

INVESTIGATION OF LIFE SATISFACTION, MEANING IN LIFE AND LONELINESS LEVELS OF A GROUP OF ELDERLY INDIVIDUALS IN TERMS OF SOME DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Bir Grup Yaşlı Bireyin Yaşam Doyumu, Yaşamın Anlamı ve Yalnızlık Düzeylerinin Bazı Demografik Değişkenler Açısından İncelenmesi

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the degrees of older individuals' life satisfaction, meaning of life and loneliness within the frame of dynamics of life. In accordance with this aim, "Meaning in Life", "Life Satisfaction Scale" and "UCLA Loneliness Scale" were applied to 96 participants (51 males and 45 females at the ages of 60 and above) living in Fatih and Kağıthane neighborhoods in İstanbul. The participants were selected via the method of convenient sampling. In the study, life-meaning, life-satisfaction and loneliness scores did not show significant differences with regards to demographic variables ($p>,05$). Yet, it was found that there was a statistically meaningful relationship between the levels of life meaning and life satisfaction ($r=,266$; $p<,01$).

The findings of this study presented crucial information about psychology of elderly individuals. Beyond gender, age and so on, the perspectives of older people toward life was an important factor determining the quality of their life. It showed us that as the elderly individuals would be satisfied with every minute of their life as long as they led a life reminding them of the reason for their existence.

Key words: *Successful aging, life meaning, life satisfaction and loneliness in old age.*

ÖZET

Bu araştırmanın amacı yaşlı bireylerin, bazı demografik değişkenlerle birlikte, yaşam doyumu, yaşamın anlamı ve yalnızlık düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektir. Bu çalışmada, uygun / elverişli örnekleme yöntemiyle İstanbul ilinin Fatih ve Kağıthane semtlerinde yaşayan 60 yaş ve üzeri 96 katılımcıya (51 erkek, 45 kadın) "Yaşamın Anlamı Ölçeği", "Yaşam Doyum Ölçeği" ve "UCLA Yalnızlık Ölçeği" uygulanmıştır. Çalışmada yaşamın anlamı, yaşam doyumu ve yalnızlık düzeyleri puanları demografik değişkenlere göre farklılaşmamıştır ($p>,05$). Ancak yaşamın anlamı ve yaşam doyum düzeyleri arasında anlamlı bir ilişki bulunmuştur ($r=,266$;

$p < .01$). Bu arařtırmadaki bulgular, yařlılık psikolojisi alanında önemli veriler sunmaktadır. Cinsiyet, yař vb. deęiřkenlerden öte yařlı bireyin yařama nasıl baktığı, onun hayat kalitesini belirleyen bir unsurdur. Yařlı bireyin kendi varoluř sebebini hatırlatan bir yařam sürdürdüğüçe yařamın her dakikasından tat alabileceğini bizlere göstermektedir.

Anahtarsözcükler: Başarılı yařlanma, yařlılıkta yařamın anlamı, yařam doyumu ve yalnızlık.

Introduction

Each period of life is unique with its distinctive characteristics. Psychological, physical and social changes occurring between the times of birth and death make each developmental period special. One of these periods is the old age period following the end of the adulthood period and resulting in death. On the other hand, aging refers to the whole biological differentiation in a person's life. However, the concepts of old age and aging had been regarded as topics of artistic and literary work until the 20th century. No services providing age counseling or psychological counseling and guidance to the elderly had been available until 1972. On the contrary, studies dealing with these issues have recently increased due to the reasons including the increase in the number of elderly population in the world, the acceleration of the technological developments and the medical enhancements in the health sector and so on. Especially after the industrial revolution, there have been changes in the family and community structures causing elderly people to alienate and isolate themselves from their own lives and to feel less satisfied in life. Therefore, the fundamentals of a successful aging process are important both for people providing the elderly psychological counseling and for researchers dealing with this target group (Durak, 2013; Kalkan, 2008; Myers, 1995).

