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*Maja Wenderlich*

## Can You Consciously Plan your Life?

### The Course of Human Life According to Charlotte Bühler

#### Introduction

The genesis of mankind has been fascinating for both ordinary mortals and scientists since the beginning of time. The course of human life has been the subject of books, films and works of art. This theme has been often present in music. According to the United Nations (2020), there are around 7.6 billion people in the world. By 2050, this figure is expected to increase to 9.7 billion (Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook, 2020). Imagine the lives of each of those 7.6 billion people. Everyone is different and has a different story to tell. Can we find anything we have in common when we try to compare the courses of human lives, apart from birth and death?

Charlotte Bühler answered these questions with the help of her scientific work. The monograph *The course of Human Life* (1933) was created using biographical materials. The author was a clinical psychologist, developmental psychologist, co-creator and a representative of humanistic psychology. Bühler had reached her conclusions gradually. Initially, she conducted research on the importance of play in human development; to this day, there is a division into functional, games, games of make-believe or illusion, receptive games and games of construction (Rzepa, 2005). There were numerous experiments, e.g. related to the behavior of an infant in contact with an adult wearing an animal mask (Rzepa, 2005: 11). However, her ingenuity was at its best while she was researching the youth and regularity in adolescence. She used the method of analyzing her own creations (letters, diaries, and literary works). She developed the theory of scientific use of materials included in works of the youth. She described the results of the practical use of this tool in her work published in 1927 entitled *Kindtheit und Jugend*. The book has been translated into many languages, e.g. Polish in 1933.

When Bühler was collecting materials for her book, she found that it is difficult to conduct research on any period of human life in isolation from other developmental stages (Rzepa, 2002). She adhered to the principle of holism and in accordance with it recognized that only studies that comprehensively capture the course of human life make sense.

Thanks to this discovery, the pioneering and innovative work was entitled *The course of human life* was created. This article is devoted to the work. I think

that it is very underrated and still relevant to this day. Looking back, it is a really original work. It is also important to note that without previous experience, Bühler (a researcher of the mind of the children, then the youth) would not have had the opportunity and chance to implement this project. The author also became the pioneer of *developmental psychology*. Bühler takes a look at the development of a person throughout their life. This development is not limited, as it was thought then, only to the period of childhood and youth. It was later confirmed thanks to the research of Robert Havighurst (1948, 1953, 1981) concerning the concept of developmental tasks and Erik Erikson's (1950, 1968, 2000, 2004, 2011) research on the theory of psychosocial human development. The prominent scientists considered human life throughout its whole course.

As Teresa Rzepa (2002) states after Richard M. Lerner and David F. Hulstsch (1983), research on the aforementioned course of human life from a holistic perspective was not conducted until the 1920s and 1930s. At that time, three papers came out which discussed the need to consider the need of a holistic approach to the course of human life. In 1927 H.L. Hollingworth published *Mental growth and decline: A survey of developmental psychology* in 1933 Prince Ch. Bühler published *The course of human life* and the third is S.L. Pressey, J.E. Janney and J.E. Kuhlen, *Life: A psychological survey*, published in 1939. Only Bühler's work refers to a collection of empirical material (Rzepa, 2002: 14).

## Description of the research method

What exactly is the biographical research conducted by Bühler and what did it consist of? What do they owe their timeless character to? Bühler and a team of her colleagues analyzed 50 biographies based on the interviews with the elderly from the Vienna care home, as well as 200 autobiographies and biographies of well-known people. The outstanding psychologist conducted a psychobiographic analysis (1933) of specific content. In regards to that, she distinguished three problem areas of life course:

- 1) The course of life in terms of behavior and objective data. Its scope is determined by biological processes that determine the development and destruction of the human body and its functions. Here the author described the general biological curve of life (biological phase image), behavioral image of phases, statistical data on growth and regression, vitality as the basis of life (lives that diminish with decreasing vitality), vitality and experience (achievements based on experience replace vitality as the basis of life and retardation, production (Bühler, 1999), (humans can create products that are subject to development and bring benefits while they die, biological production, proper human production; fun, creativity, achievement, transition from function to work, etc.). Bühler (1999) one must perceive the world the same way biologists do, perceiving and describing its course in the context of the processes of growth (expansion) and reduction (restriction) of various functions of the human body.
- 2) The course of life in terms of experiences and subjective data – a set of individual behaviors and experiences, possible to determine on the basis of biographical

