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# Maturity of Personality, Purpose of Life and Value System in Nuns During a Midlife Crisis

Dojrzałość osobowości, cel życia i system wartości  
u zakonnic w okresie kryzysu wieku średniego

## Abstract

This article aims to deepen our understanding of the midlife crisis of nuns (a study group) and women living alone (a control group). We present the results of an empirical study conducted on a group of 100 women aged 35–45. This study aimed to discover whether convent life, along with its spiritual-religious formation, may have a positive influence on the ability of women to deal with a midlife crisis and aid the development of their mature personalities by strengthening their sense of purpose and shaping their value systems. The issue tackled by this article can be contained in the following question: Is religious formation central to convent life able to support a person in a midlife crisis in gaining a higher degree of personal maturity? We may gain an answer to this by considering whether nuns engaged in such religious formation compared to women living alone would exhibit any differences in personal maturity and a sense of life's purpose and value system.

**Keywords:** midlife crisis, values, personal maturity, nuns

## Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu pogłębienie naszego zrozumienia kryzysu wieku średniego u zakonnic (grupa badana) i kobiet żyjących samotnie (grupa kontrolna). Przedstawiamy wyniki badania empirycznego przeprowadzonego na grupie 100 kobiet w wieku 35–45 lat. Badanie to miało na celu sprawdzenie, czy życie w klasztorze, wraz z jego formacją duchowo-religijną, może mieć pozytywny

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wpływ na zdolność kobiet do radzenia sobie z kryzysem wieku średniego i wspomagając rozwój ich dojrzałej osobowości poprzez wzmacnianie poczucia celu i kształtowanie systemów wartości. Problem poruszony w niniejszym artykule można zawrzeć w pytaniu: czy formacja zakonna, centralna dla życia klasztornego, jest w stanie wesprzeć osobę w kryzysie wieku średniego w uzyskaniu wyższego stopnia dojrzałości osobowej? Odpowiedź na to pytanie staraliśmy się uzyskać, sprawdzając, czy zakonnice zaangażowane w taką formację religijną, w porównaniu z kobietami żyjącymi samotnie, wykazują jakiegokolwiek różnice w dojrzałości osobistej oraz w poczuciu celu życia i przyjmowanym systemie wartości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kryzys wieku średniego, wartości, dojrzałość osobowości, zakonnice

## Introduction

The word crisis comes from the Greek *κρίσις* – *krísis* – meaning breakthrough, a point of decision, a turning point. A crisis is a sudden, unexpected improvement or worsening of a situation. For E. Erikson,<sup>1</sup> a crisis was both a period of increased development potential in a person's life and a time of possible failures. Each sudden interference with the ordinary flow of affairs demands reassessing one's ways of thinking and acting. The very word crisis has primarily negative connotations. It suggests a breakdown or a state of endangerment. However, a crisis, especially a development crisis, may lead to a breakthrough and a higher quality of life if resolved.

The concept of a crisis entered into psychology fairly recently. Although it was already used in the context of human developmental changes (C.G. Jung), it was not till the twentieth century that Lindemann<sup>2</sup> introduced it into the psychology literature. This was the starting point for many studies and attempts at defining the term. This issue has been tackled by, among many others, Caplan, Halpern, Lazarus, Dąbrowski,<sup>3</sup> and most recently Oleś and Gasiul in Poland.<sup>4</sup>

The issue tackled here can be contained in the following question: Is religious formation central to convent life able to support a person in a midlife crisis in gaining a higher degree of personal maturity? We may gain an answer to this by considering whether nuns engaged in such religious formation compared

<sup>1</sup> E.H. Erikson, *Tożsamość a cykl życia*, Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2004; idem, *Dopełniony cykl życia*, Wydawnictwo Helion, Poznań 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Erich Lindemann presented his experiences of working with the relatives of victims of a tragic fire in *Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief*, "American Journal of Psychiatry" 1944, no. 101, p. 141–148.

<sup>3</sup> G. Caplan, *Principles of Preventive Psychiatry*, Basic Books, New York 1964; H.A. Halpern, *Crisis Theory: A Definitional Study*, "Community Mental Health Journal" 1973, no. 9, p. 342–349; R.P. Lazarus, *Paradygmat stresu i radzenia sobie*, "Nowiny Psychologiczne" 1986, no. 3–4, p. 2–29; K. Dąbrowski, *Dezintegracja pozytywna*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1979.

<sup>4</sup> P. Oleś, *Psychologia przełomu połowy życia*, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2000; H. Gasiul, *Teorie emocji i motywacji. Rozważania psychologiczne*, Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warsaw 2002.

to women living alone would exhibit any differences in personal maturity and a sense of life's purpose and value system.

## Theoretical Basis of Research

Middle age is a developmental stage, usually between the ages of thirty and sixty.<sup>5</sup> During this period, both women and men reach their peak productivity and make the most meaningful contributions to society. Key challenges of this period involve developing full social and civic responsibility, attaining appropriate living standards, helping teenage children become responsible adults, learning to spend leisure time in ways suitable for an adult, building up a marital relationship and accepting physiological changes typical to middle age. Developmental processes activate adjustment mechanisms which need to be honed.<sup>6</sup>

Helena Sęk<sup>7</sup> makes a distinction between specific and non-specific symptoms of midlife crisis. Non-specific symptoms combine to form a sense of discomfort and include tension, doubt, change, confusion, a need to make changes, take up new challenges and tasks, and a state of increased excitability and sensitivity. These symptoms are the background and basis for the particular characteristics of a crisis, such as posing existential questions about the purpose and goals of life, values, identity and quality of relations with one's environment; attempting to compare and balance successes and failures, dreams and reality, values once important and those current; planning future changes and taking up new tasks. The existential nature of the problems one faces at the halfway mark can thus be seen.<sup>8</sup> A clear reference to Jung points to the crisis as a challenge which aids in the integration of opposites. According to Piotr Oleś,<sup>9</sup> a midlife crisis is a process

<sup>5</sup> R.J. Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education*, McKay, New York 1953.

