

## 2 Theoretical Considerations

The presentation of theoretical considerations is divided into five main parts. In order to set the general framework for the proposed conceptualization of longing, the first part reviews theoretical propositions of lifespan psychology and discusses their implications for the concept of longing. The second part outlines a developmental conceptualization of longing and specifies different aspects and dimensions regarded as central to the phenomenon. The third part compares longing to related concepts dealing with alternative realities of life. The fourth part puts longing into the context of lifespan development and discusses age-related differences and developmental antecedents and consequences of longing. The theoretical section is concluded with a summary of the central research questions and hypotheses of the present study.

### 2.1 Propositions of Lifespan Psychology and Their Implications for the Concept of Longing

Lifespan developmental psychology has specified a number of theoretical propositions about general principles of lifelong development (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997). Considering these theoretical perspectives can further the understanding of longing. This section reviews several of these general propositions and derives implications from them for the concept of longing.

#### *Lifelong Adaptive Process*

It is often emphasized that development is an ongoing lifelong process of (proactively or reactively) adapting to environmental and organismic changes (P. B. Baltes, 1987). Each age period has its own developmental agenda with specific tasks and challenges (e.g., Erikson, 1980; Havighurst, 1948; Levinson, 1986; Peck, 1956). This proposition has two implications for the concept of longing. First, the changing developmental agendas will likely be reflected in the contents of longing, resulting in age-related differences in the major themes adults of various ages report in their longings (see Section 2.4.2).

A second implication is that lifespan development must remain incomplete, at least until the end of life. This proposition can be extended from ontogenetic to phylogenetic development. The “development of human development” has not come to a standstill, but is an ongoing process of biological and cultural co-evolution (P. B. Baltes, 1997). Consequently, human development has an “incomplete architecture”; it is like an ill-designed building in which inherent vulnerabilities become more and more manifest with age.

Longing is regarded as an instantiation of the incompleteness of human development, both from an individual and a general perspective. It may be activated when individuals reflect on

their lives, evaluate their achievements and shortcomings, and recognize the incompleteness and imperfection of their lives. Life must remain incomplete because development is an ongoing process and because real life will never completely match the ideal or utopia that people or societies construct.

### *Dynamic Ratio of Gains and Losses*

A second characteristic of lifespan development is that, at any given point in the lifespan, development incorporates both gains and losses (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997; Brandtstädter, 1998; Labouvie-Vief, 1981). The relative amount of losses as compared to gains increases across adulthood because aging is accompanied by an increase in biological vulnerability and a reduction in reserve capacity. Nevertheless, losses are an inevitable part of development in all age periods. Losses are inevitable because development necessitates the selection of alternative goals, life domains, and developmental pathways. Resources such as time and energy are limited, and every time a person invests them in one activity, alternative options are automatically excluded. Consequently, successful life adaptation requires two basic competencies. Individuals must choose and realize developmental pathways (managing gains), and they must compensate for deficiencies and losses (managing losses).

The model of selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC; P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000; Marsiske, Lang, Baltes, & Baltes, 1995) is an instantiation of this basic view. This model specifies three life-management processes that, if jointly operating, are assumed to enable the maximization of gains and minimization of losses across the lifespan. In this theory, selection refers to the conscious or unconscious choice of particular life domains and goals for continued development. Selection can have at least two different causes or motivations. Persons can be motivated to choose developmental goals or pathways because they want to achieve desired states (elective selection) or because they react to anticipated or experienced losses in certain domains of functioning (loss-based selection). Optimization describes the internally and externally regulated search for higher levels of functioning, and compensation involves the internally or externally regulated search for means to maintain levels of functioning in the face of losses. These three processes are regarded as fundamental strategies of successful life management (for related models, see Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995).

The view that lifespan development is characterized by both gains and losses has two implications for the concept of longing. First, selection and selection-associated losses may be a primary cause of longing (see Section 2.4.1). Not all developmental goals can be achieved at the same time, and not all desirable life paths can be realized in a lifetime. These as yet unrealized or

permanently lost developmental options may have a great appeal, particularly as people tend to idealize the things that they do not have. It is assumed that longing is concerned with such desired, alternative life realities that are remote or unattainable.

Second, the gain-loss dynamic may not only cause longing, longing may in turn be a strategy to deal with the inherent gains and losses in life. This has implications for the potential functionality of longing (see Section 2.2.5). By outlining ideal or desired developmental pathways, longing may promote the adaptive selection of domains and goals for continued development. Possibly, longing can also help to compensate for losses. Because longing operates on the level of fantasy and subjective reality, it may be a way to maintain a positive connection with persons, places, or plans that are unreachable in objective reality. In this view, certain aspects of longing are related to processes of selection and compensation as specified in the SOC-model (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000).

#### *Multidimensionality and Multidirectionality*

A further central proposition of lifespan psychology is the multidimensionality and multidirectionality of development (P. B. Baltes, 1987). Even within single domains of functioning, subprocesses can be identified that may differ in the directionality of age-related change.

For a conceptualization of longing, this suggests that there may be different dimensions or facets to the phenomenon. Specifically, it is suggested that it is useful to distinguish between the structural composition (e.g., emotional quality or symbolic complexity), salience (i.e., intensity and ego-centrality), content, controllability, and function of longing (see Section 2.2). Moreover, the multidirectionality of longing is reflected in the expectation that these dimensions show different patterns of age-related change, including patterns of stability, improvement, and decline (see Section 2.4.2).

#### *Contextualism*

Human development is always imbedded in a context. Internal and external conditions create opportunities for (or limitations to) individual developmental options. Three systems of developmental influences are often distinguished: age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative (P. B. Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). Age-graded influences include biological and environmental factors that have a strong age correlation and shape development in relatively normative ways for all individuals (e.g., sexual maturation, schooling). History-graded influences denote biological and environmental factors that are associated with historical time and make the development of individuals different across cohorts and generations (e.g., war, changing social norms). Non-

normative influences are idiosyncratic events that impact only some individuals and do not follow a predictable course (e.g., having a serious car accident).

The three systems of contextual influences will likely have an impact on longing. Aspects of longing (e.g., its content or functionality) will depend on people's position in the life course and in historical time, as well as on non-normative experiences. *Age-related influences* on and differences in longing were in the focus of the present study. They are therefore discussed in detail in a later section (Section 2.4.2).

*Historical influences* will likely impact the contents of longing. For example, in times of economical hardship, people may have a strong longing for a life without financial worries or unemployment. In times of race segregation, many longings may have related to justice and equal treatment of minority groups. Today, many longings may involve a secure world and the end of terrorist attacks. Historical times also affect other dimensions of longing, including its salience and perceived controllability. For example, longing was a salient concept in the literature and art of Romanticism (around 1800), much more than it is today. It was regarded as a major source for creativity and inspiration, and the primary strategy for understanding oneself and the world (Danzer, 1998). At the same time, however, romantic poets and artists were often criticized for their passivity and tendency to use longing as an escape from reality (see Hogebe, 1994) – indicative of a collective belief of low control over the realization of longing. For the present study, this implies that historical influences need to be taken into account when interpreting age-related differences in longing. Cross-sectional data do not allow the disentanglement of age- and history-graded factors in a given phenomenon (Baltes et al., 1977; Schaie & Hertzog, 1985).

Finally, longing is affected by *non-normative influences* including people one meets, experiences one makes, and losses one encounters. Early loss of a parent may produce a lifelong longing for a complete, happy family, and a childhood spent in a different country may produce a strong longing for return.

In sum, central propositions of lifespan developmental psychology have important implications for the concept of longing. They offer insights into the origin, structure, and functionality of longing and thus have the potential to advance folk-psychological and humanist views on this phenomenon. Drawing on this family of theoretical ideas and related research, the following section introduces a developmental conceptualization of longing and specifies several dimensions and aspects central to the phenomenon.

## 2.2 A Developmental Conceptualization of Longing

By applying lifespan theory and research, the present conceptualization tries to integrate and expand the existing psychological literature on longing. This literature includes theoretical accounts from the perspectives of cultural psychology (Boesch, 1998), clinical-medical psychology (Schoch, 1994; Tretter, 1994; Verres, 1999; Vogt, 1993), and child developmental psychology (Holm, 1999, 2001; Holm, Claésson, Greaker, Karlsson, & Strömberg, 2000; Holm, Greaker, & Strömberg, 2002). Several qualitative-phenomenological studies have explored the semantic meaning structure of longing in subjective theories (Palaian, 1993; Ravicz, 1998; Schurer, 2001). Consumer researchers have investigated longing as instantiated in consumer passions and desires (Belk et al., 2003).

These perspectives have had little impact on empirical psychological research. One obvious reason is that longing is an elusive phenomenon. Due to the absence of a comprehensive theory, the debate has primarily centered on lay theoretical notions. A second, related problem is the absence of credible assessment procedures (but see Holm, 1999). Therefore, the objective of the present project was not only to advance a conceptualization of longing strongly rooted in lifespan theory, but also to offer a first operationalization in a self-report questionnaire. In the following, the previous perspectives on longing are mentioned when they are relevant to the conceptualization. An overview of the definitions and claimed features of longing in the cited writings, as well as their methods of investigation, is given in Appendix A.

### 2.2.1 Definition of Longing

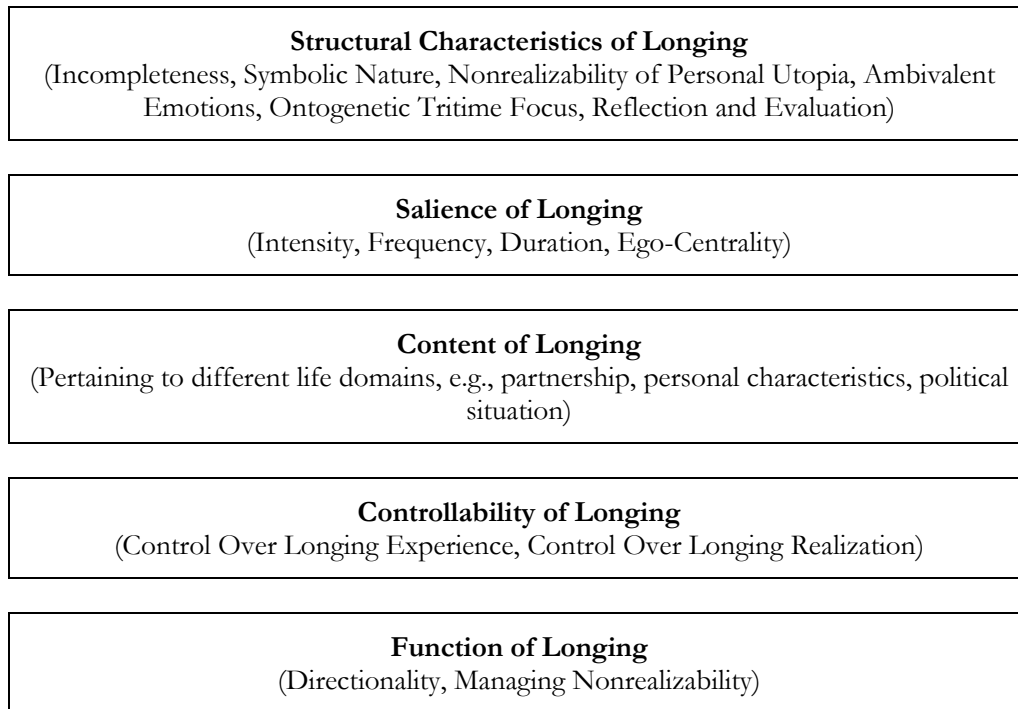
In the present study, longing was defined as *recurring mental representation of desired alternative realities of life that are remote or unattainable*. Four aspects are noteworthy. First, by definition, longing is directed at life realities that are alternative to or different from the present life reality. Longing means imagining to be or to do something different than what one is or does at the moment of longing. It is the desire for otherness and transformation of self and life (Belk et al., 2003; Ravicz, 1998). Longing thus represents a form of counterfactual thinking, that is, thinking contrary to the factual reality (Roese, 1997). Second, the term “alternative realities of life” was chosen to denote that longing is systemic-holistic and involves multiple domains of life. While specific objects (e.g., a person) can be in the foreground at any given moment, longing representations always involve manifold aspects of life including a positive overall feeling of life. Third, longing representations are enduring or recurring. They are repeatedly activated over a significant period of time. This precludes from consideration all short-term, momentary desires that are spontaneously evoked and limited to specific situations (e.g., the spontaneous desire for a cup of coffee). Fourth, the targets of longing are remote or unattainable. There is a perceived barrier to their attainment

(Ravicz, 1998). Goals or plans that can be easily realized are not considered longing according to this definition. These criteria imply that a desire like that for a cup of coffee can be a longing under special circumstances. For example, if one lives in a foreign country in which coffee is not available or has a different taste than one is used to from home, the desire for coffee may be systemic-holistic (it stands for memories of the places and people from home and an overall feeling of life there), recurring, and difficult to attain.

