronika's initial adherence to societal expectations, which leads to her feelings of emptiness. Her suicide attempt represents a rejection of these norms. Nevertheless, her experience in the mental hospital, especially with Eduard, help her embrace her true self, illustrating the transformative power of authenticity. Normative conformity refers to the phenomenon where individuals align their actions, attitudes, and choices so others will accept them and not leave them out. (Fromm, 1941, p. 90). This framework can be applied to analyse Veronika's early actions and mental condition. Despite having a seemingly perfect life, Veronika feels empty and entrapped by societal expectations that dictate how she should live and what she should aspire to achieve. Her suicide attempt may be an attempt as a powerful act and rejection of these norms and a cry for authenticity. In Villette, Veronika



encounters individuals who, like herself, have struggled with the burden of societal expectations.

Through these interactions, the novel offers a critiques of societal pressures to conform and the ways in which they can stifle individual creativity, freedom, and mental health. This work consternate on the need for societal adaptability in give individuals allowing to pursue personal self –journey and fulfilment without the scare of neglected .

### Existentialism and the Quest for Meaning

Existentialism is a philosophical school that stressed individual freedom, choice, and the creation of personal meaning in a seemingly indifferent universe. This concept is particularly relevant to "Veronika Decides to Die", as the novel delves into existential themes through Veronika's experience. Initially, Veronika's overwhelming sense of purposelessness leads her to consider life meaningless, eventually this feeling pushing her to suicide attempt. However, as she faces the reality of her mortality and relationship with other patients, she starts to discover the meaning of life and opens up to the good choices in life other than death. Existentialism suggests that individuals must walk in their own paths and forget about the past and create meaning through their own choices and behaviour. Veronika's change , from looking at her life as empty to accepting the possibilities of living honestly , encapsulates the essence of existential thought. (Yalom, 1980, p. 112): The novel invites readers to reflect on their lives and the importance of personal decisions in shaping a meaningful existence .

### Psychoanalysis, Self-Actualisation, and Social Control

The work of psychoanalysis, especially Abraham Maslow's concept of personal growth , can describe the analyses of Veronika's psychological change throughout the novel. Self-development refers to the self-awareness of one's full potential and the passion for personal growth. In Villette, Veronika's interactions with other patients and the introspection prompted by her imminent death guide her towards self-actualization. This journey is corresponding with Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, which metaphorically represents the mechanisms of social control and surveillance that shape individual behavior (Jung, 1964, p. 55):.

The mental hospital serves as a sample of society, where individuals are observed, sorted , and controlled based on societal standards. Veronika's

journey towards her potential was accompanied by her breaching these societal norms and discovering her authenticity. This theoretical framework goal to show the connection between societal control by norms and expectations and individual freedom, stressing the potential of personal growth and fulfilment when individuals insist on and breach societal expectations. By investigating Veronika's story through these theoretical frameworks, we gain a nuanced understanding of how societal factors influence individual choices and the complex interplay between social context and personal journey.

### **Case Studies and Real-Life Examples of Sociocultural Influences on Individual Choices**

- 1- Sociopolitical Development of African American Youth A case study on the sociopolitical development of African American youth highlights how sociocultural factors such as racial identity, racial socialisation, and experiences of racial discrimination shape their awareness of social inequality and engagement in activism. This study emphasises the importance of understanding the connections between racial sociocultural processes and youth's sociopolitical development. For instance, Black youth in nations with racial stratification have resisted oppression by engaging in political movements like the South African Students' Movement and Black Lives Matter. This case study illustrates how sociocultural influences can drive individuals to become aware of and act against sociopolitical factors contributing to inequitable social systems. (Cross, 1991, p. 203).
- 2- Cultural Influences on Career Choices Research has shown that cultural values significantly impact the factors influencing youths' career choices. For example, studies have found that cultural expectations and family values play a crucial role in shaping career aspirations and decisions. In some cultures, certain professions are highly valued and encouraged, while others may be discouraged(Super, 1957, p. 77). This cultural influence can lead to individuals pursuing careers that align with societal expectations rather than personal interests. A systematic review of factors influencing youths' career choices highlights the importance of considering cultural values when analysing career decision-making processes .

