

1 Introduction

At the beginning of human existence, the Greek philosopher Plato (428 – 348 B.C.) wrote, men and women were one. They were unified, spherical beings with four arms, four legs, and two faces, and they had great ambitions and powers. Yet, they threatened the gods, and thus, Zeus cut them in half. Ever since, Plato wrote, humans have been longing for reunification with their other half, that is, the missing part of themselves (Hülser, 1991). This ancient myth offers a metaphorical explanation for a common human experience. It is the intense, mostly bittersweet longing (“Sehnsucht”) for something remote or unattainable that would make life more complete.

The notion of intensely desiring something remote or unattainable that is missing from a complete life can be found invariantly in most cultures and their literatures (Hogrebe, 1994). The German term “Sehnsucht,” however, appears to involve particular connotations that are not fully captured by its equivalents in many other languages, including the English term “longing” (Grimm & Grimm, 1854-1871/1984). “Sehnsucht” consists of two components (“sehnen” = desiring and “Sucht” = insatiable craving), implying two aspects that come together in the experience of this phenomenon. These are the positive, energetic striving for an ideal and the pain of absence and unattainability. “Sehnsucht” has a comprehensive and global scope and often comprises a bittersweet overall life feeling of “Weltschmerz” (world-weariness). In reference to the German connotation of “Sehnsucht,” in this dissertation, the term “longing” will be used to denote desires that are enduring, global, and ambivalent in nature.

The present dissertation is part of a new research initiative aiming at the study of longing from a lifespan developmental perspective (P. B. Baltes, Freund, & Scheibe, 2002). This research seeks to combine perspectives from the humanities and lifespan psychology to articulate a developmental-psychological conceptualization of longing. Specifically, the present research had two sources: (1) the observation that longing has a central place in folk psychological theories and the humanities and (2) the search for “holistic” and “lifespan- and domain-integrative” concepts that capture the complexity and richness of lifespan development.

With regard to the first source, interest in the concept of longing arose from the observation that longing and related concepts (e.g., nostalgia, life dreams, romantic desires) occupy an important place in everyday life and culture and, as a reflection of this, in the humanities. Longing appears to be a central topic in folk, or lay psychological theories of the human condition. Expressions of longing and images of utopian conditions can be found in fairy

tails and myths, literature and art, architecture and technology, and in philosophical and political utopias (e.g., Boym, 2001; Illouz, 1997).

Two examples may serve as illustration. First, longing enjoys much popularity in the general population, particularly in German-speaking countries. In a recent public contest of “The most beautiful German word”, “Sehnsucht” was the third most often nominated word (the first two were “Lieben” = to love and “Gemütlichkeit” = coziness; Spiegel Online, 2004). Second, longing and images of utopian conditions are popular themes in art and literature. Historically, longing was a leading concept during the period of Romanticism (around 1800). Romantic poets and painters cultivated the feeling of longing; they regarded longing as primary route to gaining insight into themselves and the world and developed a collective “longing for longing” (Danzer, 1998; Hoguebe, 1994). In contemporary literature, longing seems to witness a revival. In her recent literature analysis, Hennebach (2004) showed how the concept of longing as an all-embracing life feeling and a search for identity drives recent writings of young German authors, including Judith Hermann, Karen Duve, and Tanja Dückers.

Longing has also been a subject of philosophical theorizing about the human condition. Philosophers often argued that experience itself is a desire, longing, or hope for utopian conditions (e.g., Bloch, 1959; Fichte, 1794/1962; Hegel, 1807/1927; for a discussion of longing in philosophy, see Danzer, 1998; Hoguebe, 1994; Ravicz, 1998). For example, the German philosopher Bloch posited that individuals are unfinished and animated by utopian dreams of a better life. According to this position, individual and collective hopes and longings are one of the driving forces behind personal, cultural, or historical developments.

Traditionally, the humanities have been concerned with the fundamental topics of the human condition. Its presence in the humanities suggests that longing may be a topic of public interest that deserves attention by psychological theory and research. So far, however, psychological attention has been scarce. The existing literature is primarily restricted to qualitative-phenomenological investigations, and a comprehensive theoretical conceptualization of longing as a psychological phenomenon is missing.

The second source of the present research was lifespan psychology and the search for “holistic” and “lifespan- and domain-integrative” concepts that capture the complexity and richness of lifespan development. Since the emergence of the field, lifespan researchers have tried not only to extend the age range of participants in developmental studies, but also to identify new fertile constructs that are central to adult development and aging (P. B. Baltes, 1987). A number of important phenomena involving complex, reflective processes have already been identified and investigated. Examples include the constructs of reminiscence or life reflection (e.g., Staudinger, 2001; Webster & Cappeliez, 1993), wisdom (e.g., P. B. Baltes & Smith, 1990; P. B.

Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), socioemotional selectivity (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), and identity as a life story (e.g., McAdams, 2001). Longing (“Sehnsucht”) is introduced as another potential construct relevant to lifespan development, particularly during adulthood and aging. In this vein, a developmental account of longing may add to the theoretical scope of lifespan psychology.

The aim of this dissertation, and the project in which it is embedded, was to draw on perspectives from folk psychology and the humanities and combine these with lifespan psychological theory and research to articulate a developmental conceptualization of longing. Central questions included: What is the nature of longing? Is it just an epiphenomenon of the vicissitudes of life, or does it serve a regulatory function for human development? Is longing the same across different life periods, or does it change and advance with increasing age and life experience? The present dissertation advances a developmental conceptualization of longing and a first empirical operationalization in a self-report questionnaire. This questionnaire was used to empirically investigate general characteristics, age-related differences, and functional consequences of longing.