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Viewing Meaning in Life in Three Generations: A Qualitative Study in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to understand meaning in life as a phenomenon in three different stages of life. Accordingly, this study aimed to investigate the similarities and differences in the way those in emerging, middle and late adulthood from different families view and experience meaning in life. In the 14 Turkish families who participated in this study, the children were in emerging adulthood, the parents in middle adulthood and the grandparents in late adulthood. The data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Based on the questions of the semi-structured questionnaire, five main themes were identified, and the data were analyzed in view of these five themes. The main themes identified were: sources of meaning, meaningful life experiences, search for meaning, goals in life and present meaning. The emerged categories were presented separately for three developmental stages. The results were discussed in light of the literature and some suggestions were made for future research.

Issues such as meaning in life or the meaning of life have been the subject of philosophical thought and theology for centuries. With the observations of the Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl (1946/1984) in the Nazi concentration camps, this concept began to be studied in the field of mental health. Meaning in life, which is the subject of positive psychology, is the way people make sense of their lives, different from the absolute meaning of life (Duckworth et. al, 2005; Stillman et al., 2009). It can also be expressed as the degree to which people perceive meaning, value and mission in their lives (Steger et al., 2009).

Since Frankl, meaning in life has been conceptualized by researchers in various ways and has been studied together with different variables, following the development of measurement tools for the concept. When looking at some of the variables with which meaning in life is positively correlated, many positive variables can be found such as positive emotions (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Steger et al., 2006), psychological well-being (Steger & Frazier, 2005), hope (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005) and life satisfaction (Park et al., 2010). In light of these relationships, the importance of meaning in life from a positive psychological point of view stands out. It has also been reported that those who experience higher meaning in life show lower depression along with higher self-confidence (Steger et al., 2006; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992) and are better off even in poor health conditions than those who experience lower meaning in life (Dezutter et al., 2013; Sherman et al., 2010).

The contribution of theoretical explanations and various measurement tools based on self-report method is indisputable. However, a problem that this method poses is the issue of the reliability of self-reporting, especially when it comes to meaning in life. While people may cheerfully express that their lives are full of

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meaning, they can do this without evaluating the nature of a meaningful life or their own sources of meaning (Lambert et al., 2013). In fact, it has been suggested that while some sources provide more satisfaction than others (Peterson & Park, 2014), measurement tools rarely get beyond the question, "Is there meaning in this person's life or not?" (Schnell, 2009).

Another seeming problem is that not much is known about the relationship between one's meaning in life and developmental stage. As individuals are viewed from a holistic perspective, it is difficult to consider a complex concept such as meaning in life separately from their current developmental stage. Despite individual differences, each stage of life has its own characteristics (Feldman, 2012).

The number of studies that focus on meaning in life from a developmental point of view is limited and different findings can be observed. In addition to the studies that show higher presence of meaning in older age (Meier & Edwards, 1974; Reker, 2005), there are also findings that observe lower presence of meaning (Pinquart, 2002; Ryff & Essex, 1992). The theory of meaning in life that the existing measurement tools embrace can be considered as an important factor in these different findings. In fact, it has been argued that observing low meaning in older age in Ryff's (1989) Psychological Well-Being Scale may be possible but misleading because meaning here is measured through purpose and one's goals are likely to decline in older age (Steger et al., 2009). Moreover, it is known that emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) is characterized by discovery and development of identity, career and social roles (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). For these reasons, it can be expected that search for meaning would be higher in emerging adulthood and even more adaptive than in other stages of life. In fact, it has been shown that higher search for meaning is associated with lower well-being in later ages compared with emerging adulthood (Steger et al., 2009).

Despite potential differences between age groups, it has been stated that meaning in life is important for all developmental stages, starting from adolescence (Brassai et al., 2011; Reker, 2005). Concepts such as meaning, purpose and sources of meaning in life are important in terms of psychological well-being and life satisfaction, but it seems that quantitative methods fail to shed light on how people experience meaning in life. Moreover, the fact that many studies have been based on Western and undergraduate samples provides limited light on the phenomenon. Therefore, it seems necessary to examine meaning in life through qualitative studies, as suggested by previous research (see Demirbaş Çelik, 2016; Hill et al., 2013), and to do research that touches on different developmental stages and cultural contexts.

In the light of all this, the aim of the present study was to examine the views and experiences of individuals from three different Turkish generations in the same family concerning meaning in life. Qualitative research method is particularly likely to provide the opportunity to examine the phenomenon in a more flexible, realistic and rich way. With the qualitative research method, it is possible to go beyond the question "Is there meaning in one's life or not?" and to shed light on many aspects of the phenomenon as to what meaningful life experiences look like, which elements play a role in adding meaning to life, what kind of goals there are in a meaningful life or what the nature of searching for meaning is. The present study is thought to be unique in that, while addressing all these aspects, it also does this by offering developmental comparisons with three different generations in Turkey. Although the qualitative method does not allow a statistical comparison between groups, it is possible to describe the reflections of the phenomenon in different stages of life through thematic comparisons. In addition, the fact that the individuals of different stages in the study come from the same family (an emerging adult being the child, a middle adult being the parent and a late adult being the grandparent of each family) makes the comparative inferences more valid by keeping the sociocultural structure relatively equal.

It is hoped that the study would (1) contribute to theoretical knowledge by describing the views and experiences of individuals from three different generations, that is, emerging adulthood, middle adulthood and late adulthood; (2) help develop a deeper understanding of meaning in life as a phenomenon and thus guide prevention and intervention studies in positive psychology; and (3) pioneer future studies, especially in Turkey on meaning in life.

Method

Participants

Criterion sampling method was used in the present study. The criterion was that the child in the family would be 18-25 years old (emerging adulthood), the parents 40-65 years old (middle adulthood), and the grandparents 65 years and older (late adulthood). Snowball sampling method was used to reach families that had met the required criteria. The snowball technique is used in situations in which it is difficult to reach the participants who meet the criteria determined by the researcher (Patton, 2005).