Form a psycho-social perspective, successful aging embodies various dimensions such as savor of life, life-satisfaction, maintaining social relationships, dealing effectively with changes caused by aging and facilitating the process of adaptation to aging by means of adaptive strategies (Bowling and Dieppe, 2005; von Faber, van der Wiel, van Exel, Gusekloo, Lagaay, van Dongen, Knook, van der Geest and Westendorp, 2001). In other words, successful aging is possible when people accept and improve themselves, strengthen their social communication by establishing positive relationships with others, maintain control on their environment and continue their autonomous structure by making their own decisions. People who have passed through a successful aging process are satisfied with their lives, can add meaning to their lives in line with certain goals and values, maintain their social communication and do not isolate themselves from social life. All types of adaptive behaviors facilitating the successful aging process give rise to the increase in the individuals' life satisfaction and their level of finding life meaningful in addition to help them to feel less lonely (Ho, Yeungand Kwok, 2014; Durak, 2013).

According to Krause (2004), life satisfaction refers to the degree of agreement between the targets individuals aim to achieve and what they have achieved so far.

Unless there is a large gap between their targets and their achievements, their life satisfaction level is high. Otherwise, they experience disappointments and regrets. According to the "Activity Theory" and the "Social Learning Theory", individuals have higher levels of life satisfaction if they continue their activities as they did in the past, move towards a certain direction as they feel themselves useful to carry out a certain task, devote themselves to something they find meaningful and feel hopeful (Heo, Stebbins, Kim and Lee, 2013). Thus, it would be fair to state that "health, social position in society, perceived personal control and social interaction" are determining factors of life satisfaction. Particularly when the effects of "health and social position" are standardized, the "social interaction" variable alone can result in changes in the individuals' levels of life satisfaction. The reality reveals how important individuals' relationships with others are (e.g. joining in an activity with their spouses and meeting with them).

As individuals are social beings, they feel the need to belong to a community. When they cannot meet this need sufficiently, they have the feeling of loneliness. In this case, both their mental health and their subjective well-being are deeply influenced (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). What is worse is that as they get older, their loss becomes sadder. This loss ranges from the death of close friends and spouses to the loss of social status after retirement and the emerging health problems. Consequently, old people holding the idea that their life quality is dwindling cannot derive pleasure from life and assume that they live in a meaningless life period. Although experiences related to loneliness differ from one person to another, all of them have a negative mood (Routasalo and Pitkala, 2003; Smith, 2012a, 2012b). This mood might also bring about the sense of meaninglessness in their lives.

One of the most important features that separate human beings from animals is the power of thinking. This power leads to sense-making that forge a link among factors such as events, situations and people. What lies at the heart of sense-making is making connections among concepts, and thus develop the sense-making skills (Baumeister and Vohs, 2002). Moore (2000, 2006) and David (2001) argue that old people must catch continuity in time so that they can attain self and mental integrity in the last stage of their lives. They can do so on condition that they can combine past, present and future. Moreover, instead of isolating themselves from the community, elderly individuals feeling themselves useless because of the changing social roles should take part in meaningful activities in which they can show to themselves and to others that they can make a difference by taking up a more active role in the society. Despite age-related losses of all kinds, it is significant for individuals to have the feeling that it is worth living. For that reason, it is necessary to attribute a meaning to life. Only by this means can elderly people cling to the hope and beware of the importance of breathing. This is only possible when they feel that life is meaningful.

In the light of the explanations above, the present research study aims to investigate elderly people's. The purpose of this research is to analyze the relationship between life satisfaction, meaning of life and loneliness of elderly people with some demographical changes.

Method

In this part of the study, the research design, population and sample, data collection instruments and data analysis are explained.