Controversy exists about the directedness of longings. In everyday language, longing can refer either to a vague, indeterminate desire for otherness (or change) or to a directed desire for a concrete object (Vogt, 1993). Philosophers including Fichte (1794/1962) and Bloch (1959) prefer the former notion (see also Boesch, 1998). In the sequence of motivational processes, they position longing in between an unconscious striving and directed wishes, dreams, and desires. Longing is considered as “consciousness of an indeterminate striving” and provides the script for particular, object-directed wishes or desires (which might be turned into goal intentions and actions; see also H. Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985). In the present conceptualization, however, it appeared more useful to adopt a less extreme position. Going with everyday language use, it was assumed that longings differ on a continuum ranging from diffuse and vague to concrete and specific. In addition, adopting the position that undirected longing provides the script for object-directed longings, it follows that both are expressions of the same phenomenon. In sum, the present definition of longing emphasized holistic mental representations of desired alternative life realities that can be more or less concrete. Short-term desires and easily attainable goals or plans were excluded from consideration.

Recognizing the inherent multidimensionality of developmental phenomena, in the present study, longing was described in terms of five aspects: structural characteristics, salience, content, controllability, and function (see Figure 1). The structural characteristics, controllability, and function were strongly informed by lifespan theory and research, whereas the salience and content were more descriptive in nature. First, longing has certain *structural characteristics*, such as its emotional quality. Based on the literature and lifespan theoretical propositions, six structural characteristics of longing were identified and are described in detail in the following section (Section 2.2.2). They represent the core of the present conceptualization of longing. Second, longing may be more or less salient for persons. *Salience* refers to the importance of longing for a person’s self-concept and the intensity, endurance, and frequency of experiencing longing. Third, longing can be characterized in terms of its *content*, which may vary from vague to concrete. For example, persons may have a longing for the love of a particular person, living by the sea, living in a just and peaceful world, or a vague longing for a different kind of life (see Section 2.2.3). Fourth, persons may feel more or less in *control* of their longing. Longing control refers to the

perceived ability to influence the occurrence and experience, as well as the realization of longing (see Section 2.2.4). Finally, longing may serve different *functions* for development. As argued below, longing may give direction for development and/or help manage losses and unrealizable developmental paths (see Section 2.2.5).



*Figure 1.* Overview of Five Aspects of Longing

### 2.2.2 *Six Structural Characteristics of Longing*

The review of previous writings on longing with their primary focus on folk psychological notions and propositions of lifespan theory suggest six structural characteristics that together capture the essence of longing. The six characteristics along with examples are listed in Table 1 and will be described in detail in the following.

It is proposed that all of these six characteristics need to be present in order for an experience to qualify as longing. Individuals will, however, differ in the degree to which these characteristics are elaborated. Together, the six characteristics represent the structural elaboration or complexity of longing.

#### *Sense of Incompleteness*

In the most general sense, longing reflects the notion that individuals are unfinished and human development never reaches completion (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997; Bloch, 1959). Human development must remain incomplete because it is an ongoing, life-long process, with new tasks

and demands emerging over the course of life. Development must also remain incomplete because real life will seldom completely meet the ideal or utopia people construct for themselves. In addition, the selectivity of human development suggests that not all possible pathways of development can be pursued (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; J. Heckhausen, 1999). Some developmental goals must be deferred until favorable opportunities arise in the future, and certain developmental options are irreversibly lost or unrealizable in a given life.

Table 1  
*Six Structural Characteristics of Longing Illustrated With an Example*

<b>Structural characteristics of longing</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Example: Living by the sea</b>
1. Sense of incompleteness	Lack of something essential to a happy and complete life; feeling of imperfection of life	I always wanted to have a house and live by the sea. I feel I belong there. A house by the sea is the missing piece in my life.
2. Symbolic nature	Involvement of diverse meanings and symbolically rich ideas of life	Living by the sea means to me freedom, endless time, connection to nature, and having a perfect life.
3. Nonrealizability of personal utopia	Idealized imaginations of alternative life realities that can be approximated but not completely realized	I see myself walking along the seashore every day, a dog running around me, with the sounds of the waves and seagulls. I will be the happiest person in the world. Of course, I know that I romanticize. Real life would never be that perfect.
4. Ambivalent emotions	Mixture of positive and negative emotions producing a feeling of "bittersweetness"	I much enjoy imagining my life by the sea. For a while, I can forget about all the hassles and problems of my actual life. Yet, it also makes me sad when I realize how remote my longing is.
5. Ontogenetic tritime focus	Joint focus on memories of the past (including unrealized possibilities), reflections on the present, and fantasies about the future	I spent all my summers at the sea when I was a child. Living far away, I rarely manage to go there today. Instead, I am surrounded by the hectic of the city and rarely encounter nature. Yet, maybe when I am old, I may buy a house by the sea and finally fulfill my dream.
6. Reflective and evaluative processes	Co-activation of reflections about the optimal course of life and one's standing relative to ideals	Thinking about the sea makes me wonder: How do I want to live? What do I need to be happy? How far am I from my ideals?

*Note.* The present example is idealized and has been constructed to illustrate the six structural characteristics.

On the individual level, longing arises from an awareness of this inherent incompleteness and imperfection of life. It involves an awareness of a discrepancy between the present life reality and an idealized alternative (Boesch, 1998; Tretter, 1994; Vogt, 1993). The discrepancy is experienced as a need for something (a thing, a state, a relationship) without which one's life does



not feel complete (Holm, 1999). The desired objects, persons, or experiences are more than mere wishes; they appear essential for a meaningful life (Boesch, 1998; Holm, 1999). What is missing may be more or less concrete and elaborated. In its most abstract form, incompleteness may be experienced as an undefined or woolly void.

The theme of incompleteness was also evident in previous qualitative studies. Palaian (1993) described longing as a sense of loss, of absence, and of something missing. Ravicz (1998) distinguished between desired objects that contribute “something more” to life and those that “make up for less.” Desiring “something more” involved the striving to develop oneself and one’s relationship with others. Desiring to “make up for less” referred to a set of needs without which one felt incomplete. Hence, the notion of incompleteness is a central component in lay theories of longing.

### *Symbolic Nature*

According to symbolic action theory (Boesch, 1991, 2001), every action, event, or object relates to other actions, events, or objects in a cultural, biographical, and anticipatory (i.e., goal-directed) system of reference. Thus, human experience and behavior has an inherently symbolic quality. It always relates to the cultural and social environment, the personal history, and desired future states. Such relations can be near or far in time or space, more conscious or less.

For longing, this implies that longing representations are symbolically rich and involve diverse meanings. It is assumed that the desired objects individuals are longing for are inevitably linked to higher-order goals, motives, values, and needs. Even if people are longing for rather concrete objects, these are but symbols, or means, for underlying aims (Belk et al., 2003; Boesch, 1998; Palaian, 1993). In the above example (see Table 1), life by the sea may symbolize freedom, inner peace, and connection to nature, all of which may represent the person’s ideas about optimal ways of living. Objects of longing are not only linked to higher-order aims, they also inherently promise intense and enduring positive feelings upon attainment. Thus, while longing may be primarily experienced as a desire for specific objects, one could argue that its real target is the positive affect caused by the attainment of these objects (Schoch, 1994). Similarly, Boesch (1998) argues that ultimately, any longing is a search for happiness and fulfillment, which he defines as the experience of an optimal harmony between oneself and the world.

The symbolic nature of longing is apparent in descriptions of consumer desires. Being directed at material goods and services, such desires represent longing in its most concrete form. According to Belk and colleagues (2003), consumer desires are always driven by an underlying, nonmaterial longing for transformation of self and for the love and admiration of others. The appeal of desired objects is not so much the object’s particular characteristics, but the person’s

own hopes for an altered state of being, including an altered set of social relationships. Apparently, concrete desires are always linked to higher-order needs.

The symbolic nature of longing has two implications. First, because the concrete object of longing is only a symbol for underlying motives and higher-order goals, its attainment will not necessarily result in an enduring sense of fulfillment. For example, moving to the sea may initially lead to intense happiness, but these positive feelings will likely diminish over time because the underlying desire for inner peace is not fulfilled. Moreover, peak experiences like intense joy and fulfillment can only be experienced in moments and cannot last for longer periods of time (Boesch, 1998; Privette, 1983). It is a well-established phenomenon that people adapt quickly to positive experiences, even if these experiences are extreme and impact many other life domains, such as winning the lottery (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Models of hedonic adaptation suggest that individuals tend to adjust to positive emotional stimuli by increasing their standard level of stimulation (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). As they gain new accomplishments and possessions, people increase their expectations, and over time, these positive events no longer make them happy. Thus, the joy of obtaining an object of longing is usually short-lived and transforms itself into routine and boredom (Belk et al., 2003; Klinger, 1977).

A second implication is that the object that is in the focus of longing can change over time (Belk et al., 2003; Schurer, 2001). Belk and colleagues (2003) describe a cycle of consumer desire, in which attainment or realization is followed by a reformulation of desire. Because the joy of attainment is short-lived and followed by routine and disillusion (as the underlying longing remains unattained), people repeatedly tend to refocus their desire on new objects.

The symbolic nature of longing is consistent with the assumption of a hierarchical structure of motivation and self-regulation (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). For example, personal goals are assumed to differ in their level of abstraction: Abstract higher-order goals are successively split into more and more concrete subgoals, which are instrumental in helping to achieve them (Carver & Scheier, 1990, 1998; Emmons, 1989). Analogously, more concrete objects of longing are instrumental or symbolic for higher-order needs, motives, and ideal ways of living (for a further discussion on the differences between longing and goals, see Section 2.3.1).

#### *Nonrealizability of Personal Utopia*

Lifespan research has shown that individuals hold subjective beliefs about the human life course and their own development (e.g., Freund, 2003; J. Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989; Lang, Goerlitz, & Seiwert, 1992; Settersten, 1997). For example, adults have relatively consistent

expectations about the age-graded timing of particular events and transitions (e.g., the expected age for marriage or reaching peak occupational positions). Subjective conceptions about development are not restricted to “normal” or average levels of lifespan development. Individuals also have ideas about what constitutes “ideal levels” of development, or what they would consider a “good life” (King & Napa, 1998). This includes representations of ideal ways of being, or the ideal self (Higgins, 1987; Ryff, 1991). Subjective beliefs about ideal development likely have a powerful impact on the way in which people perceive and evaluate themselves and others.

It is assumed that personalized representations of ideal life realities or optimal life courses are a major component of longing. In longing, the imperfect present is mentally contrasted with what may be called “personal utopias of life.” So far, the concept of utopia has been studied mainly in sociology and refers to a detailed, concrete picture of a flawless community (Cazès, 2001). Applying the concept to individuals, personal utopias comprise individuals’ representations of their own ideal life course. They involve images and fantasies that are unrestricted by the limits of reality (e.g., being overly positive or violating rules of logic and time) and can therefore be approximated but never completely realized (Boesch, 1998; Palaian, 1993; Vogt, 1993). For example, one may have a longing for reliving one’s childhood with the wisdom of an old man, for immortality, or for having a deceased person come alive.

While these may be extreme examples, it is argued that utopian elements can be found in any kind of longing. Previous studies showed that individuals tend to concentrate on the desirability and ignore the feasibility of temporally distant events (as opposed to temporally close events; Liberman & Trope, 1998). This enhances the value of desired end states and neglects possible difficulties and negative side effects. It is unlikely that the longing for a life by the sea focuses on unpleasant storms or the hassles and loneliness of living far from the city. Because of their utopian quality, the objects of longing, once attained, can never be as fabulous as imagination has made them.

### *Ambivalent Emotions*

A central facet of lifespan theory is the view that development always consists of both gains and losses (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997; Brandtstädter, 1998; Labouvie-Vief, 1981). This general view is consistent with the semantic meaning structure of longing. Specifically, it is proposed that longing is accompanied by *ambivalent* emotions. Its emotional quality can best be described as “bittersweet,” combining a positive and a negative affective component – a mixture of joy and sadness.

The emotional and ambivalent nature of longing is uniformly emphasized in previous writings (Belk et al., 2003; Boesch, 1998; Holm, 1999; Palaian, 1993; Ravicz, 1998; Schoch, 1994;

Schurer, 2001; Tretter, 1994; Vogt, 1993). In these writings, longing is described as “fervent desire”, “enjoyable discomfort”, and “embodied passion” that may include intense excitement, hope, and energetic feelings, but also the pain of loss, frustration, and regret (Belk et al., 2003; Boesch, 1998; Palaian, 1993).