data and established personal experience. In this perspective, Bühler described: objective and subjective data, intentionality (the dual role of production in the course of life). The way of life, the realization of existing for something – destiny. Conscious destiny in the form of total dedication that can even question the existence of the individual, the action “for” and “to” something; being and permeation (the idea of fulfillment, the wholeness of life, task, as a new dimension of life, being is intended to be fulfilled, destiny is the production of one’s own life); need for task and destiny (five elements of the phenomenon of destiny, examples of clearer separation of destiny from the need and more and more complete formulation of tasks); the content of destiny (action undertaken for the sake of something and for personal development); free space of destiny (more or less wide possibilities of choosing destination); experiencing destiny (passive-drawing and active-establishing the way of experience of destiny); classification of destiny (correct, as the quality of destiny, authentic, as the quality of commitment); change of the dominant (task, life for some matter or for others, replaces life as the fulfillment of own needs); intellectualization of vitality; vitality in the intellectual sphere (the creative force of the period of growth is also important for intellectual creativity); specification – the development of what is fully compatible with man (Bühler, 1999).

- 3) The course of life in terms of a work or result – own products of individual life, reflected in the ability to influence other people, the acquired social or historical role, in the works left behind: the specification of the work, commitment and chance – involvement as an act of risking for something. The correctness of destiny for commitment; success in life – statements, facts and ordering both as conditions for success in life; satisfaction and fulfillment; fulfillment (Bühler, 1999).

In this article, I will only mention some of the key issues that I have chosen.

### **“Dedicating your life” to someone or something**

One of the most important messages of Bühler’s outstanding monograph is the meaning of life understood as a “dedication” to someone or something. In the second scope: the course of life in the aspect of experiences and subjective data, the author established: “the fact that people, not only consciously, are occupied with «something» and oriented towards their thing, but they actually are devoted to «something», they want to exist, they act and believe that they must be here. They devote themselves and devote their lives to what it should be for; or believe that they read such a destiny from themselves and interpret their lives in the sense of such initially chosen destiny” (Bühler, 1999: 111).

Research shows (Bühler, 1999; Gardner & Walters, 1986; Rzepa, 2005; Wenderlich-Pintal, 2019) that some people know from the early age what they want to devote their lives to, what makes them happy, and what can make them feel fulfilled. The first decision on choosing a way of life is often made in childhood and experiences and reflections recorded at that time (Rzepa, 2005). This was not the

rule; it has happened that there was a random meeting between two people and during the meeting one of them inspired the other. This has even happened to mature individuals (Walters & Gardner, 1986).

Further we read: "The basic criterion for a fully human existence is self-determination, determining what you want to exist for. This is what people got used to call the meaning of their lives" (Bühler, 1999: 111).

According to Bühler, if a person has determined why they want to live, they have discovered the meaning of life. Their existence is no longer pointless but it has a specific purpose. All intelligent human beings ask themselves that very question at some point in life. There are even a number of psychological tests to help discover this sense, e.g. Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh, Maholicka, 1964), Meaning in Life Questionnaire – MLQ (Stegera et al., 2006). Such tests can diagnose the feeling of sense of meaning of life during therapy, then examine the change that occurs in this respect – i.e. the effects of therapeutic interventions regardless of the disappearance of symptoms, e.g. depression or anxiety.

As part of the biographical perspective, Bühler also includes the procedure of reading biographical materials in terms of content in them demonstrating healthy human development, focus on creative development, self-fulfillment, and the belief of being a creator of one's fate. As Rzepa rightly pointed out (2002: 4), as a result of using the technique proposed by Bühler, one can obtain a set of example ways to achieve full development, based on them, e.g. designing courses or training focused on self-development, even issuing psychological guides. Individual therapeutic or coaching work with clients would also make a lot of sense.

Bühler had many helpers when carrying out her research, e.g. Hanna Albrecht, Hedda Polgar, Ella Dub, Lotta Fischer, Egon Kern, Buruna Sonneck, Dr. Kathe Wolf, Paul Poschana, Dr. Paul Lazarsfeld, Dr. Else Frenkel (Bühler, 1999). The author of this outstanding monograph had research teams that were responsible for various aspects of the research. Bühler was the irreplaceable head of the study. Therefore, when deciding on research in this style, one must keep in mind their complexity. I think that it is still a topic of scientific research worthy of interest. Initially, one should focus only on one specific field (e.g. mathematics, art, humanities, etc.) and discover regularities in it. Then one can expand their perspective to other areas of knowledge.