<sup>6</sup> A. Birch, T. Malim, *Psychologia rozwojowa w zarysie. Od niemowlęctwa do dorosłości*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 1995, p. 141–142; F.B. Livson, *Paths to Psychological Health in the Middle Years: Sex Differences*, in: *Present and Past in Middle Life*, eds. D.H. Eichorn et al., Academic Press, New York 1981, p. 195–221; A. Niemczyński, *Procesy rozwojowe człowieka w pełnym cyklu życia indywidualnego*, in: *Rozwój psychiczny człowieka w ciągu życia: Zagadnienia teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, ed. M. Tyszkowa, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1988; Z. Pietrański, *Rozwój człowieka dorosłego*, "Wiedza Powszechna", Warsaw 1990.

<sup>7</sup> H. Sęk, *Kryzys wieku średniego a funkcjonowanie w społecznych rolach rodzinnych*, CPBP, Poznań 1990, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> J.R. Ciernia, *Myth about Mid-Life Crisis*, "Psychological Reports" 1985, vol. 56, no. 3, p. 1003–1007; E. Jaques, *Death and the Mid-Life Crisis*, "The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis" 1965, vol. 46, no. 4, p. 502–514; D.L. Shek, *A Scale for the Assessment of Midlife Crisis in Chinese People*, "Psychologia" 1995, vol. 38, p. 164–173; P.A. Waskel, *Intensity of Midlife Crisis on Responses to the Death Concern Scale*, "Journal of Psychology" 1992, vol. 126, no. 2, p. 147–154; P.K. Whitbourne, *The Me I Know: A Study of Adult Identity*, Springer, New York 1986.

<sup>9</sup> P. Oleś, *Psychologia przełomu...*, p. 135.

of intensive and subjectively challenging changes in personality which affect one's view of the self and the world, one's values and life goals, which may stem from a confrontation with the finality of life, a reassessment of life goals thus far and a need to adapt to tasks and roles typical for middle age.

In the case of women, physiological changes associated with the first symptoms of ageing play an important role in a midlife crisis. Some women experience physical changes dramatically, having realised that they may be losing their attractiveness, which, in turn, affects their sense of self-worth. If illness or menopause issues should compound the problem, then the situation may indeed become dramatic as it disturbs one's sense of identity as a woman.<sup>10</sup>

Most women around the age of forty experience serious problems. Life reaches a stage when it is clear that there may not be a lot of time left to achieve one's goals and aspirations, to marry or have a child. It may be difficult to avoid a reckoning of dreams and goals realised and unrealised.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the last call for entering the majority of monastic orders also comes at forty. Midlife crisis encompasses many particular phenomena and problems, depressive states and destabilising of one's sense of self-worth associated with physical changes. How one copes with these problems and how a midlife crisis plays out depends on many factors, including personality traits, life history and roles fulfilled so far.<sup>12</sup>

A calling to convent life may be understood as a human answer to a particular call from God. Thus defined, it becomes an existential fact in two dimensions: human (the human answer) and divine (God's call). It can be considered using:

- (a) a spiritual approach – “from above”;
- (b) a psychological approach – human element;
- (c) an anthropological/Christian approach by considering both the divine and the human elements and attempting to harmonise their particular dynamics.

The formation of an individual's identity plays a deciding role in the developmental process generally and particularly in the calling aspect. This process occurs in stages and takes on the characteristics of fundamental positions that change with the periods of one's life. If these development stages occur regularly, the woman may make a final choice, perceived as the only correct one for realising her life plan, which has gradually become more personal and

<sup>10</sup> B. Giordani, *Wybrane przez Chrystusa. Kobiety konsekrowane. Studium psychologiczne*, Wydawnictwo Świętego Pawła, Częstochowa 2008; J.M. Montepare, *Actual and Subjective Age-Related Differences in Women's Attitudes toward Their Bodies across the Life Span*, “Journal of Adult Development” 1996, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 171–182; Z. Pietrasiniński, *Rozwój człowieka dorosłego*; H. Sęk, *Kryzys wieku średniego...*

<sup>11</sup> C. Ward, *Mid-Life Crisis in Women – A Cross-Cultural Phenomenon?*, in: *Growth and Progress in Cross-Cultural Psychology*, ed. C. Kagitçibasi, Swets North America, Berwyn 1987, p. 218–226.

<sup>12</sup> E. Firkel, *Emotività femminile e cretia spirituale*, Città Nuova, Milan 1985; L. Pinkus, *Le parole della psicologia*, “Consacrazione e Servizio” 1997, vol. 46, p. 33; P. Wink, *Transition from the Early 40s to the Early 50s in Self-Directed Women*, “Journal of Personality” 1996, vol. 64, no. 1, p. 49–69; H. Wolff, *Gesù, la maschilità esemplare*, Queriniana, Brescia 1979.

fitting to her aspirations. Moments of constructive engagement and destructive factors contribute to forming this path.<sup>13</sup> The role of religious formation and its influence on the development of personal and religious maturity, including one's value system, has been demonstrated in many studies.<sup>14</sup>

