

ABSTRACT

The concept of *life longings* has recently been introduced into lifespan psychology. Guided by the lifespan psychological assumptions of a lifelong gain-loss-dynamic and the incompleteness of life (Baltes, 1987, 1997), *life longings are defined as intense desires for optimal (utopian) realizations of life that are remote or unattainable* (Baltes, in press; Scheibe, Freund, & Baltes, 2007). So far, little is known about the development of life longings. Thus, the central objective of the present dissertation study was to investigate the emergence and developmental trajectory of life longings and to explore the functionality of the life longing process in the context of positive development.

In this dissertation, it was proposed that as a *compensatory strategy* to deal with nonrealizability and loss, *life longings may develop out of blocked goals*. When persons realize that it could be difficult to attain a goal, they often increase their effort and commitment to this goal in order to overcome obstacles (e.g., Klinger, 1977; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Fleeson, 2001). If this is not successful, self-regulation efforts such as goal disengagement (i.e., the withdrawal of effort and commitment) are required in order to avoid psychological distress and frustration (Klinger, 1975; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003b). However, because of the high effort and commitment to the goal, a complete disengagement may be rather difficult, particularly if the goal is perceived as highly relevant for one's own identity. Another way to react to unrealizable goals might be their *management at an imaginary level by transforming goals into life longings*. My assumption was that in cases in which an important life goal cannot be attained and disengagement from this goal at the cognitive-emotional level of goal representation is difficult, this unattainable goal may be transformed into a life longing so that the goal target lingers on at the level of imagination.

In order to investigate whether life longings develop out of unattainable goals and whether this transformation process is beneficial for an individual's well-being, the widely shared goal to have children was chosen. In a questionnaire study, 168 childless women aged 35 to 55 years were asked about the duration, attainability, and past, current, and future intensity of their wish for children. In addition, they rated this wish in terms of goal and life longing characteristics and filled out questionnaires assessing different indicators of well-being and self-regulation strategies.

Data of the present study support the assumption that life longings can develop out of unattainable goals. First, path analyses revealed that the conditions under which the wish for children is expressed as a goal or life longing differ from each other. Women expressed their wish for children as a goal when this wish was currently intense and attainable. In contrast,

women expressed their wish for children as a life longing when this wish was longstanding and currently, retrospectively, and prospectively intense. Second, the developmental trajectory of life longings could be described in terms of successive stages of a transformation process from goal to life longing. Intensity of the wish for children showed an inverse U-shaped trajectory over this assumed transformation process while duration increased and attainability decreased.

A second set of questions addressed the adaptive potential of the assumed transformation of the unattainable goal to have children into a life longing. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that a strong expression of the goal to have children was negatively related to well-being but only if the goal was perceived as unattainable. Bivariate correlations did not support the assumption that pursuing an unattainable goal as a life longing was functional for well-being. In fact, women with a strong life longing to have children showed lower well-being. A closer look at the stages of the transformation process revealed that the stage in which the transition from goal to life longing takes place was most critical as indicated by the lowest well-being scores in comparison to other stages of the transformation process (before or after the transition from goal to life longing). However, the negative relationship between well-being and life longing expression was qualified by several variables. Women who reported a strong control over the experience of their life longing to have children and who, in general, made use of accommodative coping strategies when faced with blocked goals even showed a positive relationship between life longing expression and well-being. In addition, pursuing the unattainable goal to have children as a life longing appeared to be related to higher levels of well-being when women had particular problems with disengaging from this goal and when they did not invest into alternative life goals.

Embedded in a lifespan theoretical approach the present dissertation study provided first evidence that life longings develop when individuals are confronted with the nonrealizability of important life goals. In this regard, the development of life longings can be linked to one of their basic functions: Life longings might serve as compensations (in the sense of adaptive self-regulation) for something one cannot have in reality and thus help individuals cope with the incompleteness of life.