A total of 42 people from 14 families in the province of Izmir took part in the study. 27 participants were women and 15 were men. Of emerging adults, there were five women and nine men. Of middle adults, there were 10 females and four males. Lastly, of late adults, there were 12 females and two males. The average ages for the emerging, middle and late adults were respectively 21, 48 and 71. Detailed demographic information for each family is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Study Participants

Family	Age	Gender	Education	Income	Family	Age	Gender	Education	Income
	21	Male	Uni.	Middle		20	Female	Uni.	Middle
1	50	Female	High S.	Middle	8	48	Female	Uni.	Middle
	72	Male	Primary S.	Middle		74	Male	Primary S.	Middle
	18	Male	High S.	Middle		24	Male	Uni.	Middle
2	49	Female	Middle S.	Middle	9	48	Male	High S.	Middle
	68	Male	Primary S.	Middle		77	Female	Primary S.	Middle
	20	Male	Uni.	Middle		18	Female	High S.	Middle
3	45	Female	Middle S.	Low	10	46	Female	High S.	Middle
	65	Female	Primary S.	Middle		70	Female	Primary S.	Middle
	23	Male	Uni.	Middle		18	Female	High S.	Middle
4	57	Male	High S.	Middle	11	43	Female	Uni.	Middle
	76	Female	Primary S.	Middle		64	Female	Primary S.	Low
	23	Male	Uni.	Middle		20	Female	Uni.	Middle
5	54	Female	High S.	Middle	12	45	Female	High S.	Middle
	74	Female	Primary S.	Middle		74	Female	Primary S.	Middle
	21	Male	Uni.	Middle		22	Male	Uni.	Middle
6	45	Female	Middle S.	Middle	13	47	Male	High S.	Middle
	75	Female	Literate	Middle		72	Female	Literate	Middle
	18	Male	Uni.	Middle		23	Female	Uni.	Middle
7	42	Female	Uni.	Middle	14	48	Male	High S.	Middle
	65	Female	Uni.	Middle		72	Female	Literate	Middle

Preparing The Interview Form

The study data were obtained through semi-structured interviewing method. The required ethics approval application was made to and obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Dokuz Eylul University for the project "Viewing Meaning in Life in Three Generations: A Qualitative Study" (Üç Kuşakta Yaşamda Anlama Bakış: Nitel Bir Çalışma [Protocol no: 11]). The questions prepared to be used in the semi-structured interview form were created based on literature review and were also tested with pilot interviews. In addition, with the aim of improving the relevance and intelligibility of the interview questions, the draft interview form was sent to 10 academicians who completed their doctorate in guidance and counseling. The questions were revised according to their feedback, and then the form was finalized. The interview questions were as follows:

1. What generally comes to your mind when you think of the meaning of life?

2. What are the things that are currently giving meaning to your life?

3. Do you remember a specific moment when you found your life the most meaningful? How would you describe this moment? What was it that made this moment this meaningful?

4. Do you find yourself in search for meaning at times? In what situations? Can you talk about these times?

5. What goals do you have in your life right now? Both in the short run and long run?

6. If you were to evaluate the current level of meaning in your life, what would you like to say?

Data Collection

A certain day and time suitable for the families was determined for the interviews, and the interviews were carried out in the families' home environment. The participants were notified of the content, purpose and confidentiality principles of the research both verbally and in written form prior to the interviews and their written consent was obtained. Then, demographic information was collected, and interviews were conducted. The interviews were recorded by the first author using a smart phone, and these recordings were later transcribed. During the interview, participants were asked semi-structured interview form questions. Attention was paid to asking open-ended questions in the order determined for the reliability of the research, and interviews were completed between 10-30 minutes. All the data were collected in 2019-2020 before the COVID-19 outbreak.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological approach was used to analyze the data. The goal with this approach was to understand meaning in life as a phenomenon. For this purpose, sources and experiences that make participants' lives meaningful, their experiences with search for meaning, their life goals and current levels of meaning were investigated.

The transcribed data were analyzed via NVivo 11. At the very beginning of the data analysis process, a family was selected and analyzed independently by both the first author and the second author (first author's thesis supervisor). Before the analysis process, the five main themes that had been created according to the interview questions were determined by the authors and the first coding was done accordingly. Two different analyses based on a certain family (three participants in total) were compared with one another on NVivo 11, and inter-rater reliability was calculated. This calculation was made on NVivo 11, and Cohen's kappa (k) coefficient was found to be .80. Considering that values of .80 and above indicate strong inter-coder reliability, the reliability between coders in the study was quite good (McHugh, 2012).

Content analysis and descriptive analysis methods were used in analyzing the research data. Content analysis is mainly used in phenomenological designs, in which themes that may be hidden in the data are revealed and interpreted (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Descriptive method, on the other hand, involves organizing and tabulating the data (Glass & Hopkins, 1984). In order to increase reliability, the data were analyzed and

quantified on a frequency basis, and the obtained data were presented with direct quotations. Quotations were emphasized in italics and the participant from which the quotations are made was indicated in parentheses (e.g., P6.3.2). The first number in the code names refers to the family, the second refers to the generation (1 = late adulthood, 2 = middle adulthood, and 3 = emerging adulthood), and the third refers to the gender (1 = female and 2 = male). When names of certain people had been mentioned by any participant, these names were removed for confidentiality purposes and replaced by words such as my friend, son or daughter, depending upon how that person relates to the participant.

Results

The interview questions of the study were taken as themes, and the data were coded accordingly. The first two questions were handled within one theme and the remaining five questions were handled within five themes, and a total of five general themes were presented. These general themes are: sources of meaning, meaningful life experience, search for meaning, goals in life and present meaning. Salient categories that emerged were identified under these general themes. The five themes and the salient categories of the study can be seen below with their frequencies in Table 2. The salient categories are listed in descending order according to their frequency of utterance. Those with the same frequency of utterance are listed alphabetically.