The positive affective component likely derives from the positive fantasy of the longing object and the hopeful anticipation of obtaining it. In addition, longing can itself be an intrinsically pleasurable experience (Belk et al., 2003; Boesch, 1998; Schoch, 1994). Just as the poets and painters during the time of Romanticism cultivated their longings, people may enjoy dwelling on their idealized fantasies, rehearsing what it will be like to fulfill them, and in so doing, elaborate and intensify their feelings. Given the permanent incompleteness of human life (P. B. Baltes, 1997) and the impossibility of permanent fulfillment of longing, imagination may be a way to satisfy the longing for “completeness of the self” (Boesch, 1998; Ravicz, 1998). Such a sense of completeness can be rewarding in and of itself.

The negative affective component is likely a result of the perceived absence and inaccessibility of the (highly important) longing object. Longings are by definition difficult or improbable to obtain. An increased focus on the idealized alternative reality may also devalue the present and intensify its negative evaluation (Boesch, 1998). In addition, people may realize the utopian and unrealizable nature of their longing and the limits of their action potentials. Consequently, longing may be associated with regret and grief for what is not and never going to be (Boesch, 1998; Palaian, 1993). Finally, negative emotions may arise from the insatiability of longing. Repeated disillusion after obtaining desired objects (with the underlying longing still remaining) and a feeling of uncontrollability of longing may cause feelings of frustration and fear of addiction (Belk et al., 2003; Tretter, 1994; Vogt, 1993).

The proportions of the positive and negative affective components may vary – ranging from euphoric (primacy of positive emotions) over normal (equal proportions of positive and negative emotions) to depressed longing (primacy of negative emotions; Holm, 1999). The negative component most likely predominates in destructive forms of longing, which may turn into psychopathology such as depression and addiction. To some extent, however, longings are always “bittersweet,” encompassing both poles of affective evaluation.

### *Ontogenetic Tritime Focus*

The lifespan framework suggests that to understand human development, one must consider the life course as a whole (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997; Lewin, 1946). At any given point in time, individual functioning is influenced by personal representations about multiple periods of the lifespan, including the past, present, and future. For example, when evaluating themselves or

their lives at present, persons take into account images they currently hold about themselves and their lives in the past and future (Fleeson & Baltes, 1998; Johnson & Sherman, 1990; Ross & Newby-Clark, 1998; Ryff, 1991; Staudinger, Bluck, & Herzberg, 2003).

In line with this general view, longing is assumed to involve a conjoint focus on the personal past, present, and future: It is inherently an ontogenetic tritime-phenomenon. Retrospection, concurrent evaluation, and prospection work together in creating the experience of longing. Retrospective or prospective imaginations may include peak experiences (moments of intense joy) and peak performances (episodes of superior functioning; Privette, 1983) that have occurred in the past or are envisioned for the future. Images of the past may also contain negative experiences such as sufferings, failures, or unrealized hopes and potentials. The longing for a life by the sea may involve childhood memories of happy summer vacations, reading books, but also missing opportunities to buy a particular house when it was on sale. Further, the sea may symbolize something lacking in the present life, such as living close to nature. These past and present reflections may be combined with future elaborated images of having a house by the sea, walking along the seashore, and going on sailing trips.

Previous perspectives on longing also observe the temporal dimension inherent in longing. Vogt (1993) describes longing as a simultaneous movement directed at the personal past and future, connecting the memory of a joyful experience with the wish for its repetition. Palaian (1993, p. III) identified as a core theme of longing “an escape from the present to recapture the past or fantasize with anticipation of the infinite future”. Belk and colleagues (2003) regard consumer desire as a longing for temporal transformation (towards past or future), often involving attempts to recreate the image or recollection of a prior state of bliss.

Although it is assumed that a tritime focus is always present in longing, the proportion of the three foci may vary. Longing may be primarily past-directed (e.g., longing for previous life phases or a deceased partner) or primarily future-directed (e.g., longing to live in another part of the world in the future). However, it is proposed that even in longings that appear to be exclusively past-directed at first glance, a present and future focus is involved. For example, longing for a deceased partner always involves imagining (counterfactual) present and future life scenarios with this person still being present.

### *Reflective and Evaluative Processes*

A key feature of lifespan development is the importance of reflexive behavior. It is generally assumed that individuals reflect about their own status of development and evaluate themselves and their lives in view of normative expectations and personal ideals (Brandtstädter, 1998; Freund, 2003; Markus & Nurius, 1986; McAdams, 2001; Ryff, 1991; Staudinger, 2001).

Such reflections form the momentum of personal development and may result in attempts to deliberately adjust behavior or lifestyle in order to achieve developmental goals or correct for developmental problems and losses (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000; J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995).

In this vein, it is postulated that longing is associated with reflections and evaluations about the optimal course of life and one's standing relative to ideals. Proceeding from the feeling of incompleteness and imperfection of the actual life reality, longing involves an exploratory search for optimal ways of living, both externally (e.g., optimal living environments, partnership and love forms, interpersonal relationships, and societies) and internally (e.g., optimal ways of being, ideal strategies of managing gains and losses; Schurer, 2001). Longing for a life by the sea may elicit questions of how one wants to live, what kind of person one would like to be, and of the nature and importance of one's core needs and motives. Reflection is accompanied by the summative evaluation of one's standing in life in comparison to ideals and may induce the motivation to reduce the perceived discrepancies (see Section 2.2.5 on the function of longing). Thus, longing involves self-reflective and self-evaluative processes, as well as processes of constructing and reconstructing the personal past and future (e.g., Johnson & Sherman, 1990; Ross & Newby-Clark, 1998; Staudinger, 2001).

To summarize, according to the theoretical conceptualization advanced, the essence of longing is captured in six structural characteristics. These are informed conjointly by lifespan theory and common-sense and humanist views on longing. Caused by a bittersweet feeling of incompleteness and imperfection of life, longing deals with utopian ideas about desired alternative realities of life and life development, which are symbolically rich in meaning. Longing also combines reflections and evaluations about the reconstructed past, present, and future. In the conceptual approach chosen, all of these six characteristics need to be present in order for an experience to qualify as longing. Individuals will differ, however, in the degree to which these characteristics are elaborated. Because the six characteristics together represent the "manifold" of longing, they are expected to be positively interrelated. Together, the six characteristics represent the structural elaboration of longing.

### **2.2.3** *Contents of Longing: What Are We Longing for?*

The previous section outlined several basic characteristics that are assumed to apply to the phenomenon of longing in general, independent of its specific content. On an individual level, however, longing will usually be directed at more or less specific objects, persons, experiences, or life circumstances that are desired but remote or unattainable. In line with the

proposed view, the contents of longing represent a person's personal utopia of life. In general, what are the contents of longing?

Examples of longing found both in the popular and scientific literature often include homesickness and wanderlust, nostalgia, love and eroticism, social recognition and fame. This is by far not an exhaustive list. Given that longings are directed at alternative life realities, they can theoretically span all possible domains of life, although it is likely that they are driven by age-specific themes. Longings may even include very intimate, immoral, or socially undesirable aims (e.g., infidelity, harming or dominating other people). Acting on such longings would involve socially or personally dangerous consequences. Because longings are utopian and unconstrained by the limits of reality, they can include very fantastic, unreal aims, such as immortality or traveling across time. Longing may also go beyond the personal life and include the societal circumstances in which it is embedded. A famous example is the political leader Martin Luther King who was dedicated to his utopia of a world without race segregation.

Although longings can be highly idiosyncratic, it is likely that they share common themes (collective longings). From a psychological perspective, fundamental human motives and developmental tasks are probably involved. *Motives* are relatively enduring preferences for a broadly defined class of affectively charged incentives, which orient, energize, and direct behavior (McClelland, 1987). There is consensus in the literature that persons are motivated to have impact on others (*power*), do things better (*achievement*), do things together with others (*affiliation*), and be engaged in affectionate relationships (*intimacy*) (e.g., Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grässmann, 1998; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996). These four motives reflect two fundamental modalities of human existence (Bakan, 1966). According to Bakan, humans are animated by two broad and contrasting tendencies: *agency*, which concerns the existence of the organism as an individual (indicated by the power and achievement motives), and *communion*, which concerns the participation of the individual in some larger group of which the individual is a part (indicated by the affiliation and intimacy motives). Throughout life, persons have to balance their strivings for agency and communion, separation and union, getting ahead and getting along (Bakan, 1966; Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985; McAdams et al., 1996).

Although motives are usually conceived of as implicit and operating outside of awareness (e.g., King, 1995; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989), they do manifest themselves in individualized and cognitively elaborated representations of what individuals want to achieve or avoid in their lives (Brunstein et al., 1998). Previous research has shown links between implicit motives and explicit goals, wishes, and personal memories, although these links were usually not very strong (Brunstein et al., 1998; King, 1995; McAdams et al., 1996). As mental representations of ideal alternative realities of life, longings will likely also reflect these fundamental human

motives. Belk and colleagues (2003) provide initial empirical evidence. In this study, the love and admiration of other people (communion) were identified as important underlying motivations behind consumer desires. In their qualitative analyses, the authors found that desired objects were regarded as means for building social relationships with other people, obtaining desired responses from other people, or to be or feel like other people. King and Broyles (1997) asked university students to make three wishes. Students most commonly wished for achievement, affiliation, intimacy, and power, followed by wishes for happiness and money. Some wishes also pertained to other life domains such as society, religion, or sexual experiences. Wishes are not identical to longings, as they usually pertain to rather momentary, fleeting desires (see Section 2.3.4). Nevertheless, they are often colored by long-term interests and thus, there should be some overlap in the contents of wishes and longings.

From a developmental perspective, the contents of longing should also be linked to age-graded *developmental tasks and themes* (Erikson, 1980; Havighurst, 1948; Levinson, 1986; Peck, 1956). Developmental tasks represent challenges to individual development that arise in a certain period of time in the life course (Havighurst, 1948). These tasks are jointly produced by physical maturation, societal expectations, and individual goals, values, and motives. Expressions of developmental tasks (e.g., finding a partner in young adulthood) have been found in personal goals of adults of various ages (J. Heckhausen, 1997; Nurmi, 1992). Such a link with developmental tasks implies that contents of longing should change with age, an argument that is elaborated below (see Section 2.4.2). In conclusion, longing contents likely span manifold domains of life and may sometimes include immoral or socially undesirable aims. They are probably linked to basic human motives and developmental tasks.

#### **2.2.4 The Importance of Control Over Longing**

A central concept of a psychological and developmental approach to behavior and experience is the sense of control (M. M. Baltes & Baltes, 1986; Lachman & Prenda, 2004; Skinner, 1996). This concept is particularly important within action-theoretical perspectives on development (e.g., Brandtstädter, 1998; Freund & Baltes, 2000; Skinner, Chapman, & Baltes, 1988). Action theory focuses on the individual as an active agent capable of goal setting, planning, and self-regulation rather than passive respondent to external stimulation. In this view, individuals take on an active role in shaping the course of their development. Subjective beliefs about control play a major role in this process because they determine whether individuals will pursue their developmental goals and achieve a successful life adaptation.

An application of this concept to longing (and its properties of incompleteness and nonrealizability of personal utopia) suggests that a major facet of longing is its controllability.



Two components of control appear particularly relevant: control over the experience of longing and control over the realization of longing.

### *Control Over the Experience of Longing*

Given that longing can be an intensely pleasurable experience by itself, and that it allows an escape from the imperfect present, it incorporates the danger of addiction and creation of an insurmountable gap between the imagined and the real life (Schurer, 2001; Verres, 1999; Vogt, 1993). Passion, obsession, enslavement, domination, and losing oneself were phrases used by participants in the study by Belk and colleagues (2003) to describe some of their desires and longings. Insistent insatiability with a permanent “wanting more” constituted one possible theme of longing in Palaian’s (1993) study. Uncontrollable and persisting longing is often considered as one of the characteristics of clinical forms of addiction (Böning, 1994; Tretter, 1994; Vogt, 1993).

These arguments underscore the importance of a sense of control over the occurrence and experience of longing for maintaining well-being and psychological functioning. In keeping with general definitions of emotion regulation (e.g., Gross, 1998, 1999), control over the experience of longing was defined as *ability to influence the onset, course, and ending of longing episodes*. Individuals with a strong sense of control feel able to engage in longing to improve their momentary well-being or gain self-insight, and they feel able to disengage from longing if it decreases their momentary well-being or hinders more reality-based thoughts and behaviors.

In general, emotion regulation comprises a number of conscious or unconscious strategies by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them (Gross, 1998, 1999). In his model of emotion regulation, Gross posits that emotions may be regulated at different points in their generative process. Antecedent-focused emotion regulation involves attempts to influence emotions before they occur. For example, people may prospectively influence their emotions by approaching or avoiding emotion-evoking situations (situation selection) or by directing their attention towards or away from emotional stimuli (attentional deployment). Response-focused emotion regulation, in contrast, involves attempts to regulate the experiential, behavioral, or physiological expressions of emotions after they have occurred. Specifically, people may reappraise the demands of the situation or their own capacities to deal with these demands (cognitive change), or they may manipulate their behavior or physiological responding (response-regulation; Gross, 1998, 1999). These strategies can be employed to influence both positive and negative emotions. Usually, people will be motivated to down-regulate negative emotional experiences and up-regulate positive emotional experiences (Gross et al., 1997).