Midlife crisis is associated with an uncertain, ambivalent view of the future. Only occasionally does it stem directly from conscious awareness of the finality of life and a confrontation with death. It would seem that a more frequent cause may be a lack of clear goals and plans for the future, from which one might be able to conclude appropriate adaptation to middle age or from uncertainty whether one's plans may yet be realised. As an active entity, a person assigns meaning to inner events and processes: successes, hardships, and suffering are subject to interpretation. Whether life has meaning depends on one's orientation towards the future and results from one's system of meanings created around the values recognised. This alteration aspect of middle age is present in various psychological theories: as a necessity to form individual plans for life's second half,<sup>15</sup> as a process of reassessment of dreams, reconstruction of life's structure and paradigm shifts,<sup>16</sup> as a chance and a challenge to develop a creative standpoint,<sup>17</sup> as moral maturation or creation of a congruent, flexible and multi-threaded personal narration,<sup>18</sup> or as formulation of a life philosophy.<sup>19</sup> These aspects are key to one's ability to creatively alter one's life and solve the crisis because a crisis is either a chance to develop, regain and strengthen one's health or a risk of breakdown and disturbances. Growing reflectiveness, along with a need to be free and "speak in one's own voice", offer another developmental chance to strengthen intentionality, to take over the reins of one's own life, to decide for oneself.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup> R. Matignon, *Vie consacrée et équilibre psychique*, Privat, Toulouse 1965, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> P. Tokarski, *Dojrzałość religijna osób należących do Wspólnot Neokatechumenalnych*, Płocki Instytut Wydawniczy, Płock 2001; idem, *Obraz Boga a dojrzałość osobowościowa*, Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warsaw 2011.

<sup>15</sup> G.K. Jung, *The Stages of Life*, in: *The Portable Jung*, ed. J. Campbell, Penguin, New York 1971, p. 3–22.

<sup>16</sup> D.J. Levinson, *A Conception of Adult Development*, "American Psychologist" 1986, vol. 41, no. 1, p. 3–13.

<sup>17</sup> E.H. Erikson, *Dzieciństwo i społeczeństwo*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 1997.

<sup>18</sup> D.P. McAdams, *The Person: An Introduction to Personality Psychology*, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, Fort Worth 1994.

<sup>19</sup> H.R. Figler, *Overcoming Executive Mid-Life Crisis*, J. Wiley and Sons, New York 1978.

<sup>20</sup> V.E. Frankl, *Homo patiens*, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warsaw 1998; H. Gasiul, *Psychologia osobowości*, Wydawnictwo Centrum Doradztwa i Informacji Difin, Warsaw 2006; J. Heckhausen, *Adaptation and Resilience in Midlife*, in: *Handbook of Midlife Development*, ed. M.E. Lachman, J. Wiley and Sons, New York 2001, p. 345–394; P. Oleś, *Psychologia przełomu...; Człowiek – pytanie otwarte. Studia z logoteorii i logoterapii*, ed. K. Popielski, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 1987; K. Popielski, *Logoteoria i logoterapia w kontekście psychologii współczesnej*, in: *Człowiek – pytanie otwarte...*, p. 22–65;

According to Max Scheler,<sup>21</sup> values are objective and ideal, distinct from material and psychic being-entities that are tangible. This way of defining value differs from the psychological (largely positivist) one. In it, values are closely identified with psychological phenomena such as valuing or experiencing (an emotional reaction to an object). The phenomenologist also believed that in addition to values existing objectively, so did their hierarchy. A universal hierarchy stems from that which is constant within a human and considers all human activity. That which happens to be preferred within a particular historical period or social group is merely a variant of the universal. In Scheler's theory of values, all values are founded upon the highest rank, the holy. In particular, as personal value is the highest, so the highest value belongs to absolute and holy values. Scheler defined:

- (1) sacrum, i.e. that which is holy;
- (2) spiritual and cultural values, i.e. that which is good, just, true, correct and beautiful;
- (3) noble, vital values, i.e. that which is healthy and strong; noble vs common;
- (4) utility and civilisation values, i.e. that which is useful vs that which is useless;
- (5) hedonistic values, i.e. that which is pleasurable vs that which is not pleasurable.

The first two groups represent higher values; the remaining three are lower values. In this hierarchy, each lower value fulfils the role of a tool in relation to a higher value.

A person's development continues their entire life. While a "crisis" and "breakthrough" would suggest sudden leaps, "transition" and "transformation" describe a continuum of change. Changes known as internalising of personality intensify with age and may lead to a life reckoning, with the end effect being dynamic engagement in bringing about finally chosen goals and aims. Religious formation, also within a convent, appears to have an influence on changes in the value system. It has a significant meaning in terms of one's view of self, the world, time and death. Middle age is the right time to review which challenges have been taken up and solved, and if the balance looks unsettling, then there still is time to take them up.

The literature contains diverse approaches to the midlife turning point, as much in terms of cognitive and emotional processes and changes in behaviour as in terms of awareness of those changes or a tendency towards reinterpretation of the very value and way of life. It may be assumed that this variety of theoretical

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K.M. Sheldon, *Optimal Human Being. An Integrated Multi-Level Perspective*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New York 2004; Z. Uchnast, *Koncepcja człowieka jako osoby w psychologii humanistyczno-egzystencjalnej*, in: *Człowiek – pytanie otwarte...*, p. 77–100.

<sup>21</sup> P. Brzozowski, *Problemy pomiaru wartości*, "Studia Psychologiczne" 1992, vol. 30, p. 43–67; P. Oleś, *Z zagadnień psychologii wartości*, "Roczniki Filozoficzne" 1984, vol. 31, no. 4, p. 67–95.

and research approaches bears witness to the importance of the phenomenon of midlife, even if ordinary people do not readily display their experience of it. Midlife processes may remain unexpressed, yet they do occur at the level of reflection, analysis or reckoning and accounting. What may be the subject of such an account? Anything of importance: values chosen and acted upon, close relationships with other people, factors of influence on one's sense of worth, the consequences of life events, opportunities taken and chances lost, successes and failures. This is the stage when priorities are reordered so as to give life true meaning and to experience a new kind of wisdom.