Table 2. Main Themes And Salient Categories Of The Study Across Generations

Theme	Emerging Adulthood	Middle Adulthood	Late adulthood
1. Sources of meaning	Family (9), activities (8), friends (8), happiness (8)	Family (22), happiness (8), health (7)	Family (24), happiness (10), health (9)
2. Meaningful life experience	Success (5), personal growth (4), happiness (4), being with loved ones (4)	Having a child (9), freedom from hardship (4), happiness (4)	Being with loved ones (7), happiness (5), success (4)
3. Search for meaning	Existential inquiries (9), uncertainty of the future (6), being alone (5)	Frustration (7), contemplating the past (5), relational problems (4)	Frustration (6), absence of search (3), contemplating the past (3), being alone (3)
4. Goals in life	Career goals (24)	Goals for children (14), career goals (7), goals to restructure life (6)	Goals for children (9), physical health goals (8), decline in goals (8)
5. Present meaning	Half meaning (4), moderate meaning (3), low meaning (3), meaninglessness (2), high meaning (2)	High meaning (9), moderate meaning (4)	High meaning (7), half meaning (4), moderate meaning (3)

Note. Numbers between parentheses refer to the frequency of utterances/observations.

Theme 1: Sources of Meaning

The answers given by individuals regarding the meaning of their lives and what adds meaning to their lives were gathered under the theme of sources of meaning.

Emerging Adults.

Family. Family emerged as the most uttered source of meaning among emerging adults. Here, a married individual referred to his spouse, and the remainder emphasized their parents and siblings.

"When it comes to the meaning of life, family comes to my mind. Sharing love, respect, happiness and beautiful moments within family tie ..." (P3.3.2)

Activities. Secondly, the emerging adults mentioned activities as a source of meaning. Under this category were activities such as sports, music and movies.

"Music is giving meaning to my life right now. I'm young anyway. I am a 19-year-old university student. As with every university student, I, too, can say music." (P3.3.2)

Friends. Another category that shared the second place for emerging adults was friends. Here, other than family members and romantic partners, the social environment of the participants was included.

"My social environment also gives me meaning. Because my circle of friends in general is very wide. Spending time with them makes me very happy." (P13.3.2)

Happiness. Happiness also appeared as the second salient category that has the same frequency with activities and friends.

"If you have things in your life that you love, if you do things that make you happy, life is then meaningful for you." (P10.3.1)

Middle Adults.

Family. As with emerging adults, family is the most salient source of meaning for middle adults as well. Here, most of the participants firstly mentioned their own children and then their spouses. Limited emphasis was placed on their parents and siblings.

"Of course, my family is my priority. My wife, my daughter… They are the things that give meaning to me… Their happiness makes me happy, too. Their being healthy makes me healthy, too." (P8.2.1)

Happiness. Secondly, middle adult participants talked about happiness as a source of meaning.

"When I think of the meaning of life, what comes to my mind is to be happy and to be able to make people around you happy." (P4.2.2)

Health. Another category that emerged along with happiness was health. One participant expressed his emphasis on health as follows:

"Life means a lot to me as long as I know that I am healthy or when I know that the people around me are healthy." (P10.2.1)

Late Adults.

Family and happiness. Late adults emphasized their children and grandchildren while talking about family and stated that they generally experienced happiness through family members. Therefore, it can be said that the categories of family and happiness emerged together for late adults and were seen as the primary sources of meaning.

"A healthy life with my children and their being around me… I am happy with my family and children around me. I am happy with their presence." (P4.1.1)

Health. Another source of meaning that was mentioned almost as much as happiness by late adults was health.

"When it comes to the meaning of life, health comes first to me. It is very important for people of our age." (P5.1.1)

Theme 2: Meaningful Life Experience

The categories under this theme were identified by analyzing participants' experiences. Here, the aim was to mention the themes within the experiences of participants rather than the experiences themselves. However, common experiences that emerged quite frequently (such as having a child) have been presented in the table as a different category, and they were also treated under other categories like freedom from hardship and happiness. When participants mentioned more than one experience, all of these were included in the analysis.

Emerging Adults.

Success. A male emerging adult (P9.3.2) who emphasized his experience of success described the most meaningful moment of his life with the following sentences:

"It may be that moment when I got into this engineering program at university. Because I had not studied that hard since childhood until then. I only studied for this exam. That exam was actually worse than I expected, but when I got that result... That moment is one of those moments that I will never forget, that gives me meaning."

When asked what made this moment so meaningful, the participant answered:

"I had always been unsuccessful until that day. It was like having passed an exam for the first time other than the driving license test."

Personal growth. Personal growth emerged as another meaningful life experience in emerging adults. Here, the participants talked about experiences that changed their perspective, brought them awareness, and enabled them to learn some personal lessons.

A male participant (P7.3.2) mentioned some of his academic and romantic experiences that he had in the second year of high school. Despite their negativity, the participant stated that these experiences made great contributions to his character:

"At first, I started studying for the Mathematics Olympiad that year. That is why I am absolutely sure that that year contributed to my thinking. I also loved one person. It ended a little unhappy. I learned a lot. I felt that I was maturing myself, too. It created an awareness. I learned that people shouldn't be trusted that much. I used to see everyone as myself, but I learned that everyone is different."

Happiness and being with loved ones. Happiness was another experience that emerged in meaningful life experiences. It seems difficult to say that the participants emphasized only happiness in their experiences, but it can be said that happiness frequently accompanied those meaningful experiences. Being with loved ones, which was identified as a different category, was mostly expressed with happiness and therefore, reported here under the same heading.

A male participant (P3.3.2) described an evening spent with family and relatives as follows:

"Everyone was happy. We didn't have any problems. Most of the financial problems in the whole family, among all my relatives, had been solved, and it was like a meal to celebrate it."

Middle Adults.

Having a child, freedom from hardship and happiness. The experience that middle adults mentioned the most was having a child. Five out of 10 female participants and four out of four male participants stated this experience as the most meaningful experience of their lives. Having a child emerged alongside freedom from hardship and happiness. Participants' statements about the birth process revealed that the process was a crisis for some of the middle adults. It seemed that both the happiness of having a child and the end of this difficult process was quite meaningful for them.