However, not everyone can immediately take care of their self-development. Certain conditions and needs that will allow this self-development to exist must be met. Needs research is closely related to a person and their functioning. It could be said that satisfying the needs of the individual affects the quality of their life. Ten years after the publication of Bühler's paper, Abraham Harold Maslow said that by satisfying these basic human needs: organic, peace and stability, participation, approval, cognitive, aesthetic, one can speak of self-development and self-realization. His theory of human motivation described in the *Psychological Review* (1943) is also scientifically valid today. It gives us a picture of a self-realizing person with highest-order needs met.

## Fulfillment as the meaning of life

When discussing Bühler's theory, one cannot ignore the logotherapy of Viktor Emil Frankl (1984). Frankl was the creator of the third Viennese school of psychology (along with Z. Freud and A. Adler). The author believed that the basic motivational mechanism of a mentally healthy person is the will to make sense, and therefore a life in which one is striving for a meaning. Authority and honors may or may not be the consequence of recognizing meaning in one's life. On that basis, Frankl creates the assumptions of his theory. The author of logotherapy is the first to recognize that the model for psychology is not of a sick individual, but a healthy one, and human health is expressed in his pursuit of a meaningful life. If a person loses meaning in their life, it means that we are dealing with a pathogenic symptom (Kamińska, 2018). Frankl called this phenomenon noogenic neurosis (1984).

Bühler tells us the same thing. The most important point in the life of an individual is to find the meaning of life. In addition, the author also emphasizes that the human behavior depends on external factors only in the early stages of development.

Rzepa (1999) states after Bühler that: along with the acquisition of proficiency in ability to make choices (conditioned by past experiences), the basic determinant of human behavior is internalized. From this development moment, which is difficult to determine, an individual can overcome his own past, project himself into the future: defining it by formulating and achieving set goals. In this way, the person takes the responsibility over their own life (Rzepa, 1999: 17). This important message is also associated with such important content as e.g. realizing one's destiny as the meaning of life, recognizing one's vital capabilities, recognizing one's inner possibilities – i.e. the free space of destiny (Rzepa, 1999). Simply put: This most difficult life task – finding the meaning of one's own life – seems to be successful only when a rare but simple discovery appears in consciousness – that only I can decide about the destiny of my life and that this destiny results from my recognized values, which the person is guided by.

One may be tempted to say that this is the critical point in human life. From this moment, a person is able to give meaning to their life. Conscious determination of the meaning of one's life is intentional, similarly to transgression.

Another interesting aspect of "fulfilled life" is transgression, treated as human activity (Kozielecki, 1987; 1997). This activity consists of going beyond the limits of previous experiences, thoughts, adventures and achievements, as well as creating new qualities. According to the author of the concept of psychotransgressionism (1987), human life consists of daily and routine activities, i.e. repetitive and habits that are focused on meeting basic needs.

It happens, however, that in certain circumstances the individual takes up challenges and organizes his psychophysical structure so as to be able to undertake innovative, transgressive activities (Czerkawska 2012). Transgression plays a huge role in shaping personality – it is personality-forming. Each "going beyond" is an important development step.

Bühler believed that transgression beyond the course of one's own life is possible by producing works lasting after one's death (Rzepa, 1999: 16). For example, all

scientific studies or works related to art, even after one's death, cause transgression. The scientific work can be used further, by living scientists, the image – to gain other, more contemporary interpretations, the second and maybe even the third and fourth “life”. Human history is full of such expansive, transgressive behavior. Thanks to this, there is continuity of development, thoughts. Deconstruction causes construction anew.

### **The peak of human life**

Many of us have been looking not only for the meaning of our lives but also for periods of the greatest creativity, success and happiness. There are people who are sentimental about the most beautiful years of their lives when they were healthy, others about wonderful childhood, and some about the period when they managed to create fantastic works. There are also those who think that the most beautiful moments are already behind them or they are in the middle of them.

Bühler (1999) noted that the issue of the peak of life is not so obvious and simple. One can, for example, regard the peak point of human life as the time in which a person created their most outstanding works, but also the time in which they subjectively felt in their prime, as well as the time in which they lived the most expansively outward, or finally, the one in which they looked their best and their health and strength seemed to be at their peak (Bühler, 1999: 317).