Accordingly, longing may be regulated by antecedent- or response-focused strategies. The emotional quality of longing probably influences whether individuals will try to up- or down-regulate their feelings of longing, depending on whether positive or negative emotions predominate. If longing is primarily pleasurable, individuals will likely be motivated to initiate and intensify it, perhaps by listening to music, watching movies, or meeting persons with whom they can dwell on their idealized fantasies. If longing is more painful than enjoyable, people will probably be more motivated to inhibit their feelings of longing by avoiding particular situations and persons, distracting themselves, or downgrading the importance attached to the object of longing.

#### *Control Over the Realization of Longing*

Control cannot only be felt about the occurrence and experience of longing, but also about the realization of longing or facets thereof. Drawing on common definitions of control beliefs (e.g., Skinner, 1996), control over the realization of longing was defined as the *extent to which persons believe that they know and have access to means for the realization of their longing*.

Control is a multifaceted phenomenon. In her review on constructs of control, Skinner (1996) emphasized the necessity to distinguish between objective and subjective control, and between agents, means, and ends of control. Objective, or actual, control refers to a person's objective possibilities to influence the environment and is contingent on personal and situational conditions. Subjective, or perceived, control, in contrast, refers to individuals' beliefs about how much control is available. The two facets of control can dissociate, leading in the most extreme cases to learned helplessness (high objective control, low subjective control; Seligman, 1975) or illusions of control (low objective control, high subjective control; Langer, 1975; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

By definition, objective control over the realization of longing is limited. Conceptually, longing involves utopian visions that can at best be approximated, but never completely fulfilled. Furthermore, because of their symbolic nature, feelings of fulfillment upon attaining concrete objects of longing will rarely be enduring because the real targets of longing often remain unfulfilled. This does not preclude the possibility, however, that individuals subjectively perceive their longings as attainable. Longings are long-term visions and people tend to construe distant future events in terms of abstract, general, and decontextualized features (Lieberman & Trope, 1998). They may thus fail to plan for contextual constraints, difficulties, or negative side effects. In addition, individuals tend to be overly optimistic about their future (Taylor & Brown, 1988). In an interview study on long-standing wishes, Heckhausen and Kuhl (1985) found that people often do not feel that a lack of finances or time represented an ultimate barrier to attaining their

wishes. Instead, people in the study by Heckhausen and Kuhl were confident that getting older would provide them with plenty of time, so that wishes blocked by scarcity of time did not need to be abandoned.

The second distinction between facets of control concerns means, agents, and ends of control (Skinner, 1996). Ends refer to ultimate targets of control efforts (e.g., success, achievements, new abilities, recovery, happiness), agents refer to the individual or group who exerts control (e.g., self, powerful others, chance or fate), and means refer to the pathways through which control is exerted (e.g., effort, ability, cognitions). Both objective and subjective control require that two conditions are met: The individual must know means that are effective in producing the desired outcome (means-ends relations), and the individual must have access to that means (agent-means relations; Bandura, 1977; Skinner, 1996). In the above example of longing for a life by the sea, the person may or may not believe that moving to the sea would lead to inner peace, in addition to believing that he or she would have the funds necessary to do the move.

A large body of research has cumulated about the fundamental importance of control beliefs to psychological adaptation and well-being. Both experimental and correlational studies have shown that across all ages, control beliefs are linked with a wide range of positive outcomes, such as health, optimism, persistence, achievement, coping with stressful life events, and success in a number of life domains (Lachman & Burack, 1993; Skinner, 1996). Control beliefs are important because they encourage people to act on their goals, which is the first necessary step to realize them (Bandura, 1977).

Accordingly, believing that one can realize one's longings is likely linked to their emotional quality, their functionality, and general well-being. For example, the degree of control over the realization of longing may influence the extent of negative emotions associated with longing. Belk and colleagues (2003) observed that the intensity and emotional quality of desire depends on hope, that is, the felt likelihood of achieving the desire. Desire coupled with hope to realize the desire is itself pleasurable and sustains the desire. In contrast, desire coupled with little hope of achieving the desire either leads to depression, resignation, or bitterness, or it dissolves desires into mere wishes and impossible fantasies.<sup>1</sup> Palaian (1993) reports themes of grief for what is never going to be, frustration, and powerlessness as possible themes of longing – all of these indicate a low sense of control over the realization of longing. Low control over the realization of longing likely causes peoples' passive waiting for their longing to come true – a

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Belk and colleagues (2003), the present conceptualization assumes that impossible fantasies may nevertheless serve important functions for human development. This argument is elaborated in Section 2.2.5.

reaction that has often been emphasized by writers with a negative view on longing, including psychoanalytical authors (see Danzer, 1998).

To summarize, the psychological, developmental perspective taken suggests the importance of a sense of control over longing. Two forms of longing control were distinguished. Control can be felt over the occurrence and experience of longing (i.e., control at the level of imagination), and control can be felt over the realization of longing (i.e., control at the level of active behavior). The degree of control over longing likely influences whether it is functional or dysfunctional for human development, an issue that is considered next.

### *2.2.5 The Self-Regulation Function of Longing*

From a lifespan perspective, the outcomes of a given behavior for development are of key importance. In this line of inquiry, it is a central question whether the occurrence of longing has regulatory functions for the subjective and objective developmental status of individuals. In other words, does longing promote or hinder development, and if it does, in what domains of functioning?

In the literature, the function of longing is usually regarded as ambivalent (Belk et al., 2003; Bloch, 1959; Boesch, 1998; Verres, 1999; Vogt, 1993). On the one hand, longing enables persons to surpass the limits of reality and their present capabilities, which makes it a potential source for inspiration and creativity (Boesch, 1998; Vogt, 1993). Moreover, longing may be a powerful motivation to work towards its fulfillment, as reflected in the maxim “If you want your men to build a ship, do not teach them the usage of hammer and nail, but rather induce in them a longing for the great big sea.” (Verres, 1999). According to philosophers, utopian visions of a better life may drive much of ontogenetic and even societal development (Bloch, 1959; Danzer, 1998). Other writings emphasize gaining self-insight as a positive function of longing (Hogrebe, 1994; Schurer, 2001). Assuming that longing results from the neglect of core needs and motives, it elicits processes of reflection and concretization of what it is one really desires, thereby increasing knowledge about the self (Schurer, 2001).

On the other hand, longing can also hinder people from going on with their daily lives, leaving them frozen in the past or at the level of fantasy (Vogt, 1993). The idealized image of the desired may devaluate and obliterate the present (Boesch, 1998). People may chase after their unrealizable dreams and thereby fail to value what they actually have. In this way, longing may hinder flexible goal adjustment in the face of unachievable goals, irreversible losses, and aging-related deterioration (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000; J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003a). Moreover, indulging in idealized

fantasies may seduce the person to mentally enjoy the desired life reality in the here-and-now instead of pursuing it actively (Oettingen, 1996; Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001). In line with this perspective, the psychoanalytic literature often dismissed longing as regressive, immature movement towards the past coupled with passive waiting for the desire to come true (Danzer, 1998).

The present conceptualization emphasizes the positive function of longing and the regulatory role it may have in human development. It is assumed that longing can be considered as a part of life management, that is, people's strategies to actively take part in and shape their developmental trajectories across the lifespan (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandtstädter, 1998; Freund & Baltes, 2000). Based on previous writings on longing, two functions are proposed: directionality and managing nonrealizability. Both functions work on the imaginary level, that is, the level of fantasy and subjective reality.

The two functions of longing are compatible with the model of selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC; P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000). This model is conceptualized as a meta-model that can be applied to diverse domains of functioning (e.g., emotional or social functioning) and levels (e.g., individual or group level; P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000). Longing can be considered as an application of the SOC-model to the level of imaginary processes (as opposed to the level of objective reality). The two processes of selection and compensation are particularly relevant to longing.

### *Directionality*

Longing may be involved in the *imaginary exploration and selection of alternative life trajectories and give people a general orientation for development*. Longing outlines ideal plans of life, which take into account people's core needs and motives. By aligning one's life with these ideals, one ensures congruency between core needs and actual behavior. Longing does not only point toward the ideal life, it may also constitute powerful incentives to act towards the realization of these ideals. Thus, longing can have a motivating function and lead to the formulation of goals (Schurer, 2001; Tretter, 1994; Verres, 1999; Vogt, 1993). This, however, depends on a sense of control over the realization of longing. Only if there is hope to attain the desired outcome or approximate the ideal, longing is turned into a productive tension and motivates people to surpass their present life reality.

In the SOC framework, the directionality function of longing represents an imaginary form of selection. It describes mental processes of exploring and selecting alternative life realities and trajectories for continued development. It may also elicit the selection of goals, which in turn may elicit the selection of goal-relevant behavior.

*Managing Nonrealizability*

A second function of longing may be the *regulation of (irreversible) losses and unrealizable life trajectories using the imaginary level*. Losses and constraints are inevitable in human development (e.g., P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997). Since their time and energy is limited, individuals must select among different possible goals and life domains in which they invest their resources. The selectivity of human development necessarily excludes alternative developmental options. In addition, development is limited by biological, social, and cultural constraints (e.g., Dannefer, 1984; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). Adapting to losses and nonrealizability in a way that avoids meaninglessness and depression and preserves subjective well-being is regarded an important ingredient of successful life management and development (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000; J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995).

Longing can be an imaginary substitute for the things one cannot have in reality. To fantasize about an idealized alternative reality can be a strategy to temporarily escape the imperfect present, connect to distant places and times, and thus restore subjective well-being. It also allows momentarily overcoming the permanent incompleteness of human life through imagination (Boesch, 1998; Ravicz, 1998). For example, in Ravicz's (1998) study, participants reported that their longing provided them with a feeling of connection to their desired objects (that they could not have in reality), which lead to a sense of satisfaction and completion. However, indulging in longing as compensation for unrealizable life options must be temporarily restricted in order to be functional. Thus, it must be combined with a sense of control over the experience of longing. Otherwise, longing will probably hinder people in pursuing more reality-based, achievable goals.

In the SOC-framework, managing nonrealizability can be considered as an imaginary form of compensation. In the face of irreversible losses and unrealizable goals, fantasy and imagination can be used as an alternative mean or strategy to maintain particular projects and the connection to lost persons, times, or places. There are also links to models of life-management that are compatible with the SOC-model. Both the model of optimization in primary and secondary control (OPS; J. Heckhausen, 1999; J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995) and the model of assimilative and accommodative coping (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Brandtstädter, Wentura, & Rothermund, 1999) specify strategies to regulate losses by adjusting personal preferences and goal orientations to given situational forces and constraints (secondary control or accommodative coping). The function of managing nonrealizability can be regarded as a special case of such strategies. To the extent that longing cannot be realized in reality, persons can lower their personal standards in the sense that imaginary consumption is regarded as satisfactory

(accommodative coping) or by forming mental representations of unattainable life realities that serve as their mental substitute (secondary control; see also Boerner & Heckhausen, 2003).

To summarize, in the theoretical framework advanced, longing is conceived of as a multidimensional phenomenon with five aspects. The structural characteristics, controllability, and function of longing are based on a conjoint consideration of common-sense and humanist perspectives as well as on lifespan theory and research. The contents and salience of longing are more descriptive in nature. The following section draws on this proposed conceptualization to show that related psychological concepts appear to capture only parts of the conceptual space of longing.

## 2.3 Distinguishing Longing From Related Concepts

When attempting to articulate a new construct, the question of convergent and divergent construct validity is crucial. Thus, it is necessary to consider both the conceptual overlap of longing with other constructs as well as its uniqueness. For instance, longing shares characteristics with several other concepts, including goals (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996), possible selves (Hooker, 1992; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Smith & Freund, 2002), the ideal self (Higgins, 1987; Ryff, 1991)), wishes (Ehrlichman & Eichenstein, 1992; King & Broyles, 1997), regret (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1995), hope (e.g., Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990; Snyder, 2000), daydreams (e.g., Singer, 1966), and free future fantasies (Oettingen, 1996; Oettingen et al., 2001). None of these related concepts, however, is fully equivalent with the present conceptualization of longing. The following sections discuss the commonalities and differences between longing and each of these related concepts. Table 2 gives an overview of their definitions and differentiating features on a conceptual level.

### 2.3.1 *Longing and Goals*

Longings are consistent with goal concepts; yet, they are distinct from the goal concepts typically studied in motivational psychology (e.g., Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Emmons, 1986; Klinger, 1977; B. R. Little, 1983; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Nurmi, 1992; Riediger, 2001). On a very general level, goals are defined as internal representations of desired states (outcomes, events, or processes), ranging from biological set points (e.g., body temperature) to complex cognitive depictions of desired outcomes (e.g., career success) (Austin & Vancouver, 1996).