"I could not give natural birth. It was always to and fro. We were going to the hospital all the time. And the hospital was far away. There was a distance of about 85 km. I wanted this process to end as soon as possible. Perhaps this could have triggered a little more. This trouble, this process ... We were going there every three days. We were constantly going for tests. Waiting to see if the baby is moving ... Of course, it makes one very happy to encounter such a beautiful thing as a result. I think that's the reason. The stress and boredom I was experiencing at that moment." (P8.2.1)

Late Adults.

Being with loved ones and happiness. Late adult women mentioned that the most meaningful times of their lives were when they were together with their deceased husbands. Other answers included spending time with their family in childhood. The meaning in these experiences was also defined by the participants mostly through happiness.

A late adult female participant, who lost her spouse in the ninth year of her marriage, emphasized firstly the time spent with her husband, and another participant mentioned the time spent with her family in childhood:

"When I was with my husband… I lost him 28 years ago. I had very good days. The best twenty years of my life passed with him." (P5.1.1)

"There are times in my first childhood. Those were special times for me. I had my mother and father… You are waiting for a mother who will come from work, prepare food for you, her love… They were very special days for me." (P3.1.1)

Success. Another meaningful life experience that emerged for late adults was success. A female participant (P1.1.1), who had never attended school in her childhood, mentioned how she decided to go to a literacy course at the age of 59 and managed to receive a certificate. Seeing this as one of her most meaningful experience, the participant expressed her success and happiness as follows:

"My child, I have never studied. I went to school at the age of fifty-nine and got a certificate. It is my most meaningful day. I can start studying even now if I want to. I love it so much. It is the most meaningful thing. I got a certificate for reading and writing. I was very happy to have gotten it. I said I will do it and I went and did it. I went and got it when I was fifty-nine."

Theme 3: Search for Meaning

Another phenomenon addressed in the present study was search for meaning. Participants were asked whether they would find themselves in search for meaning at times. 37 of the 42 participants said that they sometimes did find themselves in search for meaning.

Emerging Adults.

Existential inquiries and being alone. The emerging adults' experiences of search for meaning largely coincided with the existential inquiry category. The moments when they question their world views, fail to reach any conclusions and thus fail to find an absolute meaning were covered under this category. The category of being alone, as another salient category, emerged mostly simultaneously with existential inquiries. So, the emerging adults experienced search for meaning when they got into existential inquiries, and according to their statements, these inquiries usually occurred when they were alone.

"Yes, I find myself (in search of meaning). Like every human being, I think about why we exist, what the meaning of this struggle is, (since) we will die anyway, why we are working… When we come to the question "What is the purpose for our living?", it always comes to a dead end. I can't find a solution, a way out. We put in so much effort... (It is) all wasted actually. As they say, this world is mortal… I don't know the why either, but we keep going." (P6.3.2)

Uncertainty of the future. Emerging adults also talked about how uncertain their future looks. The answers addressed in this category had more to do with what awaits them in the future rather than questioning man's existence.

"You want to have a profession, you want to put your life in order, but none of them are clear in front of us. I'm making an effort, but will I be able to get there? … One wants to see the result." (P6.3.2)

Middle Adults.

Frustration. The most salient category in middle adult's search experiences was frustration. Here, participants talked about their expectations that could not be met.

"You know, you labor or you try hard for something, or I don't know, something about your child… You try really hard, you sacrifice but you, you know, don't get rewarded. Like there is no result." (K7.2.1)

Contemplating the past. Middle adult participants also mentioned that from time to time, they reviewed their past and tried to envision what their current lives would be like, if they had taken some different steps. Participants, who were not fully satisfied with a certain point of their past, referred to these retrospective moments as an experience of searching for meaning.

"Well, when I look into the past, one experiences an "I wish" moment, even if it is just a little "I wish." After reaching a certain age, you think of the past. Sure, today is fine, too, but then I think like, if I had done this or that, maybe things would have been different." (P2.2.2)

Relational problems. Another salient category in middle adults' experience of searching for meaning was relational problems. Here, the participants talked about their problems with family and colleagues.

"I don't like being criticized for not being like others. Because I can't be like someone else. I am who I am. I want them to accept me as I am. Sometimes I have such problems in my workplace with my manager... Sometimes I have them with my child, too." (P8.2.1)

Late Adults.

Frustration. Like middle adults in the study, late adults also seemed to experience frustration when they were in search for meaning. Here, participants' experiences of sadness, distress and unhappiness were collected under this category. A female late adult (P12.1.1), who used to live in the same building with her daughter and grandchildren for a long time, told that her daughter's family moved to another place and that this distance saddened her.

"My grandchildren used to live upstairs. They moved out and left here. I got saddened by their leave at one stage. This makes me meaningless. Like why did this happen? I wish we lived closer. I wish we visited one another at nights, too..."

Absence of search. Another category under search for meaning was identified as absence of search. 5 out of 42 participants stated that they did not experience any search for meaning, and three of these were late adults.

"No, I lived life to the fullest." (P8.1.2)

"I am actually… Well, I am a positive person. You know, I'm healthy… You know… I always think of turning bad things into good." (P7.1.1)

Contemplating the past and being alone. Like middle adults, late adults also described contemplating their past as a meaning seeking experience. Participants seemed to experience these moments while they were alone.

"Sometimes, when financial means are short, I say like… would it be different if we had done this or that? Could we at least offer our children other opportunities?" (P3.1.1)

Theme 4: Goals in Life

Since goals play an important part in meaning in life, participants were asked about their short-term and long-term goals with the aim of investigating meaning qualitatively across generations. Here, answers were quite varied and expressed clearly by the participants. Their responses were analyzed with a descriptive perspective.

Emerging Adults.

Career goals. Both the short-term and long-term goals of the emerging adults were mostly career related. Participants mentioned goals such as: to complete their education, to do their desired profession, to settle abroad or to start a master's degree.

"My goal is to improve my GPA and start in a good company. Then I will do my master's degree. I will decide on the field I want to work in and then if it is a company that has branches abroad, I want to go work abroad." (P8.3.1)

Middle Adults.