The author divided human life into experience and achievement phases taking into perspective the course of life in terms of a work or result. Because, as I mentioned earlier, discussing the peak point in human life is quite problematic, I will focus only on the part concerning the achievements phase – the number of achievements in a given course of life. Bühler (1999: 302) distinguished four main types of quantitative capacity peak:

- 1) First of all, this peak may lie at the relatively beginning of life, from the climax of achievement, the curve falls to the end gradually, but constantly.
- 2) Secondly, the peak may fall in the middle of life. The performance curve is more or less like a biological curve.
- 3) Third, the peak occurs when the number of achievements in the best part of life gradually increases, and reaches its peak relatively late – in the second half of life – and there is a steep and unexpected fall from there by the end of life. We have the impression that creativity develops for a long time, more and more, until the excessive weakening of the psychophysical constitution by diseases ends this development.
- 4) Fourth, it is distinguished by the fact that the achievements show no clear connection with the phases of life at all, but extend throughout life as a certain constant. Work manifests itself as a kind of constant phenomenon accompanying life.

The outstanding psychologist in her monograph even tempted to assign the biography to specific types.

After analyzing the four distinguished types of peak points of human life, the question arises whether any specific professions performed by man are more suited

to one of the types? Bühler (1999: 304) answers this question, obviously emphasizing that her research material was too small to draw general conclusions from for the entire population, but nevertheless a certain regularity caught her eye. People with sports, acting, singing achievements usually show the first type distribution. Trade enterprises, artistic achievements, inventions, research travel seem to intensify in the middle of life, and then disappear, they run in their quantitative distribution in accordance with the biological curve of life (type 2). Accumulation of the achievements of politicians, political journalists, scholars, as long as they do not show an isosceles distribution of the type 4 curve, are most often shifted towards the second half of life – curve 3.

It can be concluded, therefore, by examining the quantity and quality of human products, to which group a given person will belong. In other words – by examining a single biography of a specific person, we may find at what stage of life he is at present (knowing his past) and what may await him in the future (of course, if biological issues do not get in his way).

Manfred Spitzer in the book *How the brain learns* (2007) wrote about the breakthrough in mathematical and physical discoveries made by young people. The author mentions, for example, 20-year-old French mathematician Evariste Galois who have made great contributions to the development of algebra, in particular the problem of solvability of polynomial equations. This also results from my research in which I compared the life stories of outstanding mathematicians of the last eighty years (Wenderlich-Pintal, 2019). It turned out that the mathematicians studied by me present only two types indicated by Bühler: type one and two, with a large predominance of the first.

## Conclusion

I agree with Roman Zawadzki's position that recognizing the whole truth about man is simply impossible, even more impossible is his full and reliable "portraiture". Despite this, since the beginning of time people have been trying to inquire about the essence of their nature and seek the truth about themselves, about the world around them and about their mutual relations with it.

Bühler's outstanding work is timeless, but is only a small element in the "garden" of human life. An interesting implication to the author's research, it could be to study the course of life in terms of culture, time, etc. It would help us build an image of entire societies and interesting transformations on a global level.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the course of human life has been an inspiration for representatives of science, art, religion and philosophical systems for years. It is close to all beings on earth. It has features unique to the entire human population: birth and death. It also has features common to specific groups and features designed for individual units. The duration of human life is different. Everyone has or will have their own unique, one of a kind story. No wonder that human biographies are still relevant to this day. After all, they can inspire others to get to know themselves and the world better.

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#### Abstract

The article is about an outstanding monograph entitled *The course of human life* by Charlotte Bühler. The author proposes a holistic view of human development, which makes this work timeless. She recognizes three aspects in the course of human life. The first one is the aspect of objective behavior and data – biological processes determining the development and destruction of the human body and its functions. The second is the aspect of experience and



subjective data – a set of individual behaviors and experiences possible to determine on the basis of biographical data and established personal experiences. The third one is the aspect of the work or result – personal products of individual life, reflected in the ability to influence other people, the acquired social or historical role. The author also talks about accumulations in life – e.g. periods of outstanding creativity and she notes that human lives differ in this respect. The various aspects behind the main theme of Bühler’s work, which is “devoting one’s life” to something or someone, are discussed.

**Keywords:** Charlotte Bühler, the life course, qualitative research, dedicating your life

**dr Maja Wenderlich**

Instytut Wspomagania Rozwoju Człowieka i Edukacji  
Akademia Pedagogiki Specjalnej w Warszawie  
maja.wenderlich@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0002-6123-7859