The watershed that is midlife, as important as it is to each of us, has been subject to only infrequent study of late. Still, more rarely do we encounter any analysis of its potential connection with religiosity or personal maturity in the literature. This is the reason for the study of this particular population. Perhaps, based on the analysis of this group, it may be seen that religiosity can have a positive influence on the development of personal maturity, which has been demonstrated, for example, by Gwiazdowska,<sup>22</sup> who showed that members of a religious order are less susceptible to a crisis of values, which is an important element of personal maturity.

The research is not only a broadening of the scope of currently cited results but also their more in-depth verification based on a more precisely laid out methodology and psychometric research model. This opportunity has become possible due to the appearance of a new tool, the Personality Integration Questionnaire (Pol. Kwestionariusz Integracji Osobowościowej, KIntO), which will be introduced below.

## The Issue at Hand and the Hypotheses

Midlife crises, particularly in women, as well as the means of dealing with them, have a significant influence on a person's subsequent functioning, while life in a religious order is an interesting phenomenon in social and religious terms. Personality changes occur against this background, particularly in terms of maturity and its particular aspects, that is, life's purpose and declared values. Theoretical analysis of these phenomena has allowed for the research problem to be formulated as to whether the particularities of convent life influence the results of how middle-aged women deal with their midlife crisis.

Research questions express this in more detail:

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<sup>22</sup> D. Gwiazdowska, *Wpływ programu formacyjnego Katolickiej Szkoły Ewangelizacji na wybrane elementy osobowości*, Archiwum UKSW, Warsaw 2006, unpublished MA dissertation.

Can convent life (deeper spiritual engagement, living in a community) have a positive influence on how a person gets through a midlife crisis and whether this may aid their personal development towards maturity (Q1), offer them a sense of life's purpose (Q2), and contribute to the development of an appropriate (socially shared) value system (Q3)?

Detailed research hypotheses were formed to enable empirical verification of these questions:

H1. Members of the study group (nuns) show more indicators of personal maturity than members of the control group (women living alone).

H2. The study group exhibits a higher level of life's purpose, measured using the PIL scale, than the controls.

H3. When assessed using the SWS, the study group assigns higher worth to the top few of Scheler's value tiers and lower to the last few compared to controls.

The next stage was to select appropriate research tools and carry out research in appropriately chosen groups.

## Research Methods

To reach the goal of the study, i.e. prove the hypotheses, the following tools were used:

- The KIntO created by Wanda Zagórska and her team: Mateusz Migut, Magdalena Jelińska, and Maria Wocial.
- Purpose in Life scale/PIL test based on the work of J.C. Crumbaugh and L.T. Maholick.
- Scheler's Value Scale (Pol. Skala Wartości Schelerowskich, SWS) by P. Brzozowski.

The KIntO was inspired by the Questionario per Rilevare gli Stadi dello Sviluppo Psico-Sociale (QRSSP), constructed between 1997 and 1999 by R. Hinc on the basis of Erikson's theoretical work. Wanda Zagórska and her collaborators from the University of Warsaw's Psychology Department modified the questionnaire between 2004 and 2005 and between 2008 and 2009. A new team under the same leadership (this time at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw) published a significantly improved version, which has been used with success in research programmes. In subsequent years, further modifications have been made, in particular following a study of six hundred persons aged 15 to 75 in January 2012. As a result of the analysis of collected data, the KIntO was constructed. This is still an experimental, unpublished version, the psychometric properties of which are still under review. The current version has 98 items and considers all eight of Erikson's crises.



The KIntO assesses personal integration (psychosocial balance) at each adult life stage. The presence of syntonic and dystonic forces at each stage is assumed since it is requisite to continuing development: the final effect of a crisis is a vector of the two. Erikson maintained that each stage of development contains remains of the previous stage and embryonic elements of a future stage. Each stage is referenced by one of the sub-scales described, like in Erikson's writings, as opposite spheres where developmental crises and the force of ego play out: Basic trust vs Basic mistrust (hope), Autonomy vs Shame (will), Purpose/Initiative vs Guilt (purpose), Industry vs Inferiority (competence), Identity vs Role confusion (fidelity), Intimacy vs Isolation (love), Generativity vs Stagnation (care), Ego integrity vs Despair (wisdom). The KIntO builds on and complements a number of operational questionnaires based on Erikson's theories, including *A New Inventory of Examining Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development* D.A. Rosenthal, R.M. Gurney, S.M. Moore (1981); *Erikson's Inventory* R. Ochse, C. Plug (1986); *The Measure of Psychosocial Development (MPD)* G.A. Hawley (1988); *Psychosocial Inventory of Ego Strengths* C.A. Markstrom, V.M. Sabino, B.J. Turner, R.C. Berman (1997); *The Inventory of Psychosocial Balance* G. Domino, D.D. Affonso (1999). Individual items from the above tools have inspired the authors of the KIntO. In addition, selected and recast statements were further developed using other available tools.

The questionnaire construction included deductive analysis of the quality of each item in relation to Erikson's theory, the aims of the questionnaire and a number of inductive (empirical) criteria. In line with psychometric test guidelines, 98 items were selected from the original list of 156 by analysing the reliability of the scales (all turned out reliable: Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 to 0.78) and using other criteria: discrimination of test items measured using corrected item-scale correlation coefficient (range of 0.20–0.70); positive/negative key balance (within each scale, 40% to 60% of statements are negative); empirical spread of all items close to normal: averages range from 2.3 to 3.7; item redundancy control based on item intercorrelation (if any two items were correlated to a degree above  $r = 0.40$ , one of them would be eliminated based on other criteria); hierarchical analysis of clusters of all variables (Ward's method, distance-weighted mean) to uncover any "shifts" of individual items (into scales other than established by deduction).