Table 2  
*Concepts Related to Longing: Definitions and Differentiating Features (On a Conceptual Level)*

Concept	Definition	Differentiating features
Goals	Internal representations of desired states (outcomes, events, or processes), ranging from biological set points (e.g., body temperature) to complex cognitive depictions of desired outcomes (e.g., career success) (Austin & Vancouver, 1996)	Goals as typically studied in motivational psychology are future- and present-oriented, more reality-based, and more concrete and domain-specific than longing. Goals are usually not emotionally ambivalent. Means to achieve goals are more often known and accessible than means to fulfill longings. Goals are linked to everyday behavior more than longing.
Possible selves	Hoped-for and feared future life scenarios representing people's ideas of what they may become, would like to become, and are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989)	Possible selves are images of oneself, primarily future-oriented, and more reality-based than longing. Possible selves include negative possibilities of the future and avoidance goals, whereas longing is always directed at "something better." Possible selves are not necessarily utopian or emotionally ambivalent.
Ideal selves	The representation of the attributes that someone (self or other) would like one, ideally, to possess (including hopes, aspirations, or wishes) (Higgins, 1987; Ryff, 1991)	The ideal self pertains only to the self-concept and is not necessarily utopian or emotionally ambivalent. A discrepancy between the actual and the ideal self is predicted to induce negative rather than ambivalent emotions.
Wishes	Aims that are unconstrained by the limitations of the real world (Ehrlichman & Eichenstein, 1992)	Wishes are more short-term, concrete desires often representing momentary, superficial concerns (not holistic life alternatives). Wishes are only present- or future-oriented and lack the sense of incompleteness, symbolic elaboration, and emotional ambivalence of longing. Attainment of wishes is not always essential for a meaningful life.
Regret	Unpleasant feeling when people look back on bad decisions (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995)	Regret is exclusively negative in emotional quality, requires a sense of choice (i.e., having had the choice to act differently), and concerns the removal of negative consequences (avoidance focus).
Hope	Expectation of attaining goals that are uncertain, but not improbable or unrealistic, personally important, and socially acceptable (Averill et al., 1990)	Hope is primarily future-oriented and directed at realistically possible states. It only targets socially acceptable goals and desires, and requires a sense of personal control.
Daydreams	Inward shift of attention away from an ongoing physical or mental task or from a perceptual response to external stimulation towards a response to some internal stimulus (Singer, 1966)	Daydreams occur spontaneously and are often a fleeting experience. Representations are usually not elaborated (in terms of symbolic meanings, temporal extension, incompleteness, and emotional ambivalence). Daydreams can involve positive fantasies (like longing), but also negative fantasies (e.g., failure experiences).

*(table continues)*



Table 2. (continued)

Concept	Definition	Differentiating features
Free future fantasies	Thoughts and images of future events that appear in the mind independent of the likelihood of their actual occurrence (Oettingen, 1996)	Free fantasies are not necessarily enduring, emotionally ambivalent, symbolically rich in meaning, and temporally complex. They do not always involve reflections on the present life reality, and hence, a feeling of incompleteness.

Goals are hierarchically organized, and abstract, high-level goals are pursued by means of lower-level goals and activities (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Emmons, 1989). For example, Carver and Scheier (1990; 1998) postulate a goal hierarchy that includes at the highest level system concepts such as the idealized sense of self, a relationship, or a society. The next layer comprises principles or “be”-goals (e.g., honesty, responsibility) that are more abstract than programs or “do”-goals (e.g., cooking dinner). Finally, programs are turned into movement sequences or “motor control”-goals (e.g., slicing the tomatoes). Goals are increasingly important, and disengagement from them increasingly difficult, as one moves upward in the hierarchy. Higher-order goals are also more abstract than lower-order goals, and their focus is on the more distant future (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Lower-order goals are more closely related to concrete action programs. The importance of lower-order goals is influenced by the degree to which they are regarded as instrumental for higher-order goals (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Klinger, 1977).

Different goal concepts can be located in this hierarchy on the basis of their abstractness, situational consistency, and temporal extension into the future. Current concerns (Klinger, 1977) and personal projects (B. R. Little, 1983) are rather short-term, frequently changing, and contextualized. Hence, they are located at the lower end of the goal hierarchy. For example, current concerns (e.g., to keep an appointment) are strongly related to individuals’ ongoing thoughts, emotional reactions, and behavior, and they disappear once the goal is attained or put aside (Klinger, 1977). At an intermediate level of the goal hierarchy are life tasks (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987) and personal strivings (Emmons, 1986, 1989). These concepts denote broader goals that are more durable and consistent across situations. For example, personal strivings indicate what a person is typically trying to do (e.g., avoid conflicts with people). Possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989) and ideal and ought selves (Higgins, 1987, 1996) are still somewhat broader in focus. These concepts represent goals for the self, that is, hoped-for or feared images of the self in the future (possible selves) or images of the kind of person one would like or ought to be (ideal and ought selves).<sup>2</sup> At the highest level of the goal

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that all of these goal concepts can themselves vary in their level of abstraction and broadness (Carver & Scheier, 1998). For example, personal projects can range from “trivial pursuits” to “magnificent

hierarchy are motive dispositions, defined as enduring, recurring clusters of experiential preferences (McClelland, 1987). Motive dispositions are regarded as highly stable and decontextualized. Accordingly, they are usually assessed nomothetically rather than idiographically (Emmons, 1989). A small number of different social motives are often proposed, such as intimacy, affiliation, achievement, and power (e.g., Brunstein et al., 1998; McAdams et al., 1996).

As idealized representations of desired alternative life realities, longing is located at the upper end of the goal hierarchy, at the level of possible, ideal, and ought selves. It may best be described as ill-defined and relatively vague meta-goals regarding ideal ways of being or living. Consistent with their position in the goal hierarchy, longings are highly important: They are accompanied by a feeling of incompleteness and their fulfillment appears essential for a meaningful life. They are also ill-defined and removed from concrete action programs. Longings (such as living by the sea) contain little specific information about goal-related action, unless they are translated into more specific goals (e.g., contacting a real estate agent). In comparison to most other goal concepts, longings are less controllable and cannot be completely achieved or fulfilled; they have a utopian quality. Buying a house by the sea does not guarantee happiness and inner peace. Another distinctive characteristic is temporal complexity. Goals are primarily future- and present-oriented, whereas longing always has a tritime focus on the personal past, present, and future. Certainly, there can be goals that are rooted in the past (e.g., regaining the physical strength one had prior to an illness). However, the actual target of goals is always a change in the present or future.

Finally, in contrast to longing, goals are usually not conceptualized as emotionally ambivalent (Mayser, 2004). Models of the interaction between motivation and emotion typically assume that goals are accompanied by positive *or* negative emotions, depending on whether expectations of goal attainment are favorable or unfavorable (e.g., Bagozzi, Baumgartner, & Pieters, 1998; Carver & Scheier, 1990, 1998). For example, Carver and Scheier posit that individuals monitor their progress towards approaching their goals in reference to an internal standard rate of progress. If progress is equal to the standard, affect will be neutral. Positive affect will arise if progress is faster than the standard, and negative affect will arise if progress is slower than the standard. As people typically have multiple goals at a time, the rate of progress towards them can differ. This may lead to mixed affect, but only because multiple goals are involved. In contrast, longing is conceptualized as emotionally ambivalent in and of itself. It

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obsessions" (B. R. Little, 1989). Moreover, a number of studies have shown that individuals differ reliably in the level of abstraction that they typically use when reporting their goals (Emmons, 1992; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987).

should be noted that some authors propose that even single goals can be accompanied by mixed emotions. For example, happiness about obtaining a goal can be coupled with anxiety about its long-term consequences (Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 1996). Nevertheless, goals will typically not be emotionally ambivalent.

A study conducted in our research group supported most of the proposed differences between longings and goals (Mayser, 2004). In this study, participants attended two group sessions. In one session, they generated and reported on their three most important goals, while in the other session, they generated and reported on their three most important longings. The order of sessions was counterbalanced. The assessment of longings was very similar to the procedure used on the present study. It included a guided mental journey, a generation of idiographic longings, and a rating of the three most important longings on nomothetic dimensions (see Method section). Dimensions included cognitive aspects (symbolic nature, level of abstraction), emotional aspects (intensity and ambivalence of accompanying emotions), and perceived control over the realization of longings. A standard instruction was used for the assessment of goals (see Riediger, 2001). Specifically, study participants were asked to generate personal goals that they sought to obtain in the near future, that is, the coming weeks, months, or years. Subsequently, they rated their three most important goals on the same dimensions as used in the Longing Questionnaire (items only differed in terms of the words “this goal” versus “this longing”). At the end of the study, an open-ended question asked participants for commonalities and differences between longings and goals.

Mayser (2004) found that longings are perceived as more emotionally ambivalent (i.e., pleasurable and painful at the same time) than goals. Goals were rated as more closely linked to everyday behavior and as more controllable than longings. Participants reported that the pursuit of their goals influenced their immediate behavior more than the pursuit of their longings. As to perceived control, study participants indicated that they often chose their goals themselves and could give them up relatively easily, whereas longings just emerged nonintentionally and would be harder to give up. The means to realize goals were perceived as more often known and accessible than the means to realize longings. Mayser did not confirm the hypothesis that longings are perceived as more symbolic than goals. Possibly, individuals are aware of the hierarchical organization of their goals. For example, they may realize that the concrete goal of planning a vacation at the sea is symbolically linked with the higher-order desire for nature and inner peace. Furthermore, Mayser found mixed evidence for a higher level of abstraction of longings as compared to goals. Participants did not differ in their ability to list specific criteria indicative of having realized the goal or longing. In contrast, in an open-ended question of differences

between longings and goals, one third of the sample reported that longings are more abstract than goals, whereas no participant reported the opposite pattern.

In sum, longings can be best perceived of as higher-order, ill-defined meta-goals that are more utopian, emotionally complex, uncontrollable, and removed from everyday behavior than goal concepts that are typically studied in motivational psychology. Because longing is most similar to the concepts of possible selves and the ideal self, the following sections discuss its relation to these constructs in more detail.

### *2.3.2 Longing and Possible Selves*

Like longing, possible selves (Hooker, 1992; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Smith & Freund, 2002) are located at the upper end of the goal hierarchy. They involve hoped-for and feared (i.e., alternative) future life scenarios and represent individuals' ideas of what they may become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. They are conceptualized as the cognitive, personalized manifestations of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats, which indicates a symbolic nature of possible selves. Possible selves function as incentive for future behavior and provide the evaluative context for the present view of self.

Apparently, only a subset of possible selves overlaps with longing, namely those possible selves that persons would very much like to become (hoped-for possible selves). In addition, possible selves are primarily future-oriented and lack the tritime nature of longings. Although representations of the self in the past are regarded as antecedents of possible future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), they are not a constituent part of them. As the definition suggests, possible selves are the images of the self that have not yet been realized but that are hoped for or feared in the future. Another difference pertains to emotional quality. Possible selves have been described as varying in valence, that is, they can be either positive or negative. Longing, in contrast, is conceptualized as both positive and negative at the same time. Finally, possible selves are more reality-based than longing. They are the ideas about what is possible for us to be, to think, or to experience both in the positive (hopes) and negative sense (fears) (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Longing can be utopian and go beyond realistically possible states of self. In sum, possible selves are more future-oriented and less utopian than longing. They include negative possibilities of the future (i.e., avoidance goals) and lack the emotional ambivalence typical for longing.

### *2.3.3 Longing and the Ideal Self*

Longing is also related to the concept of ideal self specified in Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory (see also Ryff, 1991). The ideal self comprises attributes persons would ideally

like to possess and represent persons' hopes, aspirations, and wishes for themselves. The ideal self is distinguished from the ought self, which comprises attributes a person believes he or she ought to possess (including duties, obligations, and responsibilities). Self-discrepancy theory predicts that certain negative affective states arise from discrepancies between these two self-guides and the actual self (representation of attributes one actually possesses). Discrepancies between the ideal self and the actual self lead to dejection-related emotions (sadness, dissatisfaction, depression), whereas discrepancies between the ought self and the actual self lead to agitation-related emotions (anxiety, fear, shame). In studies by Higgins and colleagues (e.g., Higgins, Bond, Klein, & Strauman, 1986; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994), the ideal self is commonly operationalized in terms of freely generated attributes that participants would ideally like to possess (e.g., being attractive). Ryff (1991) studied the ideal self by asking participants to rate aspects of psychological functioning (e.g., autonomy, social relations, self-acceptance) with regard to the person they would most like to be.