Goals for children. Middle adults mostly emphasized their goals for their children. Children's happiness, being supported in their future dreams, completing their education, having a job and similar answers are in the category of goals for children.

"In truth, my short-term goals are a happy family and the continuation of the happiness of the family. To be able to guarantee the future of my children... And their success, of course. I have nothing else." (P2.2.2)

Career goals. Another category that stood out in the second generation was career goals. Participants especially mentioned their retirement plans at this point. Other goals expressed by the participants were to have a profession other than retirement plans and to advance in the occupation.

"I want to retire. My goal ahead of me is to retire." (P8.2.1)

Goals to restructure life. The third category, which emerged in relation to children and career-related goals, was the goals of middle adults to restructure their lives. The participants stated that after their children gained their independence, they would focus more on themselves, travel around and live a life away from the city with their spouses.

"As soon as my sons are able to go their own way, my whole thing… the meaning of my life then will be my wife and me. I will take time for both of us. Then, I'm going to say, 'to myself' a little bit." (P4.2.2)

Late Adults.

Goals for children. As in middle adults, the first goal category identified in the late adult group was goals for children as well. Compared to emerging adults and middle adults, the participants here in particular emphasized their "wishes" rather than goals. Their children and grandchildren seemed to be the base of their wishes. Goals such as witnessing the happiness of one's own children (and grandchildren), being visited by them, spending time with them, not being dependent or burden on them and the like were addressed in this category.

"(My goal is) to see my children happy, to watch their lives getting better all the time." (P7.1.1)

"Just that my children be happy. I want nothing else. Just that they care about me, too." (P14.1.1)

Decline in goals. Another salient category in the late adult group was decline in goals. When the participants were asked about life goals, they stated that they did not have many goals at this stage of life.

"I can no longer have goals. Why? (Because) I have achieved my goals. I'm seventy-four already. I have nowhere to go from now on." (P8.1.2)

"Oh son… How old are we now? What goals?" (P12.1.1)

Physical health goals. Another goal category that did not emerge in the other groups was physical health goals. Late adults thirdly mentioned goals about their health.

"My goal is health. That I can keep doing my physical exercises for a few more and have good health." (P5.1.1)

"Well, it is health. That is what I ask from God." (P2.1.1)

Theme 5: Present Meaning

Participants' views on their present level of meaning were discussed under this theme. Participants sometimes rated their opinions with adjectives, sometimes made Likert-type statements, and sometimes gave answers based on percentages. The answers were gathered on a common ground and presented under the categories of meaninglessness, low meaning, half meaning, moderate meaning and high meaning.

Emerging Adults. More than half of the emerging adults (nine out of 14) viewed their lives as half meaningful, lowly meaningful, or meaningless.

Half meaning. The reason why the first category was presented with the word "half" is that the participants stated that they had some meaning in their lives, but it was incomplete until some things happened.

"I don't think it's exactly meaningful actually. I mean, there are people who give meaning to my life, but I think it will be much more meaningful when I fully get a job, make a life for myself and take my own economic freedom." (P10.3.1)

Moderate meaning. A male participant (P5.3.2) who emphasized his future plans and current situation stated that he found his life meaningful:

"Of course, my life has meaning. I am happy now. I have future plans. School will end. I will move and I will live abroad…"

Low meaning. Another male participant (P7.3.2), who approached the topic with existential questioning, stated that his own life did not mean much when viewed from a cosmic perspective. The statement of the participant considered under the low meaning category was as follows:

"(My life) doesn't make much sense right now. Because when we look at it considering all humanity, I wonder what humanity would lose if I was not there… So my life is a little bit meaningless."

Meaninglessness. Another female participant (P12.3.1), who was coming from a similar perspective, stated that her life had no meaning:

"I think, my life is very meaningless. It can be meaningful when you look at it with all its goals and efforts, but I'd say it has no meaning looking from the outside."

High meaning. Another emerging adult (P3.3.2), referring to the importance of the decisions he was about to make at this stage of his life, told that this stage and therefore his entire life were very meaningful for him:

"It is really meaningful for me right now. Because I'm laying the foundation of my life. In the slightest mistake, I would throw away all the next 40 years – if I'll have them, of course. I'm not sure if my peers think that way about it. But this stage is very important for me."

Middle Adults. When middle adults' responses were analyzed, it was observed that nine out of 14 participants considered their lives highly meaningful, four moderately meaningful and one meaningless.

High meaning. Most of the participants stated that they viewed their lives highly meaningful and referring to their sources of meaning, they generally emphasized family and happiness here as well.

"My life is very meaningful right now… I think I now live a much better life than I imagined. I wouldn't have imagined a life like this. I have comfort. Comfort in an economical sense and also, I am very comfortable in my family relationships. I have a husband who loves me and understands me. I have a child that I value very much." (P8.2.1)

Moderate meaning. The participants who did not emphasize high meaning but viewed their lives as meaningful were included in the category of moderate meaning.

"Right now, I am pretty close to the last steps. I am at a point where I can understand that life has a meaning, that it is something worth living." (P3.2.1)

Late Adults. Late adults' answers on their present meaning in life were gathered under the categories of high meaning, half meaning and moderate meaning. While seven out of 14 participants found life highly meaningful, four participants saw in it a half meaning and the remaining three found it moderately meaningful.

High meaning. Like middle adults, the late adult group also generally found life meaningful. Parallel to sources of meaning, participants sometimes emphasized their children, grandchildren and health.

"(My life is) quite meaningful for me. I'm fine, healthy, happy. Of course, there are things I feel sad about, but this is life. I think, God willing, everything will pass with goodness and beauty. I have children. I must always be there for them. I praise God for the fact that I live." (P7.1.1)

Half meaning. Some late adults, on the other hand, referring to their family and health problems, stated that their lives were meaningful to some extent. In order to preserve the name of the category in emerging adulthood, these answers were also handled under "half meaning." As a matter of fact, participants mentioned some shortcomings here as well.