Next, exploratory factor analysis (main component, varimax rotation) was carried out for each scale to verify its internal structure against the theory. The resultant set of 98 items was then subject to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using a parcelling technique in which items belonging to each latent construct, i.e. scale, are randomly divided into three groups, i.e. parcels. Verification covers not only the data/model fit of the sum results (as is usual with CFA) but also individual structures of each scale (internal integrity of items within a given

scale). The goodness of fit coefficients reached marginal values (CFI, 0.90; RMSEA, 0.08; SRMR, 0.05), which suggests that the model is well fitted to the data, though only once Scale 5 (Identity) was removed as too highly correlated with all of the others and especially with Scales 1 and 8. In light of Erikson's theory, we should not consider this a disqualifying result. On the contrary, Erikson stressed many times that the identity stage draws on all previous stages far more than any of the others and also influences all subsequent stages to a greater degree than any of the others.<sup>23</sup>

Each scale of the current 98 items of the KIntO contains ten to twelve statements, apart from Scale 7, to which a further seven items were added, following empirical analysis, which demonstrated that the scale did not contain statements relating to stagnation. Individual items are short statements in the first person singular. The respondents replied to each using a five-step scale: definitely disagree, somewhat disagree, hard to say, somewhat agree, definitely agree. Versions for men and women have only grammatical differences (inflection). For example: My worldview has a solid foundation. I accept the adversities of everyday life with serenity. My faith (spirituality and religious beliefs) is currently weaker than it used to be. I fully accept the life path I have chosen.

Scores of each scale provide information about the effect of dealing with consecutive developmental crises by the given person, i.e. about the degree to which this person exhibits a shaping/intensification of the power of ego ("virtue") characteristic to each developmental stage. Interpretation took into account the respondent's developmental stages experienced so far and the one she is about to enter next. The person's profile, i.e. scores on all of the scales used, was also analysed. This profile demonstrates the level of psychosocial balance (personal integration) of the person.<sup>24</sup>

The Purpose in Life Test (PIL) was the second tool used to determine a person's awareness of their life's purpose, i.e. to evaluate to what degree they are aware of their life's purpose and goal. This scale is based on Frankl's theory of existential frustration and noogenic neurosis, published in 1962 by Crumbaugh and Maholick as "Purpose in Life Test" (PIL). It was translated into Polish by Zenomena Płużek and is known in Poland as "Test Sensu Życia". It enables a quantitative assessment of the degree of awareness of life's purpose.<sup>25</sup> The

<sup>23</sup> E.H. Erikson, *Dzieciństwo i społeczeństwo*; idem, *Tożsamość a cykl życia*; idem, *Dopełniony cykl życia*, Wydawnictwo Helion, Poznań 2012.

<sup>24</sup> As cited in: W. Zagórska et al., *Kwestionariusz Integracji Osobowej KIntO(f) – wersja pilotażowa*, Wydawnictwo UKSW, Warsaw 2012.

<sup>25</sup> J.C. Crumbaugh, L.T. Maholick, *Manual of Instructions for the Purpose in Life Test*, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 1981; C. Cekiera, *Psychoprofilaktyka uzależnień oraz terapia i resocjalizacja osób uzależnionych*, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 1981; B. Pilecka, *Test Poczucia Sensu Życia – Purpose – In – Life – Test (PLT) by J. C. Crumbaugh, L.T. Maholicka*, in: *Osobowościowe i środowiskowe korelaty*

examples of subscales and test items: The meaning of life; When I reflect on my relationship to the world around me: 1 – I feel quite lost... 7 – I find my role in the world. Goals of life; In my life: 1 – I do not have any goals and do not aspire to anything... 7 – I have very clear goals and aspirations. Evaluation of my own life; My life: 1 – is empty and full of despair... 7 – is going well.

The last tool used was Scheler's Value Scale (SWS) by P. Brzozowski (1995), inspired by Scheler's theories of the objective hierarchy of values and modalities of value<sup>26</sup> modified by J. Tischner.<sup>27</sup> By referring to these concepts, this tool compares actual subjective hierarchies of values with the theoretical models. More precisely, it enables qualitative and quantitative analysis of the similarities between the subjective values and Scheler's objective (ideal) standard. This tool has a high psychometric efficiency.

Scheler's Value Scale (SWS) enables us to learn the subjective importance of fifty values and assess any similarities between the subjective values and the objective, ideal prototype. The tool contains a list of fifty values within six basic scales. These are the subscales of hedonistic values (H), vital values (V), aesthetic values (A), truth (T), moral values (M) and holy values (HV). The analysis results suggested further division into factor subscales. The vital values subscale (V) is divided into two-factor subscales: physical fitness and strength (PhV) and Endurance (EnV). The holy values subscale is divided into secular holy (SeH) and religious holy (ReH). As part of the SWS, the respondent received a list of 50 values. Their task was to evaluate each on a scale of 0 to 100. An indicator of the preference for a given type of value was the mean of the value evaluation for the given type. Indicators of all scales, according to the key, were introduced into the multidimensional scaling. In the Portrait Values Questionnaire, the respondent received a set of items describing another person in the categories of things that are important to them. The task of the respondent was to evaluate the similarity of the described person to oneself on a 6-point scale (ranging from 1 – not like me at all, to 6 – very much like me).

The last two tools show sufficient relevance and veracity to be successfully used in many studies. Therefore, no detailed description of their psychometric properties has been provided here.