Like longing, the ideal self represents persons' wishes about the self and ideas about ideal ways of being. The notion of a discrepancy between the actual and the ideal self is equivalent to the feeling of incompleteness inherent in longing. In contrast to longing, however, the ideal self pertains only to the domain of self-concept, that is, ideal personal characteristics and ideal relations to other persons and activities in the world (Higgins, 1996). Longings that do not directly involve the self, such as longing for one's children to recover from illness or for world peace would not be captured by this concept. Another conceptual difference lies in the emotional experiences that accompany ideal-actual self discrepancies and longing. Self-discrepancy theory predicts that activation of actual-ideal self discrepancies induces discomfort, and empirical studies support this claim (Higgins et al., 1986). Thus, actual-ideal self discrepancies are not conceptualized as emotionally ambivalent.

Further, ideal self-representations do not necessarily have a utopian quality. In an extension of self-discrepancy theory, Higgins and colleagues (e.g., Higgins, Vookles, & Tykocinski, 1992) consider not only the present self, but representations about the "can self" (attributes a person believes he or she can possess, that is, a person's potential and capabilities) and the "future self" (attributes a person is likely to possess in the future, that is, a person's expectation about future attributes). The ideal self can equal the "future self" or the "can self"; in this case, it represents a realistic "hope" or "potential." When the ideal self exceeds the "future self" or the "can self," however, the ideal self is a desired end-state that one does not expect to attain. It thus represents a "wish" or "dream." Only in this case would an ideal self contain aspects of longing, specifically longing pertaining to the self. Higgins and colleagues (1992) further argue that unfulfilled hopes and potentials are more closely related to negative emotions

than unfulfilled wishes and dreams. In sum, the ideal self differs conceptually from longing in that it is restricted to the domain of self and not necessarily utopian. Activation of a discrepancy between the actual and the ideal self is predicted to induce discomfort, rather than bittersweet emotions.

### *2.3.4 Longing and Wishes*

Longing has similarities with the concept of wishes (Ehrlichman & Eichenstein, 1992; King & Broyles, 1997). Wishes have been defined as aims that are unconstrained by the limitations of the real world (Ehrlichman & Eichenstein, 1992). Like longings, wishes reflect higher-order needs and values (symbolic nature), are less reality-bound than goals (utopian quality), and can have very idiographic contents (King & Broyles, 1997). However, unlike longing, wishes are not necessarily enduring or emotionally intense. Indeed, it has been argued that wishes seem unusually likely to reveal momentary or even superficial concerns of the person (King & Broyles, 1997). Longing, in contrast, deals with personally significant holistic life alternatives and is accompanied by a feeling of incompleteness. Wishes also do not have an ambivalent emotional quality and lack the tritime focus as they are exclusively present- or future-oriented. Finally, attainment of wishes does not appear essential for a meaningful life (Holm, 1999). In support of this argument, wishes were found to have very few associations with measures of subjective well-being (King & Broyles, 1997). Interestingly, associations were more pronounced for the subgroup of people with more idiosyncratic wishes (e.g., “wishing for my husband to recognize that my love for him is true” as compared to “love”). These idiographic wishes may be more similar to longing.

### *2.3.5 Longing and Regret*

Longing is also similar in structure and emotional intensity to regret (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). Regret is the feeling people experience when they look back on bad decisions, either regarding their actions taken (commission regrets) or regarding their actions not taken (omission regrets; Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). Like longing, regret involves counterfactual thoughts, that is, imagined alternatives to reality. These may range from very circumscribed present life scenarios (e.g., not having gone to the supermarket) to more general alternative scenarios of personal development (e.g., not having studied psychology; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002).

Longing has similarities with more general kinds of regret about not having pursued particular developmental pathways. Like longing, regret involves a feeling of incompleteness, instigated by a discrepancy between a negative reality and a desired alternative reality. Regret can

also be an emotionally powerful experience, motivating people to actively change their lives (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). Hence, regret shares the tritime focus with longing, in that it involves images of the past (the past actions or inactions one regrets), the negative present reality (which results from these regretted actions or inactions), and the future (which may be positive and negative depending on whether or not one expects to correct the regrettable behavior).

Unlike longing, however, the feeling of regret is exclusively negative. It further requires a sense of choice and responsibility for one's past actions or inactions, which is not the case for longing. Consequently, regret does not have a utopian quality because it focuses on the wish of having undertaken (or not having undertaken) particular actions that were realistically possible at a past point in time. Finally, regret always concerns the removal of negative consequences of past mistakes (avoidance focus), whereas longing can be directed at the attainment of positive outcomes (approach focus).

### **2.3.6 *Longing and Hope***

Hope is another emotional response that arises from thinking about alternative realities of life. Hope is usually defined as a greater than zero expectation of attaining important goals (Averill et al., 1990; Stotland, 1969). Objects of hope are uncertain (but not improbable or unrealistic), personally important, and socially and morally acceptable (Averill et al., 1990). According to Snyder (2000), hope is contingent on a sense of personal control, including the person's perceived capabilities to initiate and sustain movement towards goals (agency) and the perceived capabilities to produce effective routes to goals (pathways).

Hope and longing are both directed at personally important aims that are not immediately obtainable. Differences exist, however, in the ultimate likelihood of attaining desired outcomes. Hope vanishes if an event is unrealistic, out of personal control, or interferes with other goals (Averill et al., 1990). Longing, in contrast, can be directed at events that are unattainable or utopian. For example, one can have a longing for immortality, whereas one would never hope for it. Unlike hope, longing can also be directed at socially undesirable or unacceptable aims. Finally, hope and longing differ in their temporal orientation. Hope is primarily future-directed and thus lacks the tritime nature of longings.

### **2.3.7 *Longing and Daydreams***

Images of alternative life realities are also part of daydreams. Daydreaming can be characterized as an inward shift of attention away from an ongoing physical or mental task or from external stimuli towards internal stimuli (Singer, 1966). The contents of daydreams may be fantastic in nature, but are more likely to be mundane (Giambra, 2000). It is argued that

daydreams often revolve around current concerns (Klinger, 1977) or the goals people currently pursue, including imagined successes and failures in achieving them (Langens & Schmalt, 2002). In contrast to longing, daydreams usually occur spontaneously and are often a fleeting experience. Consequently, the usual contents of daydreams are probably not very elaborated, that is, they will be rather low in symbolic meaning, temporal extension across past, present, and future, and emotional complexity. They also do not necessarily involve the perception of a discrepancy between the present and an alternative life reality, which would induce a feeling of incompleteness of life. In addition, daydreams may involve positive fantasies (like longings), but also negative fantasies (e.g., failure experiences). At most, longing could be regarded as a special form of positive daydreams that are recurring and elaborated and involve the desire to change the present life reality.

### **2.3.8 Longing and Free Future Fantasies**

Longing appears similar to free future fantasies conceptualized in fantasy realization theory (Oettingen, 1996; Oettingen et al., 2001). As the term “free” indicates, future fantasies and longing share the counterfactual thinking about future life scenarios that are unconstrained by the limits of reality. However, although they can involve unrealistic states, future fantasies do not have to be utopian. Rather, they are independent of the likelihood of the actual occurrence of imagined events. In contrast, longings are by definition improbable or not attainable. Future fantasies are also not necessarily enduring. They can be spontaneous, short-term experiences, and thus, they are conceptually closer to wishes and daydreams than to longing. If short-term and fleeting, future fantasies are likely not structurally elaborated, in terms of symbolic meanings, temporal complexity, and reflective processes.

Future fantasies can be accompanied by reflection on the negative present reality (causing a feeling of incompleteness), in which case a necessity to act is induced. Depending on the person’s expectation of being able to successfully transform the negative reality into the desired future, goal commitment (in case of high expectations) or goal disengagement (in case of low expectations) will result (Oettingen, 1996). If free future fantasies are not accompanied by reflections on the imperfect present, however, individuals’ will be seduced to mentally enjoy the desired future in the here and now instead of actively trying to attain it. Hence, there can be future fantasies that are purely enjoyable and not accompanied by a feeling of incompleteness. This discussion shows that only a subset of future fantasies would be compatible with the present conceptualization of longing, namely those future fantasies that are enduring or recurring, symbolically and temporally complex (i.e., they are rooted in the personal past), and accompanied by reflections on the present reality.



This review of related concepts suggests that longing is a unique phenomenon that is not adequately captured by existing concepts dealing with alternative realities of life. Longing comprises recurring representations of highly desired alternative life realities and is therefore distinct from more short-term, momentary phenomena including daydreams, future fantasies, and wishes. Longing is also unique in its temporal and emotional complexity, its importance and centrality for persons, and its utopian quality. Because of its complexity, longing may involve other phenomena, including wishes, regret and hope, daydreams and future fantasies, but each of these alone does not suffice to describe longing. Longing can be best perceived of as a special kind of goals, namely abstract and ill-defined meta-goals about ideal ways of being or living. Possible selves and the ideal self can be considered as a subset of longings, namely those longings that predominantly pertain to desired or ideal images of oneself.

## 2.4 Longing in the Context of Lifespan Development

A lifespan developmental framework cannot only be used to articulate propositions about the general structure, contents, and regulatory functions of longing, but also to derive hypotheses about the linkage between longing and lifespan development. Specifically, such a framework suggests that longing has developmental antecedents and consequences, and that longing itself is a developmental and evolving phenomenon that undergoes age-related changes and may be more or less “advanced”. These issues are discussed in the present section.

### 2.4.1 *Developmental Antecedents and Consequences of Longing*

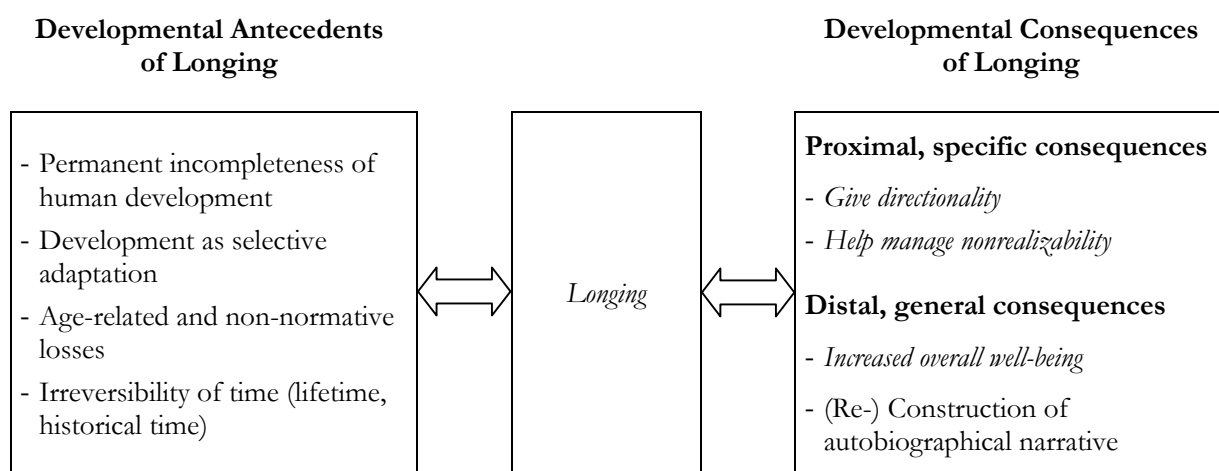
It is proposed that longing is embedded in lifespan development and has developmental antecedents and consequences. A schematic overview of these is given in Figure 2.

#### *Developmental Antecedents*

Based on theoretical propositions of the lifespan framework (see Section 2.1), four developmental antecedents of longing are suggested. First, longing is proposed to be a direct reflection of the *incompleteness of individual lives* as well as the *imperfection of human development* from an evolutionary perspective (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997). Because development is a lifelong process of adapting to environmental and organismic changes, life is incomplete at any given point in time (except perhaps the time of death). Life is also incomplete from an evolutionary perspective. The development of humans is an ongoing process of biological and cultural co-evolution. Thus, human lives have an “incomplete architecture” and are like an ill-designed building in which vulnerabilities become more and more manifest with age (P. B. Baltes, 1997). Similarly, philosophers argue that humans are inherently unfinished and motivated by visions of idealized

alternative realities of life (Bloch, 1959). The subjective awareness of life's incompleteness is an essential component of the experience of longing.

Second, it is assumed that longing is a consequence of the *selectivity of human development* (P. B. Baltes, 1987; P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; J. Heckhausen, 1999). Because their time and energy are limited, individuals must select among a possible set of goals, life domains, and developmental pathways. Not all life paths can be pursued in a given life. By (proactively or reactively) choosing among a possible set of developmental options, other options are automatically excluded, some of them irreversibly. Important developmental plans that could not be executed may give rise to longing.



*Figure 2.* Schematic Overview of Proposed Developmental Antecedents and Consequences of Longing  
The figure presents a general model of the developmental antecedents and consequences of longing. Not all of parts of the model were tested in the present study. The processes for which linkages were tested are indicated in italics. It should be noted that not all possible connections are shown. It is also an open question whether linkages are linear or whether there are optimal and dysfunctional levels of longing.