"These days I just want to have a calm mind. I mean this is what I want. I don't want sadness. But it is impossible not to be sad right now. Grandchildren and so on... Calmer, happier… This is what I am looking for but it's hard to find. So, I would say (I have) medium level (of meaning). It's neither bad nor good." (P13.1.1)

Moderate meaning. Other late adults, on the other hand, responded that their lives were meaningful, even though they did not specify high level of meaning.

"Every day has its own beauty. Every morning has its own sunrise. I think every age in life has its own beauty. I am happy with my old age. If I am healthy, if I am walking, you should be thankful for all of this." (P1.1.1)

Discussion

The above-mentioned findings for three different generations under five main themes (that is, sources of meaning, meaningful life experiences, search for meaning, goals in life and present meaning) showed both commonalities and distinctions from a developmental point of view. Therefore, they were discussed separately.

Common Categories

The salient categories which emerged commonly in all developmental groups were relationships, happiness and success. This observation seems to be consistent with other studies in the literature. Relationships (Debats, 1999; Bhattacharya, 2011; Hill et al., 2013), happiness (Reker & Wong, 1988; Robak & Griffin, 2000) and success (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Hill et al., 2013; DeWitz, 2014) are variables that have been shown in many different qualitative and quantitative studies on meaning in life. In particular, positive relationships and concepts such as environmental control, autonomy, and efficacy that can be considered under the category of success play a part in different well-being theories (see Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2018) and theories of meaning in life (see Baumeister, 1991).

What was particularly interesting here was that these relationships were largely family relationships. Although not as frequent in the emerging adult group as in the middle and late adult groups, all three groups stated that family was the primary source of meaning for them. Again, when examined from a developmental perspective,

different studies on meaning in life have shown that relationships with spouses and children and relationships with parents and relatives are at the forefront in middle adulthood (Fave et al., 2013; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). In addition, a study conducted with people over 65 years of age (Krause, 2007) found that emotional support from family among different types of social support was associated with higher meaning in life. However, that family was seen as the primary source of meaning in emerging adulthood along with other stages may indicate cultural emphasis. In this developmental stage that is characterized by identity discovery and close relationships (Erikson, 1968), self-focus becomes prominent (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, it seems a little unlikely that emerging adults will see their families as the primary source of meaning. However, this study was performed in a Turkish context, where familial and social ties are strong and collectivistic characteristics are stronger (Hofstede, 2001). However, both quantitative (Lambert et al., 2010; Lambert et al., 2012) and qualitative studies in the American context (Hill et al., 2013) also suggest that family remains an important source of meaning in emerging adulthood. Researchers argued that individuals in this transitional period may be returning to their families repeatedly to find support and direction (Lambert et al., 2010).

Another important finding was that happiness emerged both as a source of meaning and as an emotion accompanying meaningful life experiences. Previous research has shown that happiness is related to meaning in life in all three developmental periods (see Dezutter et al., 2013; Robak & Griffin, 2000; Steger et al., 2006; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). However, while meaning in life is a eudaimonic variable, happiness is a hedonic variable, and the overlaps and differences of these concepts are still debated. The study seems to support the discussion that meaning in life will almost always bring happiness (Reker & Wong, 1988). By explaining the relationship between meaning in life and positive affect with learning, researchers argued that if the experience of meaning emerges with positive emotions over and over again, the connection between these two variables becomes strongly etched in memory via these learning experiences (Clore et al., 2000). In this way, thinking about one triggers thoughts about the other and the two become conceptually related (King et al., 2006). Moreover, since this study comes from a phenomenological point of view, it can be said that cultural understanding of meaning or happiness may change and the on-going debate on eudaimonic vs. hedonic well-being should include cultural context. The degree to which a variable is eudaimonic or hedonic could have more to do with experiential differences rather than conceptual differences.

Developmentally Distinct Categories

In addition to the findings mentioned above, the most important findings in this study were the seeming reflections of developmental stage on meaning in life.

Health as a source of meaning in middle and late adulthood. In the middle and late adult groups, health emerged as a source of meaning, different from the emerging adults. Given the characteristics of these stages, this observation is expected. In middle adulthood, which is defined as the period of gains and losses, the individual tries to adapt to various physical and psychological changes, while at the same time fulfilling his professional and family responsibilities (Lachman, 2004). Therefore, it is very important for middle adults to maintain their physical health to maintain their quality of life. Throughout late adulthood, health quality further decreases, and different health problems arise. In the light of all these, health becoming more important in one's meaning in life in older ages can be explained by the fact that older ages are when health problems begin to emerge. Previous research showed that a positive relationship between physical health and meaning in life exists (for a meta-analysis, see Czekierda et al., 2017) and that health plays a major role in older adults' life satisfaction and meaning in life (Arslan, 2004; Ebersole, 1998). Therefore, it can be argued that health is a component of meaning in life but will not be seen as a primary source of meaning until health issues arise.

Existential inquiries in emerging adulthood and search for meaning manifested with future anxiety. When emerging adults' meaning seeking experiences were examined, the salient categories were identified as existential inquiries, uncertainty of the future and being alone. These salient categories reflect the key characteristics of emerging adulthood. Questioning one's own world and shaping one's personality through personal convictions are some of the tasks performed in this stage (Santrock, 2011). It has been discussed that as a stage characterized by discovery of identity, emerging adulthood may also be linked to search for meaning in life (Steger et al., 2009). Participants seemed to struggle with holistic meaning (see Park, 2010) and therefore

were led to search for meaning. It can be said that a meaningful life is not only a purposeful life, but also a life that can be justly explained by one's worldview. This is especially relevant for emerging adulthood.

The second salient category in the emerging adults' search for meaning was uncertainty of the future. Uncertainty is another important factor in the lives of emerging adults (Arnett, 2006). In this transitional period, they experience many academic, social and personal changes, and these changes pose an uncertainty for the emerging adult. Participants seemed to experience these changes from various angles, and they were particularly concerned about whether their education will provide tangible feedback. Previous qualitative findings showed that the theme of uncertainty about the future emerged with the theme of meaninglessness (Bhattacharya, 2011). Hence, it can be argued that the ability to cope with uncertainty seems even more necessary in emerging adulthood. Indeed, many theorists agree that perceived loss of control will shake the individual's meaning in life (Baumeister, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1989).