*poznucia sensu życia*, ed. B. Pilecka, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej w Rzeszowie, Rzeszów 1986; *Człowiek – pytanie otwarte*; P. Siek, *Wybrane metody badania osobowości*, Wydawnictwa Akademii Teologii Katolickiej, Warsaw 1993.

<sup>26</sup> M. Scheler, *Aprioryczne powiązania o charakterze starszeństwa między modalnościami wartości*, in: A. Węgrzecki, *Scheler*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw 1975, p. 61–168; Z. Kuderowicz, *Scheler – personalizizm etyczny*, in: *Filozofia i socjologia XX w.*, ed. B. Baczeko, Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw 1965, p. 331–353; W. Tatarakiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1970; A. Węgrzecki, *Scheler*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warsaw 1975.

<sup>27</sup> J. Tischner, *Etyka wartości i nadziei*, in: *Wobec wartości*, eds. D. von Hildebrand et al., Wydawnictwo Polskiej Prowincji Dominikanów "W drodze", Poznań 1984, p. 53–149.

## Study Group and Methodology

One hundred people took part in the study (September 2022 to February 2023). They were divided into two equal groups: the study group (SG) and the control group (CG.) The study group consisted of fifty nuns aged 35 to 45 from different orders throughout Poland. The control group consisted of women in the same age bracket who lived alone. Given the demographic variables, we can consider the two groups very similar. Individuals were selected to satisfy the demands of the research question to create two study groups – nuns and women living alone. The research problem thus dictated the selection of the first group, while the second group was due to the need to make comparisons with a relatively similar group, except not living in a convent, i.e. unmarried women.

The following tools were used in statistical analysis: basic statistics within the framework of statistical description, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (K–S test, equality of distributions), Student’s t-test for two independent trials, the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test.

## Research Results concerning Personal Integration, Purpose of Life and Value Systems in Studied Groups

To begin statistical verification of the collected results, analysis of descriptive statistics of the studied variables was carried out using measures of central tendency (mean), dispersion (standard deviation, minimum, maximum, dispersion) and deviation from normal distribution (skewness, kurtosis). In addition, distribution data were checked for congruence against normal distribution using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for a single variable.

Hypotheses based on theoretical analysis of historical research and determinations were tested empirically by the research. The first hypothesis (H1) stated that when tested using the KIntO, respondents (nuns) would have higher coefficients of personal maturity as compared to controls (women living alone).

The hypothesis concerning differences in levels of personal maturity was tested by comparing average results collected in both groups. To this end, Student’s t-test was used in two independent trials. Results are presented in Table 1.

On the basis of the collected data, statistically significant differences were found for four scales:

- integration/despair/wisdom ([t (87) = -2.942; p < 0.01]),
- trust/mistrust/hope ([t (95) = -2.773; p < 0.01]),
- identity/role confusion/fidelity ([t (98) = -2.721; p < 0.01]) and
- intimacy/isolation/love ([t (96) = -2.080; p < 0.05]).

Table 1. Comparison of average scores on the KIntO of the control group (women living alone, N = 50) and the study group (nuns, N = 50).

	Group	Average	Levene's test	Significance	t	df	Significance (mutual)
Trust/mistrust/hope	Control	38.00	1.339	0.250	<b>-2.773</b>	95	<b>0.007*</b>
	Study	41.60					
Autonomy/shame/will	Control	37.98	0.574	0.450	-0.822	96	0.413
	Study	39.21					
Initiative/sense of shame/purpose	Control	42.31	0.660	0.419	-1.357	92	0.178
	Study	44.37					
Industry/inferiority/competence	Control	39.70	0.023	0.879	-0.614	94	0.541
	Study	40.59					
Identity/role confusion/fidelity	Control	38.84	0.086	0.770	<b>-2.721</b>	98	<b>0.008*</b>
	Study	42.66					
Intimacy/isolation/love	Control	39.06	0.153	0.696	<b>-2.080</b>	96	<b>0.040**</b>
	Study	42.00					
Generativity/stagnation/care	Control	55.35	4.821	0.031	1.519	87	0.132
	Study	53.55					
Integration/despair/wisdom	Control	36.62	4.647	0.034	<b>-2.942</b>	87	<b>0.004*</b>
	Study	40.85					

\* significant at  $p < 0.01$  \*\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

Other differences between the study group and the controls were not statistically significant. The data suggests that nuns have higher scores than women living alone in the stated parameters. Analysis confirms significant differences in the personal maturity of nuns and women living alone.

The second hypothesis (H2) concerned life's purpose and postulated that, tested using PIL, the study group would have a higher degree of purpose in life than controls. This hypothesis was tested by comparing average scores obtained in both groups. As the distribution of variables concerning purpose in life could not be considered normal, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of averages for purpose in life scales of the control group (women living alone, N = 50) and the study group (nuns, N = 50).

	Group	Average	Z	Significance (mutual)
Affirmation of life	Control	43.20	-0.614	0.539
	Study	44.64		
Self-acceptance	Control	16.10	-0.839	0.402
	Study	16.56		
Goal-awareness	Control	16.26	-1.349	0.177
	Study	17.24		
Sense of freedom	Control	10.34	-0.840	0.401
	Study	10.98		
Assessment of the future	Control	11.38	-1.464	0.143
	Study	12.10		
Attitude towards death	Control	9.64	<b>-2.007</b>	<b>0.045*</b>
	Study	10.64		
General result	Control	106.92	-1.366	0.172
	Study	112.16		

\* significant at  $p < 0,05$

The data suggests the existence of only one statistically significant difference between the groups in their attitude towards death: ( $[z(100) = -2.007; p < 0.05]$ ). According to the data, it can be stated that nuns reach significantly higher scores on this scale than women living alone: the analysis partly confirms significant differences between the study group and controls concerning the purpose in life scale, manifested only in their attitude to death.

