

Abstract

Longing ("Sehnsucht"), the strong wish for something remote or unattainable, is a common, yet hardly investigated phenomenon. Using lifespan psychology as a general theoretical framework, the present research sought to integrate and expand folk psychological and humanist notions of the concept. Longing was defined as recurring mental representation of desired alternative realities of life with six structural characteristics: Longing comprises (1) a sense of incompleteness and imperfection of life, (2) diverse meanings and symbolically rich ideas of life, (3) utopian conceptions of ideal development that are unattainable in principle, (4) strong and ambivalent emotions, (5) a conjoint focus on the personal past, present, and future (tritime focus), and (6) reflective and evaluative processes dealing with the optimal course of life and one's standing relative to ideals. Together, these six aspects reflect the structural elaboration of longing. It was further assumed that longing serves two important regulatory functions in adult development, the imaginary exploration of alternative life trajectories that give direction for development (directionality) and the regulation of losses and unattainable life trajectories on the imaginary level (managing nonrealizability). The present study aimed at the operationalization of the proposed conceptualization with a self-report questionnaire and the investigation of age-related differences and (proximal and distal) functional consequences of longing.

A sample of 299 adults aged 19 to 81 years attended three group sessions, in which they generated a list of personal longings and rated their three most important longings in terms of (1) structural characteristics, (2) salience, (3) content, (4) controllability, and (5) function. Participants also completed measures of subjective well-being. Following its optimization with confirmatory factor analysis, the Longing Questionnaire demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and retest stability across five weeks. Confirmatory factor analyses also supported the proposed six-factor structure of longing. At a higher level of aggregation, these could be organized into two higher-order dimensions: Intensity/Scope and Utopia/Ambivalence. In accordance with lifespan theory and research, different patterns of age-related differences were found for the contents, controllability, and function of longing, and age-related stability was found for the structural elaboration and salience of longing. However, age effects were generally small. Regarding the functional consequences of longing, results were mixed. Although longing was reported to be functional for development (there were positive associations between the structural elaboration and functions of longing; proximal criterion), it was negatively associated with subjective well-being (distal criterion).

Overall, the present study demonstrated that longing is an important aspect of adulthood functioning that can be satisfactorily measured by self-report. The negative relationship between longing and subjective well-being was unexpected, and four alternative explanations are suggested. First, longing may be detrimental for adaptive functioning because it indicates that persons are unable to disengage from important, but unattainable aims. Second, a history of loss experiences may act as a third factor causing both intense longing and low well-being. Within groups with comparable losses, however, longing may promote recovery and adjustment. Third, longing may act as a feedback mechanism fostering the long-term alignment of implicit motives and explicit goals. Fourth, longing may be a multifunctional phenomenon with negative effects on aspects of environmental mastery, but positive effects on facets of personal growth (e.g., creativity, self-knowledge, wisdom). These different possibilities should be investigated in future studies. It is concluded that as a lifespan concept, longing can further our understanding of the complex processes that characterize human development.