Search for meaning manifested with relational problems in middle adulthood. Unlike late adults, another experience that middle adult associated with the search for meaning was their relational problems. As the categories of family, friends and being with loved ones, which emerge under the themes of sources of meaning and meaningful life experience, support the importance of relationships for a meaningful life, relational problems under the theme of search for meaning further strengthens the emphasis on relationships. According to the participants, while continual satisfaction in relationships makes life meaningful, having problems in relationships seems to lead the individual to search for meaning. This observation seems to be in line with previous research that showed that relationships are an important source of meaning for different age groups (Debats, 1999; Prager, 1996) and that lack of satisfaction in relationships is likely to lead to search for meaning (Steger et al., 2008). That middle adults described relational problems as an experience leading to search for meaning may be due to the quantity of relationships in this developmental stage. Especially in family context, a parent stays in contact with not only their children, but also their spouse and their own parents. Apart from this, the individual also maintains other relations in and outside the workplace. Therefore, compared to late adults, it seems more likely that a negativity in the relationships of middle adults who have many social roles will lead to a search for meaning.

Search for meaning in middle and late adulthood manifested with frustration and negative contemplation of the past. Unlike emerging adults, the first category that stood out in middle and late adults' experience of search for meaning was frustration. These two groups did not mention any existential inquiries or future anxiety, but rather the situations in which their expectations were not met. In other words, the participants seemed to search for meaning when their expectations about themselves, other people or life in general were not satisfied. This observation can be interpreted in opposition to the category of happiness in meaningful life experiences. It can be said that while positive emotions may lead one to see life more meaningful (King et al., 2006), negative emotions are likely to result in the opposite effect. Research showed that increasing sadness, fear and shame is indeed related to increasing search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006). It seems that various negative emotions can be experienced within the phenomenon of disappointment and therefore lead the individual to search for meaning.

Similar emotions seemed to be experienced also when the same participants review their own pasts. Within the category of contemplating the past, participants expressed their "I wish" moments. It is known that with aging, adults seem to focus more on the past (Santrock, 2011). When the statements of participants are examined, it can be seen that this retrospective look generally focuses on negative experiences. Participants associated the search for meaning in life particularly with past experiences that they were not satisfied with. Previous research seems to support this observation that search for meaning is associated with focusing on past negativity (Steger et al., 2008). Therefore, it can be argued that a meaningful life requires contentment not only with the present, but also with the past. As argued by Baumeister in his four needs for meaning (1991), it appears that for a meaningful life, one must be able to positively justify his own actions, and these actions also include past experiences.

Decreasing search for meaning in late adulthood, though sometimes manifested with loneliness. Some late adult participants (and two middle adults) stated that they never find themselves in search for meaning. This observation can be explained by maturation, in that, it is expected that the "why" questions forming one's

world view will be relatively completed throughout emerging adulthood (Kroger et al., 2010). In addition, there is more diversity of experiences in emerging adulthood than middle and especially late adults who have already accomplished certain goals in life (Ebner et al., 2006). Therefore, it can be said that they are less likely to view the future as that uncertain and less likely to experience future anxiety.

When asked about their search for meaning in life, the late adult participants also mentioned the times when they are alone. The late adults in this study mostly included either retired or widowed participants and therefore, it can be argued that they were more likely to search for meaning in these times compared to middle adults. And also, unlike emerging adults, it seems that loneliness itself created a problem for late adults, rather than the existential questions that being alone provokes. This observation further supports the important role relationships play in meaning in life, particularly in late adulthood where physical and social losses and loneliness become characteristics of the stage (Feldman, 2012).

Career goals in emerging adulthood. The emerging adults of the study seemed to have largely career goals. Given the developmental tasks of the stage and that all these participants continued their education, this observation is to be expected. In this stage of possibilities (Arnett, 2000), individuals tend to have many both short and long-term goals, many of which are career-related (Creed et al., 2009). However, this result can also be seen as extension of Turkey's current situation. Especially with the increase in population and the number of universities in the last twenty years in Turkey, unemployment is rising (Yeşilyaprak, 2016). According to the Turkish statistics in 2020 (the time of data collection), youth unemployment rate was about 25% (TÜİK, 2020). It is also helpful to note that career uncertainty is considered as a characteristic of the 21st century and therefore, in the midst of this uncertainty, it can be argued that emerging adults are likely to seek safety in the first place.

Goals for children in middle and late adulthood. The middle adults in the study mostly mentioned their goals for their children. In both sources of meaning and meaningful life experiences, it seemed that children of middle adults were at the center of their lives. Other goals that followed were career goals and goals to restructure their lives. These three elements seem to clearly reflect middle adult developmental tasks conceptualized by Havighurst (1972). To help young children become responsible and happy adults, to achieve and maintain vocational satisfaction, to nurture the marriage relationship and to develop appropriate leisure activities are the developmental tasks in middle adulthood (Sugarman, 2001). All the salient goals mentioned by the middle adults of this study remarkably coincided with these developmental tasks. Goals and concerns about the future of children and their career have also been supported by studies in various countries (Cross & Markus, 1991; Ulusoy, 2020).

Similar to middle adults, late adults also mentioned goals for their children (and grandchildren) as their primary goals. However, the participants took a more passive position in these goals. In general, middle adults talked about supporting the building of their children's future, whereas late adults talked about seeing the happiness of their own children and grandchildren. In other words, it can be said that middle adults described themselves in the role of a "helper", while late adults were more in the role of a "spectator." This observation seems to point to the changing life roles in personal goals across developmental stages. Research have shown that while goal orientation at younger ages moves toward personal development, at later ages this orientation focuses more on maintenance and reducing loss (Baltes, 1987; Ebner et al., 2006).