The last of the three hypotheses (H3) concerned Scheler's hierarchy of declared values, namely that the study group would place a higher worth on the first few items on the list of Scheler's hierarchy of values (tested using SWS) as compared to the controls. This hypothesis was tested by comparison of averages. In the case of scales with normal distribution, a comparison was made using Student's t-test; for others, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used. The results are presented in Tables 3a and 3b.

Table 3a. Hierarchy of value averages with normal distribution for the scale in the control group (women living alone, N = 50) and the study group (nuns, N = 50).

	Group	Average	Levene's test		Student's t-test		
			F	Significance	T	df	Significance (mutual)
Hedonistic values	Control	461.04	1.877	0.174	<b>4.625</b>	98	<b>0.000*</b>
	Study	333.7					
Vital values	Control	290.32	0.001	0.980	1.114	98	0.268
	Study	262.62					
Aesthetic values	Control	366.82	1.234	0.269	1.199	98	0.233
	Study	334.78					
Truth	Control	610.06	0.820	0.367	1.368	98	0.174
	Study	575.92					
Fitness and physical strength	Control	145.62	0.045	0.832	1.509	98	0.135
	Study	124.24					
Stamina	Control	145.52	0.093	0.761	0.364	98	0.717
	Study	140.52					

\* significant at  $p < 0.001$

Table 3b. Hierarchy of value averages with non-normal distribution for the scale in the control group (women living alone, N = 50) and the study group (nuns, N = 50).

	Group	Average	Z	Significance (mutual)
Moral values	Control	919.98	-1.045	0.296
	Study	959.96		
Holy values	Control	750.20	<b>-2.345</b>	<b>0.019*</b>
	Study	854.82		
Secular values	Control	417.78	-1.534	0.125
	Study	459.82		
Religious Holy	Control	332.42	<b>-3.824</b>	<b>0.000*</b>
	Study	396.60		

\* significant at  $p < 0.001$  \*\* significant at  $p < 0.05$

Based on this data, it can be stated that the two groups differ in terms of three scales:

- hedonistic values ( $[t(98) = 4.625; p < 0.001]$ ),
- holy values ( $[z(100) = -2.345; p < 0.05]$ ) and
- religious Holy ( $[z(100) = -3.824; p < 0.001]$ ).

Research has shown that women living alone do indeed achieve higher scores on the hedonistic scale than nuns. The study group achieved significantly higher scores on the holy and religious holy scales. The hypothesis, which posited that there would be significant differences in Scheler's hierarchy of values between the study group and the controls, has been confirmed for some of the scales. Nuns do indeed place a higher worth on the items at the top of the hierarchy, while women living alone place a higher worth on hedonistic values.

## Conclusions

The research aimed to deepen knowledge and understanding of the midlife crisis in nuns and women living alone. The first question was whether religious life (spiritual formation, convent life) had any influence on personal maturity. The hypothesis stated that the study group (nuns) would score significantly higher than controls (women living alone.) Analysis has confirmed the significant differences between the two groups as framed by this question. It transpired that nuns were characterised by a higher degree of personal maturity in terms of the following virtues: wisdom, hope, fidelity and love. The results suggest that persons belonging to monastic formations are indeed characterised by a higher sense of fulfilment or satisfaction with life, a sense of safety, and a sense of self as a relatively stable person and exhibit a significantly better ability to connect with another person than women living alone.

The next research problem concerned any possible influence that religious formation and lifestyle may have on a person's sense of purpose in life. The hypothesis stated that the study group would score higher than the controls. The results show statistically significant differences only in terms of attitude to death. Middle age, understood as 35 to 45 years of age (as cited in Oleś, 2011), brings about many changes in life. One of these is the reality of one's death and changes in one's subjective perspective towards the passing of time. Anxiety about the future may appear, although, in the case of the nuns, it is ameliorated by their deeper religious life. Awareness of the impending end is, therefore, not quite as fear-inducing as in the case of women living alone for whom religiosity does not have as much importance.

The last research problem was the influence, if any, of the religious formation and lifestyle on one's declared hierarchy of values. The hypothesis stated that



the study group would place a higher worth on the top positions of Scheler's hierarchy of values and a lower worth on those near the bottom as compared to the controls. Results of the research demonstrate statistically significant differences in hedonistic values (more important to the controls) and holy values, in particular religious holy values (more important to the study group).

Women living alone frequently include single mothers. Such a lifestyle has several consequences for these women, primarily the need to earn a living to support themselves and their children. Secondly, many responsibilities rest on their shoulders, which, in turn, means that they have a lot less free time to spend on their private life. As a result, values associated with prosperity or high satisfaction with life increase in worth. An example of these are hedonistic values, including prosperous living, erotic love, ownership, pleasure, *joie de vivre*, comfort, rest, or a life full of new experiences. Conversely, these are the very values which ought to be renounced by those belonging to religious orders – their place taken up by values key to spiritual life, such as God, faith, salvation or eternal life, which belong to the holy values, in particular the religious holy.

Summing up, it can be said that persons belonging to monastic communities exhibit higher indicators in some spheres of personal maturity, are better reconciled with death and place a higher worth on religious values and a lower one on hedonistic values compared with women living alone. Theological dimension, along with its goals, the spiritual life and the charisma of the institution, are central to a convent life. The community's charismatic vision creates the community as it is the source of its identity. The clearer the community's understanding of its goal, spirituality and charisma, the clearer the vision of its identity, and the clearer the image of identity, the easier it is to take on work and build relationships. The theological dimension is, therefore, the main priority. Consequences of this approach appear at different stages of the lives of members of monastic orders. It seems they are felt most strongly in middle age, and the research appears to confirm this. An additional general conclusion which may be drawn from the research results is a supposition that systematic engagement in the care of the spiritual dimension aids in more fruitful experiencing of crises on the path towards a fuller and more mature personality.