Research Design

Aiming to explore the life satisfaction, meaning in life and loneliness levels of a group of elderly people depending on some demographic variables, this research study uses a descriptive method. More specifically, how satisfied elderly people are with life, to what extent they find life meaningful and how lonely they feel themselves are investigated and whether their levels of life satisfaction, meaning in life and loneliness differ with regards to the variables such as age, gender, marital status, educational background and home-environment. It would also be true to state that the study is designed as a relational survey model as the relationship among life satisfaction, meaning in life and loneliness levels of the target group are also focused within the scope of this study.

Population and Sampling:

The population of the study includes elderly individuals who are at the age of 60 and above. The sample group is comprised of individuals living in Fatih and Kâğıthane districts of the İstanbul province. The method of sampling used for the study is convenience sampling. By means of this method of sampling, the cost, time and the labor for the study is minimized. In convenience sampling, the researcher continues to collect data starting from participants that are easily accessible until the sample size intended for the study is reached. When the intended number of participants is reached, the sample groups take shape (Büyüköztürk, Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz and Demirel, 2012).

Out of 96 participants taking part in the study, 51 (53,1%) were female while the remaining 45(46,9%) were male. 65,6% of the participants were between the age of 60-69 while 34,4% were 70 or above. When it comes to their marital status, it was found that 68,8% were married while 31,3% were not married. As for their educational backgrounds, 11,5% of the participants were illiterate, 61,5% were literate at the level of primary school, 14,6% of them were graduates of secondary/high school and 12% graduated from university/graduate programs. Regarding their home-environments, it was found that 10,4% lived in their own houses alone while 89,6% lived with their families.

Data Collection Instruments:

Meaning in Life Scale (MLS):

Meaning in Life Scale (MLS) developed by Steger, Patricia, Shigehiro and Matthew (2006) was adapted into Turkish by Akin and Taş (2011). The scale aims to assess what life means for the individuals. Including 10 seven-point Likert-type items, this scale is comprised of two sub-dimensions: "Presence of Meaning" and "Search for Meaning". Each of these sub-dimensions has five items. Items 1, 4, 5, 6 and 9 make

up the "Presence of Meaning" sub-dimension while items 2, 3,7, 8 and 10 constitutes "Search for Meaning". Item 9 is reverse coded. The score to be obtained from the scale ranges from 7 to 70. Individuals having high scale scores are considered to have high levels of meaning in life (cited in Demirci, 2012).

Life Satisfaction Scale (LSS):

Aiming to reveal to what extent individuals are satisfied with life, the "Life Satisfaction Scale" was developed by Diener, Emmons, Laresen and Griffin (1985) and adapted into Turkish by Köker (1991). The scale is comprised of five seven-point Likert-type items (Cited: Dost, 2007).The range of score to be obtained from the scale is between 5 and 35. The higher score a respondent gets in the scale, the higher level of life satisfaction he/she has. The test-retest reliability coefficient of the scale is 0.85. On the other hand, item test correlations ranges from 0.71 to 0.80 (cited in Tümkaya, Hamarta, Deniz, Çelik and Aybek, 2008).

UCLA Loneliness Scale:

"UCLA Loneliness Scale" was developed in 1978 by Russell, Peplau and Ferguson in order to assess individuals' levels of loneliness by considering their social relations. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Yaparel (1984) and Demir (1990). The scale includes 20 four-point Likert-type items, 10 of which are formulated in the form of positive statements (1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19,20) while the remaining 10 are in the form of negative statements (2, 3, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17,18). Therefore, the positive statements are simply coded while the negative statements are reversely coded. The total score range of the scale changes from 20 to 80. The total score represents the "General Loneliness Score". Higher scores can be interpreted as higher loneliness levels (Demir, 1990).

Data Analysis:

In this study, the data collection instruments used were applied in the spring term of the 2013-2014 academic year. 96 elderly people (60 years old and above) living in Fatih and Kağıthane districts were given the scales and the data was coded by means of the SPSS 21.0 program. The data was analyzed using independent sample t test, Mann-Whitney U test and the Pearson Product Moment Correlation.