Decline in goals in late adulthood. Goals for maintenance and reducing loss can be seen in late adults' following salient goals that are identified as physical health goals and decline in goals. The participants mentioned that after this age, they no longer had many goals and basically just wanted to be healthy. This decline in goals that the participants expressed is an important finding. As argued, scales on meaning in life that contain goal-oriented items (e.g., Ryff, 1989) could yield developmentally problematic results (Steger et al., 2009), since in this stage of role loss (Feldman, 2012), individuals have fewer goals to achieve (Lawton, et al., 2002). This qualitative study seems to further support this discussion.

Low meaning in life in emerging adulthood. Only one-third of the participants in emerging adulthood stated that they had a really meaningful life, while the rest mentioned that they experience meaninglessness, low meaning or half meaning. Especially when compared with the responses of the participants in the other two

generations, emerging adults was the group that expressed the least meaning in the study. As can be seen in their expressions about their search for meaning, the emerging adults here told that they could not make sense of the world and its events, and that the future was very uncertain for them at the moment. This observation seems to point to the cognitive dimension of meaning in life that is emphasized theoretically (see Reker & Wong, 1988). Being able to comprehend life at a cognitive level and coming up with satisfactory answers with regards to why everything exists seem quite important for a meaningful life (Reker & Wong, 1988), which also has been conceptualized as holistic meaning (Park, 2010) and cosmic meaning (Yalom, 2018). In accordance, the expressions of the participants in this study about meaninglessness or low meaning revealed their difficulties in making sense of life from a cosmic perspective.

The dominance of expressions reflecting cosmic meaning issues in the emerging adult group indicates that it would be indeed helpful to approach the phenomenon from a developmental perspective. In this stage, individuals enter into a discovery (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968), becoming preoccupied with their identity, careers and social roles and reevaluating the ready-made meaning systems coming from family and the society (Dezutter et al., 2013). It has been argued that search for meaning may be in a sense normative in emerging adulthood, leading them to a higher search in comparison to middle and late adults (Steger et al., 2009). The qualitative findings in the current study are thought to strengthen this debate.

Moreover, the uncertainty about achieving personal goals seemed to pose a problem for the participants. Therefore, in addition to cosmic meaning, a motivational fulfillment can be seen as another important factor in meaningful life. Since emerging adults tend to have many career goals, their experience of uncertainty and anxiety may lead them to experience a life that is not complete (as in half meaning). The concepts of competence and self-efficacy are likely to play a special role in the lives of emerging adults.

High meaning in life in middle and late adulthood. Middle adult and late adult participants mostly stated that their lives were very meaningful and emphasized their children (and grandchildren) and happiness. In terms of frequency, the middle adult group was the group that expressed the highest meaning in this study. Although it is not possible to indicate a statistical difference, there is a remarkable difference in the expressed meaning levels between these two generations (middle and late adults) and the third generation (emerging adults). The fact that the middle and late adults are likely have accomplished many social and professional goals and that certain goals are still present may provide satisfaction and meaning for the participants. The participants' sources of meaning and their goals in life seemed to support this observation. High meaning in life in older ages has also been shown by previous research (Heintzelman & King, 2014; Pinquart, 2002; Steger et al., 2009).

Summary

The present qualitative study showed that the participants in emerging, middle and late adulthood mostly and commonly emphasized relationships, happiness and success in both their sources of meaning and meaningful life experiences. As discussed above, these findings were in line with previous qualitative and quantitative research (Bhattacharya, 2011; Debats, 1999; De Vogler & Ebersole, 1981; Hill et al., 2013, Reker & Wong, 1988; Robak & Griffin, 2000, DeWitz, 2014; Hill et al., 2013; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). The fact that these findings were obtained from participants from three different generations of the same family is thought to further strengthen the emphasis on these concepts.

However, it can be argued that the most important findings of this study were the reflections of developmental stage characteristics on meaning in life. In addition to the common salient categories, salient categories that differed across generations also emerged in this study and are as follows: an emphasis on health as a source of meaning in middle and late adulthood; emerging adults seeking meaning together with existential inquiries and uncertainty of the future and, in their own words, experience low meaning in their lives; middle and late adults experiencing lower search for meaning and stating that these searches are generally related to relational problems and past negativity; emerging adults having largely career-related goals, middle adults having goals for their children and late adults having likewise goals for their children/grandchildren and also decreasing goals; and finally, highest meaning shown firstly by middle adults and then late adults. Most importantly, having selected participants of different developmental stages from the same family should in a sense exclude many social, economic and cultural variables and allow making comments on a developmental basis.

Suggestions

Future research is needed to examine meaning in life, particularly using mixed designs, in which quantitative and qualitative methods are combined. As a matter of fact, one major limitation of the study is that the qualitative findings cannot be generalized. Also, for practical purposes, snowball sampling method was used to find families as participants who would meet the required criteria. One family mentioning another family as potential participants was likely to cause the participant group to be less heterogenous and thus further complicate interpreting the findings. This could explain the reason for another limitation of the study, which was that the study was largely based on a single perceived socioeconomic status (that is, middle). Moreover, among the reached families, the majority of the late adults were female (11 out of 14 participants). It should also be noted that the study was conducted in the province of Izmir, that is, Western Turkey. Findings across the Turkish land could yield different results as Turkey hosts various cultural climates, of which Izmir is only one minority. Therefore, the results of this study should be considered within the context of the particular sample. So, future research can investigate meaning in life across socioeconomic statuses and genders as well as different cultural contexts.

Another limitation might have to do with accessing thoughts about meaning in life. Upon asking Question 1 in the interview form ("What generally comes to your mind when you think of the meaning of life?"), many participants had to take their time to answer it, explicitly indicating that this was not an easy question. It could be discussed whether a preparation phase prior to the interview would in fact confound or help the research.

In addition, many different variables such as family, worldview, efficacy, career concerns, health, and life goals seem to be important in meaning in life, all of which can be the focus of both psychological research and therapeutic practices. Finally, considering the reflections of developmental stage characteristics in this study, it would be helpful for future research on meaning in life to include developmental and especially longitudinal examinations.

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