## Final Discussion

The study aimed to discover whether convent life, along with its spiritual-religious formation, may have a positive influence on the ability of women to deal with a midlife crisis and aid the development of their mature personalities by strengthening their sense of purpose and shaping their value systems. Based

on statistical analysis of the results, it can be stated that there are significant differences between the study group and the controls.

In the case of personal integration (measured with KIntO), the differences concern four scales: trust/mistrust/hope, identity/role confusion/fidelity, intimacy/isolation/love, and integration/despair/wisdom. The research confirms differences between nuns and women living alone in terms of personal maturity; it may be said that the nuns use the virtue of hope to overcome developmental crises. The trust/mistrust scale demonstrates the trust that consecrated women have in the world, giving them hope that they will receive assistance in difficult situations, will be taken care of by someone, and will feel important. Basic trust appears already in a newborn as a result of its first experiences and interaction with people close by. The mother plays the most important role in its shaping. Further life experiences may, however, modify this trust and build it up or weaken it. This trust is a fundamental component of a person's vitality, not just in their infancy and childhood but also through their entire life, and a sense of at least basic trust is a primary developmental prerequisite to "enter and contribute" to society.

The virtue of fidelity (identity/role confusion) is an ability to keep freely agreed-to commitments despite any unavoidable conflicts of values. It is also a kind of support structure on which a permanent sense of self-worth may be built. During middle age, a person will attempt to satisfy the need to integrate, which shows up once the individual feels their internal identity "makes sense". The basis for this is a vital power which is inspired by those social ideas and ways of life that have spoken to the young person the strongest during their previous life stages, i.e. when they were seeking approval from their peers, teachers and other members of society.

The virtue of love overcomes isolation. It manifests in various ways during previous stages of development while reaching higher levels in subsequent ones. During the penultimate stage, a person will be sufficiently mature to demonstrate an ability to form an intimate bond of their own identity with others. This is brought about through closeness and bonds with another person, and the individual is able to form a relationship with full awareness that it may require commitments, sacrifices and concessions. Closeness with another involves experiencing states which may have been thus far foreign. The need for intimacy, which exists in every person, is satisfied by the great vital force that is love. Love gives a person a chance to exist in a new state, defined through the expression "we", in contrast to the egoistic "I".

Since the virtue of wisdom arises as a result of a confrontation between integration and despair, it means that wisdom is a neutral interest in life in the face of death. The eighth stage is the final stage of a human's complex psychosocial development. During this stage, a person will reap what they have sown in all

of the previous stages and will make an account of their life thus far. A cumulation of all of the preceding vital development forces ensues, and the tension between integration and despair has to be resolved positively. When the last developmental crisis is solved, stabilisation and integration of the ego appear, bringing about acceptance of the life lived and its achievements. The level of integration will, as a rule, set the tone of a person's relationship with death. The better the ego is integrated, the lower the fear of death. During the last developmental stage, a person undertakes an account of their life with all of its achievements and losses. The most advantageous outcome of such an account may be a feeling of fulfilment and wholeness. A significant danger during the last developmental stage is loss of integrity in physical as well as psychological and social terms. Differences within those scales between the two groups would point to those realising spiritual development (nuns) are characterised by a higher degree of personal maturity in terms of the following virtues: hope, fidelity, love and wisdom.

In the case of the Purpose in Life scale, analysis of results confirms only some significant differences between the two groups. i.e. only in their attitude to death. Consecrated life, shaped by faith, opens up more spontaneously towards spiritual values, those that transcend death. Reflection on the sense of death leads to the expectation of eternity and a meeting with God.

Research concerning Scheler's Value Scale confirmed that nuns place a higher worth on the top items of the scale: God, faith, salvation or eternal life, which comprise holy values or religious holy in particular. Women living alone, on the other hand, give higher worth to hedonistic values: prosperous life, erotic love, ownership, pleasure, *joie de vivre*, comfort, and a life full of new experiences. In studying a person's accepted values, we learn about their *Weltanschauung* and the relative importance of those values in relation to what occurs within the sphere of the person's experience. We learn about the dimensions of their consciousness and generally accepted categories within which the person perceives their social world.

A midlife crisis is an important part of our journey through life. We are forced to face many questions we may have pushed from our consciousness and seek answers. That is why middle age is so important in our lives. The halfway mark contains, according to many psychologists, three significant tasks: to review our past, reframe our lives and reach greater individuation while taking into account our finality and the perspective of our death. With this crisis overcome, a time to experience a new form of wisdom may come.

## Limitations

Human development appears to offer endless opportunities for study, and our knowledge of it may never be complete. This research is merely a small contribution to a greater understanding of the midlife crisis. The authors find limited support for their hypotheses. As we know, null or unexpected findings are an important part of the scientific enterprise. However, the fact that significant differences in outcomes were observed only in terms of attitudes towards death suggests that the conclusions regarding any benefits of a monastic lifestyle are limited. The authors do not assess potential alternative explanations for results or potential confounds in study design. There are many ways in which nuns may differ from lay women in the general population, i.e. self-selection, number of social ties, connection with family, etc. These issues merit separate research.

The authors hope that despite its limitations, this work may contribute to a better understanding of adult life, balanced decision-making, the ability to introduce changes and prioritise, as well as generativity, that is, the ability to support others and pass on to others values and wisdom which come from faith and experience.

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