- 3- Learning Collaboratively in the Classroom An example of sociocultural theory in action is the collaborative learning approach in classrooms. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In this setting, students work in groups to solve problems or complete projects, allowing them to learn from each other and share diverse perspectives. For instance, in a history class, students might be divided into groups to research different aspects of a historical event and then present their findings to the class(Bruner, 1996, p. 58).. This collaborative approach fosters a deeper understanding of the subject matter and emphasises the role of social interactions in learning. The teacher facilitates these interactions, guiding the students and providing support when needed.
- 4- Cultural Definitions of Leadership Cultural definitions of leadership vary significantly across different societies, influencing how individuals perceive and enact leadership roles. In some cultures, leaders are expected to be firm, demanding, and emotionally distant, while in others, leaders are expected to be empathetic and concerned about the thoughts and feelings of their team(Hofstede, 1980, p. 112).. These cultural expectations shape individuals' leadership styles and behaviours, impacting worker productivity and company loyalty. Understanding these cultural differences is essential for effective leadership in diverse and multicultural environments. (Goleman, 1995, p. 78).

### **Conclusion:**

To sum up , Veronika Decides to Die by Paulo Coelho shows a deep exploration of the connection between societal expectations and the investigations of individual selfhood. Through Veronika's journey, the novel encourages readers to question prescribed community standards and advocate authentic self-expression. Her opening to admission to a mental health hospital represents the process of engagement with the nature of the human soul , in addition to the possibility for personal transformation. Veronika's first time suicide try to show her rejection of a life restitution by societal norms. This analysis stresses on the paradox that established social conventions can , simultaneously , mask a form of mob mentality. By shaped Varity's theoretical frameworks—like normativity, conformity, existentialism, and psychoanalysis—this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how social forces influence personal

decisions. Veronica's story showed significant demonstrations of the human condition, with its obstacles, challenges and success through the prescriptions of normative compliance, sociocultural theory, psychoanalysis and existentialism, increasing comprehension and appreciation for the complex interplay between societal norms, cultural rules and individual choices as Veronica navigates her way on her self-journey and development. The novel's investigate about mental health, cultural norms, and the pursuit of credibility that provide a richness of knowledge, showing the complicated details of individuals life .

This novel challenges the boundaries of cultural norms, compelling readers to engage in introspection and make intentional choices that shape their lives and pushing us to search for the meaning of life and be completely responsible about it, disregarding what norms are around us or any other kind of restrictions.

This research focuses on the value of individual independence and supports increased adaptability of society, permitting individuals to live their own lives. Future research could expand on this topic by comparing Veronica's experiences with those of characters in other literary works that explore mental health and cultural norms or by assessing how gender roles align with social conventions. Veronika Decides to Die ends on a sad note that shows how self-discovery and human persistence may evolve over time.



### **References:**

- Coelho, P. (1998). *Veronika decides to die*. HarperCollins .
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. Submission ID trn:oid:1:3212683339
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Durkheim, E. (1897). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. Free Press.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Anchor Books.
- Laing, R. D. (1960). *The divided self: An existential study in sanity and madness*. Penguin Books.
- Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Beacon Press .
- Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. Free Press .
- Szasz, T. S. (1961). *The myth of mental illness: Foundations of a theory of personal conduct*. Harper & Row .
- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin .
- Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. Farrar & Rinehart.
- Jung, C. G. (1964). *Man and his symbols*. Doubleday.
- Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. Basic Books .
- May, R. (1983). *The discovery of being: Writings in existential psychology*. W. W. Norton & Company .
- Horwitz, A. V., & Wakefield, J. C. (2007). *The loss of sadness: How psychiatry transformed normal sorrow into depressive disorder*. Oxford University Press .
- Wong, P. T. P. (2016). Meaning-seeking, self-transcendence, and well-being. In A. Batthyány (Ed.), *Logotherapy and existential analysis* (pp. 311–322). Springer.