*Age-related and non-normative losses* are a third possible origin of longing. Age-related losses may be particularly salient to individuals when they approach or surpass a “developmental deadline,” such as the biological clock for childbearing in women (J. Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Fleeson, 2001; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999). Passing a developmental deadline sharply reduces opportunities for solving developmental tasks. Thus, upon approaching developmental deadlines, the urgency for attaining developmental goals is greatly enhanced. Longing will likely be more intense during these times, particularly if persons have low expectations about fulfilling their wishes (i.e., if they seem unattainable or utopian). After passing the deadlines without successfully attaining the goal, particular developmental pathways are permanently lost. These lost life paths may be transformed into lifelong longings. Non-normative losses can also be powerful sources of longing because they are often unexpected and may represent extreme situations of challenge.

Fourth and finally, longing may result from the *irreversibility of time* and the impossibility of movement in time. Time, including lifetime (i.e., the time already lived as well as the time left to live) and historical time, is progressing at its own speed and is linked to specific biological and cultural influences. These influences prevent people from living the life of another age group or generation. Movement in time is impossible. We cannot turn back time to relive previous life phases (e.g., childhood) or live in historical periods (e.g., the “Golden Twenties”), nor can we compress time to “jump” into the future, both personally (e.g., skip the stressful period of young parenthood) and historically (e.g., when certain diseases have become curable). An awareness of the irreversibility of time may result in a powerful longing to surpass the restrictions of time. For example, persons can have longings for “leading” the life of another age group or generation.

In sum, it is suggested that longing deals with all those alternative life realities that are (currently or permanently) inaccessible for individuals, either because they are lost, unrealizable, as of yet unrealized, or because they belong to a different life period or historical time.

#### *Proximal, Specific Developmental Consequences*

From a lifespan perspective, it is useful to distinguish between domain-specific and domain-general, or between short-term and long-term consequences of a given behavior or experience. A process or strategy that is functional in one domain of life does not need to be functional in another. Similarly, if a behavior is linked with positive outcomes in the short-term, this does not guarantee that it is also linked with positive outcomes in the long-term. Therefore, the current conceptualization distinguishes between proximal, specific and distal, general developmental consequences of longing.

The proximal, specific consequences pertain to the two self-regulation functions of longing (see Section 2.2.5). When dealing with as of yet unrealized alternative life realities or with life realities envisioned for the future (e.g., being famous, living by the sea), longing can give direction and a general orientation for development (directionality function of longing). It thus ensures that development is aligned with core needs and motives. Living in accordance with intrinsic needs and implicit motives is often considered essential to successful development and psychological well-being (e.g., Brunstein et al., 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The directionality of longing may (but does not need to) induce a strong motivation to act towards the fulfillment of longing. It does so by transformation into more concrete, achievable goals. Via the route of goals, longing is involved in individuals' active attempts to shape their development (P. B. Baltes, 1997; Brandstädter, 1998; Freund & Baltes, 2000).

However, not all longings refer to as of yet unrealized or future alternative life realities. Some life realities may be irreversibly lost (e.g., physical fitness after a serious accident) or

unrealizable in objective reality (e.g., reliving childhood with the wisdom of an old person). Longing can be a way to manage such lost or unrealizable life realities on an imaginary level. The level of fantasy and subjective reality can be used to maintain unrealizable projects, connect to places, persons, and experiences of the past or future, and thus repair subjective well-being (mood regulation). If temporarily restricted, longing can be a psychologically healthy escape from the imperfect present. As noted before, however, the positive functions longing may serve are contingent on the control and regulation of longing. Perhaps, longing can exert its beneficial effect on human development only when people have control over the experience and realization of longing.

On the basis of these considerations, in the present study, it was hypothesized that the structural elaboration and controllability of longing are positively associated with the directionality and managing nonrealizability functions of longing. Moreover, the structural elaboration and controllability were expected to interact in their effect on the functionality of longing. The association of the structural elaboration with the functionality of longing was expected to be higher if coupled with a strong sense of control over longing.

#### *Distal, General Developmental Consequences*

On a more general level and/or in the long-term, some expressions of longing should promote successful (i.e., adaptive) development as indicated by high subjective well-being. It is an open question, however, whether the relationship between longing and successful development is linear. Very low and/or very high levels of longing may well be dysfunctional for development. Moreover, relationships may vary by outcome (e.g., affective versus cognitive judgments of well-being). In the following, as a first effort to illuminate distal developmental consequences of longing, this complexity is reduced. The focus is primarily on a general effect pattern.

The question of what constitutes successful development has long been debated and a number of criteria have been proposed (e.g., P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Riediger, 2003; Lawton, 1983; Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). According to Baltes and Baltes, individuals age successfully if they have high adaptive plasticity, that is, if they have the potential and preparedness to deal with a variety of demands. This includes objective and subjective, short-term and long-term, domain-specific and general competencies (Freund & Riediger, 2003). For example, cognitive and social competencies as well as one's perceived control over stressful events will all contribute to adaptive plasticity.

Because one's ability to cope with a variety of demands and a successful person-environment interaction result in subjective well-being, persons' feelings about and evaluations of

the quality of their lives are often considered as informative subjective indicators of successful development (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Riediger, 2003; Ryff, 1989). Subjective well-being comprises a manifold of different aspects, including life satisfaction judgments, the frequency of positive and negative affect, and feelings of meaning and fulfillment (Diener, 1984). It includes cognitive judgments and affective reactions as well as aspects of happiness (maximization of pleasure; “doing well”) and meaning (maximization of self-congruence and self-actualization; “being oneself”) (McGregor & Little, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989). Because longing is primarily a subjective experience, its relation to subjective criteria of successful development appears to be a good indicator for the regulatory role of longing.

Given claims that longing may hinder adaptive psychological functioning (Danzer, 1998; Vogt, 1993), what are the arguments for a positive relationship between longing and subjective well-being? Although not in the context of longing, many previous studies have shown a link between psychological well-being and several dimensions and characteristics longing comprises. For example, emotional complexity (i.e., the tendency to see both positive and negative aspects of situations) is often viewed as characteristic of mature persons associated with better emotional control and mental well-being (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Labouvie-Vief & Medler, 2002). Reflections and evaluations of life, particularly as they extend across past, present, and future, are conceived as a route to insight about oneself and life in general (Staudinger, 2001) and may contribute to a sense of integrity and identity (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; McAdams, 2001). In a similar line of reasoning, Klinger (1977) contended that long-term incentives that are believed to be highly satisfying but cannot be fully attained have a stabilizing influence on people’s lives. They are safe from habituation and disillusionment and create a large number of other, more immediate, incentives that are instrumental in helping to achieve the long-term incentives (see also Carver & Scheier, 1990, 1998). Thus, utopian and symbolically rich aims can be especially effective sources of meaningfulness.

In addition, as noted above, the two proposed functions of longing (directionality and managing nonrealizability) represent processes that are often considered essential ingredients of successful life management. Successful development requires that individuals choose and realize their own developmental goals and can compensate for deficiencies and losses (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000; Freund & Riediger, 2003; J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). These capabilities are central to all major models of life management, including the model of selective optimization and compensation (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2000, 2002), the model of optimization in primary and secondary control (J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995), and the model of assimilative and accommodative coping (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990; Brandtstädter et al., 1999). Longing can support the

selection and pursuit of developmental goals because it enables the exploration of possible life trajectories and outlines a meta-plan of the ideal life course (directionality). By providing a long-term incentive, it can be a powerful motivation for tenacious goal pursuit and the maintenance of effort in the face of barriers. Longing can also support the task of compensating for deficiencies and losses. When faced with truly unachievable goals or irreversible losses, longing can help maintain a connection to distant persons, places, or times on an imaginary level and thus preserve subjective well-being.

Following these assumptions, the present study tested the hypothesis that longing characteristics (i.e., structural elaboration, controllability, and function) are positively associated with subjective well-being. It was also assumed that a strong sense of control over longing would moderate the association between the structural elaboration and function of longing with subjective well-being. Specifically, these associations should be higher at higher levels of control over longing.

Besides subjective well-being, there may be additional general consequences of longing for development, although these were not in the focus of the present study. For example, longing may have an effect on the construction and reconstruction of autobiographical narratives. When persons construct their life stories, they take into account biographical facts and realistic future expectations. However, they also go considerably beyond the facts, as they construct and reconstruct their past and future, selectively focus on aspects of their experience, and reflect about causal linkages and their own and others wishes and intentions (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; Johnson & Sherman, 1990; McAdams, 2001; Ross & Newby-Clark, 1998; Staudinger, 2001). Longings may serve as overarching themes in individuals' life stories. They represent the persons' personal utopias of life to which they aspire. Because of their long-term and symbolic nature, they may provide subjective explanations for behavior and experience across time and situations. Thus, longing may play a vital role in the construction and reconstruction of autobiographical narratives.

#### *2.4.2 Age-Related Influences on and Changes in Longing*

Longing is likely to change over the life course. Longing in childhood may differ in substantial ways from longing in adulthood, and the longings of young adults may differ in numerous aspects from the longings of older adults. The concept of longing outlined in the present conceptualization is a complex phenomenon with cognitive, affective, and motivational components. It is similar in complexity to wisdom-related knowledge (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001) and processes of life reflection (Staudinger, 2001). Longing thus requires processes that are not yet fully developed in children.

For example, the emotionally ambivalent quality of longing requires an understanding that multiple, and sometimes opposite, feelings can be directed at the same target or situation, which emerges in early adolescence (Saarni, 1999). Other components of longing, including the symbolic nature, tritime focus, and reflection and evaluation, require abstract reasoning and autobiographical memory, abilities that only become fully available in middle to late adolescence (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; McAdams, 2001; Staudinger, 2001). Thus, not unlike wisdom-related knowledge (Pasupathi et al., 2001), a fuller expression of longing as it is conceptualized here likely emerges at some point during youth. The basic structure of longing should be established and elaborated when entering adulthood. The focus of the present study was on adulthood. Before presenting potential age-related influences on and changes in longing across adulthood, I will shortly review findings on longing in childhood.

### *Longing in Childhood*

Holm and colleagues (Holm, 2001; Holm et al., 2000, 2002) studied longing in children. In these studies, longing was defined as a complex, mixed emotion (comprising both happiness and sadness) experienced as a need for something (a thing, a state, a relationship), without which one's life does not feel complete (see also Appendix A). This conceptualization differs from the present conceptualization in that longings are not seen as systemic-holistic representations of alternative life scenarios, and do not include a tritime focus, symbolic nature, reflections and evaluations, or idealization. Longing as conceptualized in the studies by Holm and colleagues thus constitutes an early developmental form of longing.

Interview studies revealed that the concept of longing as defined by Holm was understood and adequately used by 6-year old children, but not by 4- and 5-year old children (Holm et al., 2000, 2002). Six-year-old children's longings mostly had specific targets, such as persons with whom they had close relationships (a parent, playmates, grandparents, etc.), animals, or joyful events (e.g., going to the zoo). The experience of longing was generally described as negative (e.g., "It feels like mourning") and passive (e.g., "It is like waiting"). Only some children described longing as a happy emotion.

Holm (2001) also developed a 13-item questionnaire designed to measure different dimensions of longing, including content (focus on persons, events, things, or something else), salience (frequency of longing), emotional quality (happy, sad, both, or some other feeling), time perspective (past, future), among others. Administration of this scale to groups of Swedish 9-, 12-, and 15-year-old children ( $N = 242$ ) revealed significant age differences. Older children experienced longing more frequently than younger children, and they described longing more often as a mixed emotion and as something directed at the past and future (although not

necessarily simultaneously). These findings imply a continued development of the longing concept during childhood.

### *Longing in Adulthood*

Little is known about the developmental course of longing in adulthood. It will likely be driven by a number of age-related influences that create particular developmental contexts for young, middle-aged, and older adults. These include age-graded developmental tasks and themes, perceptions of lifetime (lifetime already lived and lifetime left to live), the availability of resources and reserve capacity, the ratio of developmental gains and losses, and the amount of life experience (P. B. Baltes, 1987; Erikson, 1980; Havighurst, 1948; Lang & Carstensen, 2002; Neugarten, 1968; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996).

Developmental tasks and themes will likely influence the contents of longing. For example, Erikson (1980) proposed a sequence of developmental themes covering the entire lifespan. Each theme defines a particular conflict between contradicting forces. In this model, young adulthood is characterized by the theme of “intimacy versus isolation,” middle adulthood by the theme of “generativity versus stagnation,” and old adulthood by the theme of “integrity versus despair.” In a similar approach, Havighurst (1948) outlined successive developmental tasks that arise in a certain period of life and must be solved if one wants to develop successfully. These tasks relate to the life domains of partnership, family, friendships, occupation, civic responsibility, physical health, and living situation, albeit with changing emphases. For young adulthood (age 18 to 30 years), tasks include selecting and learning to live with a partner, starting a family and rearing children, managing a home, getting started in an occupation, taking on civic responsibility, and finding a congenial social group. The developmental tasks of middle-aged adults (age 30 to 55) comprise achieving adult civic and social responsibility, establishing and maintaining an economic standard of living, assisting teenage children to become responsible and happy adults, developing adult leisure-time activities, relating to one’s spouse as a person, accepting the physiological changes of the body, and adjusting to aging parents. Old adulthood (age 60 onwards) requires adjusting to decreasing physical strength and health, adjusting to retirement and reduced income, adjusting to death of spouse, establishing an explicit affiliation with one’s age-group, meeting social and civic obligations, and establishing satisfactory physical living arrangements.

Although modern developmental psychology rejects the notion of a universal and irreversible sequence of developmental tasks and themes (e.g., Freund & Baltes, in press; but see Conway & Holmes, 2004), these taxonomies do reflect concerns that many individuals in a given age group share. For example, the proposed developmental tasks are reflected in the current life



goals and concerns that adults of various ages report (J. Heckhausen, 1997; Nurmi, 1992). Consequently, longing contents should reflect these changing developmental tasks and themes. Specifically, relative to other age groups, longings of young adults should more often pertain to partnership, personality and self-development, and work and education. Longings of middle-aged adults should focus more often on work, family, and partnership, and longings of older adults should be more often directed at health, family, as well as at politics, society, and the situation of the world in general.

Developmental contexts should also influence dimensions of longing other than content. Young adults face a comparatively long lifetime left to live and shape (Lang & Carstensen, 2002; Neugarten, 1968), a high amount of biology-based resources and reserve capacity to attain desired outcomes (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996), and a predominance of developmental gains over losses (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997). Thus, in young adulthood, the future seems infinite and filled with unlimited possibilities. With age, the amount of lifetime left to live and shape continuously decreases. In addition, developmental options are increasingly closed, many of them permanently (Dannefer, 1984). Developmental losses steadily accumulate and at some point exceed developmental gains. On the positive side, life experience promotes the continuing maturation of self-regulation skills. For example, research has shown an increasing differentiation of emotional experiences and improvements in older adults' ability to regulate their emotions (Carstensen et al., 2000; Gross et al., 1997; Lawton, Kleban, Rajagopal, & Dean, 1992).

Given these age-related changes across adulthood, the directionality function of longing and the control over the realization of longing should be stronger in young adulthood as compared to middle and older adulthood. These two aspects of longing should also be more important for the well-being of younger adults. In face of a long life still ahead, deriving a general orientation for development and believing that one can approximate ideals of life should be a major promoter of a sense of happiness and fulfillment.

In contrast, the function of managing nonrealizability and the perceived control over the experience of longing should be stronger in, and more important for the well-being of, older adults. Older adults have to manage increasing numbers of closed or lost developmental options. Accordingly, the ability to regulate losses and nonrealizability is a major challenge in older adulthood (Freund & Ebner, in press; J. Heckhausen, 1999; Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1995). This task is likely supported by the higher emotion regulation abilities of older adults, such as a stronger sense of control over the experience of longing.

The assumed age-differential function of longing implies that the structural elaboration and salience of longing should be stable across adulthood. Longing is probably equally

structurally complex and salient in adults of various ages, although for different reasons (i.e., deriving a direction for the long lifetime ahead in earlier life periods versus compensating for increasing numbers of losses and closed pathways in later life periods). This is not meant to imply that the structural complexity of longing representations would not undergo developmental maturation. However, the phenomenon of longing presumably emerges during youth; thus, its structure should already be established when entering adulthood.

To summarize, longing as conceptualized in the present study is a complex phenomenon, and early forms of it can be found in childhood. The focus of the present study was on adulthood. Based on the changing nature of developmental contexts of young, middle-aged, and old adults (e.g., developmental themes, time left to live and shape, ratio of gains and losses, availability of resources, richness of life experience), one of the sources of interindividual differences in longing should be related to chronological age. It was hypothesized that age-related differences would be located primarily in the contents, controllability, and function of longing, whereas the structural elaboration and salience of longing would exhibit stability across adulthood. The size of age-related differences relative to interindividual differences due to factors other than chronological age is unknown.

## 2.5 Central Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study investigated general characteristics, age-related differences, and developmental functions of longing in adulthood. Although a central topic in folk psychological theories and the humanities, longing has thus far been largely neglected in empirical psychological research. Two frames of reference were used to derive a psychological-developmental conceptualization of longing. The first was humanist and common-sense characterizations of longing. Translating this approach into psychological language, longing was defined as recurring mental representation of alternative realities of life that are highly desirable but remote or improbable to obtain. The second frame of reference was lifespan psychological theory and research. Considerations of lifespan theoretical propositions suggested a family of six criteria to characterize the concept (feeling of incompleteness, symbolic nature, nonrealizability of personal utopia, emotional ambivalence, tritime focus, and reflection/evaluation). The frame of lifespan psychology also implied two regulatory functions of longing for development (directionality and managing nonrealizability) and the importance of a feeling of control over longing. Five main research questions guided the present study:

1. Can longing be measured empirically?
2. Do the empirical data support the proposed general characteristics of longing?

3. Are there age-related differences in longing across adulthood, and in which aspects?
4. Does longing have a regulatory function in adult development?
5. Are there subgroups with distinct longing profiles, and does subgroup membership moderate age associations and the regulatory function of longing in adult development?

### *2.5.1 Can Longing Be Measured Empirically?*

Starting empirical research on a new construct first and foremost necessitates its operationalization and the development of a method of assessment. Thus, the first goal of this dissertation was to develop a self-report measure of longing based on the theoretical conceptualization. The method of self-report was chosen to benefit from the fact that individuals themselves are the best experts for their inner thoughts and feelings, of which longing is a part. In addition, self-report seemed to be a suitable starting point for the investigation of a new concept. Although it may be affected by all kinds of biases (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2002), it is also very pragmatic and open to meaningful, although common-sense based interpretation. Certainly, this does not exclude the possibility of investigating longing using other approaches in the future (e.g., implicit measurement, experimental elicitation of longing).

Following the current conceptualization, the questionnaire assessed five aspects of longing. They include (1) the six structural characteristics, (2) the salience of longing (referring to the intensity, duration, and frequency of longing episodes as well as their centrality to the self), (3) the contents of longing characterized in terms of their primary life domains, (4) the perceived control over the experience and realization of longing, and (5) the functions of longing. The salience and contents were descriptive in nature, whereas the remaining three aspects were derived from a conjoint consideration of perspectives from the humanities and lifespan psychology in addition to common-sense views on longing. The development of the questionnaire also involved the investigation of its test-retest stability across five weeks. It was assumed that the psychometric properties of this questionnaire would show whether longing is a phenomenon that can be reliably measured by self-report.

### *2.5.2 Do the Empirical Data Support the Proposed General Characteristics of Longing?*

The second research question pertained to general characteristics of longing. A priori, six structural characteristics of longing were identified that, as a positive manifold, were assumed to capture the essence of longing (feeling of incompleteness, symbolic nature, nonrealizability of personal utopia, emotional ambivalence, tritime focus, and reflection/evaluation). Empirically, this proposal should be reflected in positive interrelationships between the six structural

characteristics (see Section 2.2.2). Moreover, the six characteristics should all load on one higher-order factor representing the structural elaboration of longing. Finally, if these six structural characteristics were indeed central to the phenomenon of longing, they should be positively related to the salience (i.e., intensity and ego-centrality) of longing. In brief, the following hypothesis was tested:

1. *The six structural characteristics of longing form a positive manifold. Together, they capture the essence of longing. This is reflected in the following pattern of results:*
  - a) The six structural characteristics are positively interrelated.
  - b) The six structural characteristics load on one higher-order factor representing the structural elaboration of longing.
  - c) The six structural characteristics are positively related to the salience of longing.

### 2.5.3 *Are There Age-Related Differences in Longing Across Adulthood, and in Which Aspects?*

A third research question addressed age-related differences in longing across adulthood. Based on the changing nature of developmental contexts of young, middle-aged, and old adults (e.g., developmental themes, time left to live and shape, ratio of gains and losses, availability of resources, richness of life experience), age-related differences were predicted for the content, control, and function of longing. In contrast, the structural elaboration and salience of longing were expected to exhibit stability across adulthood (see Section 2.4.2). The specific hypotheses were as follows:

2. *Longing characteristics show different patterns of age-related differences, including patterns indicative of age-related increase, stability, and decline (multidirectionality).*
  - a) The *structural elaboration* and *salience* of longing are stable across adulthood.
  - b) The *contents* of longing change across adulthood in reflection of changing developmental themes. Relative to other age groups, longings of *young adults* more frequently pertain to partnership, personality and self-development, and work and education. Longings of *middle-aged adults* focus more often on work, family, and partnership. Longings of *older adults* are more often directed at health, family, as well as at politics, society, and the situation of the world in general.
  - c) The perceived *control* over the experience of longing increases, whereas the perceived control over the realization of longing decreases with age.
  - d) The directionality *function* of longing decreases, whereas the managing nonrealizability function of longing increases with age.

Strictly speaking, such hypotheses require longitudinal, time-extended observations within individuals. For pragmatic reasons, this was not possible within the confines of a dissertation or

emerging project. Rather, the present study constitutes a first test of these hypotheses using cross-sectional data. Interpretations, therefore, can only be tentative because cross-sectional age differences are not direct measures of change and can involve a multitude of alternative explanations (P. B. Baltes, Reese, & Nesselrode, 1977; Schaie & Hertzog, 1985).

#### 2.5.4 *Does Longing Have a Regulatory Function in Adult Development?*

A fourth research question related to the potential regulatory role of longing for adult development. Two functions of longing were proposed that operate on an imaginary level: the provision of a general orientation for development (directionality) and the compensation for irreversibly lost or unrealizable developmental pathways (managing nonrealizability). These two functions were conceptualized as proximal, or specific developmental consequences of longing. On a more distal and general level, longing should contribute to subjective well-being as one indicator of successful development. A sense of control over the experience and realization of longing should enhance the positive regulatory role of longing (see Section 2.4.1).

However, the two functions and dimensions of control over longing were predicted to be differentially important for the well-being of younger and older adults. The directionality function and a sense of control over the realization of longing should be more important for the well-being of younger adults. In contrast, the managing nonrealizability function and a sense of control over the experience of longing should be more influential for the well-being of older adults (see Section 2.4.2). Specific hypotheses included:

3. *Longing has an immediate function for adult development, and this function is enhanced in the context of a strong sense of control over longing (proximal, specific developmental consequences).*
  - a) The structural elaboration of longing (indicated by high levels of the six structural characteristics) and the control over longing (in terms of experience and realization) are positively related to the two proposed functions of longing (directionality and managing nonrealizability).
  - b) The perceived control over longing moderates the positive relationships between the structural elaboration and the two functions of longing, that is, positive associations are higher at higher levels of control.
4. *Longing is positively associated with subjective well-being, and this relation is moderated by the perceived control over longing and age (distal, general developmental consequences).*
  - a) Longing characteristics (including the structural elaboration, control, and functions of longing) are positively related to subjective well-being.
  - b) The perceived control over longing moderates the relationship between the structural elaboration of longing and subjective well-being, as well as the relationship between

the two functions of longing and subjective well-being. Positive associations are higher at higher levels of control.

- c) Age moderates the relationship between the control over longing and subjective well-being as well as the relationship between the two functions of longing and subjective well-being. The directionality function and a sense of control over the realization of longing are more influential for the subjective well-being of younger adults. The managing nonrealizability function and a sense of control over the experience of longing are more influential for the subjective well-being of older adults.

As was the case for age-related changes in longing, these hypotheses can be addressed adequately in longitudinal studies only. Cross-sectional data do not permit conclusions about causal linkages indicating the role longing plays in developmental regulation. Nevertheless, it is possible to test whether correlational patterns are consistent with theory-based predictions about causal linkages between longing characteristics and indicators of successful development.

### ***2.5.5 Are There Subgroups With Distinct Longing Profiles, and Does Subgroup Membership Moderate Age Associations and the Regulatory Function of Longing in Adult Development?***

A final goal was to explore the possibility that distinguishable subgroups of individuals exist that differ in the structural composition of their longings. The assumption that all persons have the same kind of longings might be an over-simplification. The existence of distinguishable subgroups may influence the postulated associations of longing characteristics with age and subjective well-being. An empirical, exploratory approach (cluster analysis) was used to test for this possibility. Such an approach appeared more suitable than using theoretical criteria for deriving subgroups, because previous studies were missing and cut-off values would necessarily be arbitrary. To be meaningful, subgroups should differ on central variables other than the ones used to derive these subgroups. The specific hypothesis was as follows:

5. *Subgroups of individuals with distinct longing profiles can be identified that differ on central variables in a meaningful way. Subgroup membership moderates associations of longing characteristics with age and subjective well-being.*