Findings

The findings are illustrated in the tables below in line with the research questions. The findings presented on tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 are related to the first research question seeking an answer to the question whether the total scores of the elderly people in the "Meaning in Life Scale", "Life Satisfaction Scale" and "UCLA Loneliness Scale" differ depending on the gender, age, marital status and home-environment variables.

Table 1. Results of the Independent Samples t Test Applied to Identify whether the Scores in the Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction and UCLA Loneliness Scales Differ Depending on the Gender Variable

Score	Groups	N	\bar{x}	ss	Sh $_{\bar{x}}$	t Test		
						t	Sd	p
Meaning in Life Scale	Female	45	53,29	9,40	1,40	-,924	94	,358
	Male	51	55,38	12,61	1,77			
Life Satisfaction Scale	Female	45	23,40	7,95	1,18	-,044	94	,965
	Male	51	23,47	7,83	1,09			
UCLA Loneliness Scale	Female	45	34,64	9,51	1,42	-,086	94	,932
	Male	51	34,49	8,15	1,14			

As can be understood from Table1, as a result of the independent samples t-test carried out to reveal whether the scores in the Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction and UCLA Loneliness Scales differ with regards to the gender variable, it was found that the difference between the arithmetic means of the groups was not statistically significant ($p>,05$). According to this research, elderly people's life satisfaction, meaning in life level and perceived loneliness do not differentiate by gender significantly.

Table 2. Results of the Independent Samples t Test Applied to Identify whether the Scores in the Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction and UCLA Loneliness Scales Differ Depending on the Age Variable

Score	Groups	N	\bar{x}	ss	Sh $_{\bar{x}}$	t Test		
						t	Sd	p
Meaning in Life Scale	60-69	63	54,24	11,12	1,40	-,187	94	,852
	70 -...	33	54,70	11,57	2,01			
Life Satisfaction Scale	60-69	63	23,15	7,64	,96	-,479	94	,633
	70 -...	33	23,97	8,31	1,44			
UCLA Loneliness Scale	60-69	63	34,71	8,91	1,12	,233	94	,816
	70 -...	33	34,27	8,60	1,49			

As can be seen in Table 2, the independent samples t-test used to determine whether the scores in the Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction and UCLA Loneliness Scales show any difference depending on the age variable revealed that the difference between the arithmetic means of the groups was not statistically significant ($p > .05$). In present research, elderly people's life satisfaction, meanings of their life and perceived loneliness do not differentiate by age.

Table 3. Results of the Independent Samples t-Test Applied to Identify whether the Scores in the Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction and UCLA Loneliness Scales Differ Depending on the Marital Status Variable

Score	Groups	N	\bar{x}	ss	Sh \bar{x}	t Test		
						t	Sd	p
Meaning in Life Scale	Married	66	53,95	11,01	1,35	-,555	94	,585
	Unmarried	30	55,37	11,78	2,15			
Life Satisfaction Scale	Married	66	23,33	7,33	,90	-,192	94	,848
	Unmarried	30	23,67	8,99	1,64			
UCLA Loneliness Scale	Married	66	34,32	7,97	,98	-,403	94	,688
	Unmarried	30	35,10	10,43	1,90			

Table 3 summarizes the results of the independent samples t-test carried out to realize whether the total scores in the Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction and UCLA Loneliness Scales differ depending on the marital status variable. According to the results, elderly people's, meaning in life level, life satisfaction and perceived loneliness do not differentiate by marital status ($p > .05$).

Table 4. Results of the Mann Whitney-U Test Applied to Identify the Significance of the Difference in the Scores of Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction and UCLA Loneliness Scales Depending on the Home-environment Variable

Score	Home-environment	N	\bar{x}_{sira}	\sum_{sira}	U	Z	p
Meaning in Life Scale	Own	10	32,40	324,00	269,00	-1,93	,053
	House/Alone						
	With Family	86	50,37	4332,00			

	Total	96					
Life Satisfaction Scale	Own House/Alone	10	37,60	376,00			
	With Family	86	49,77	4280,00	321,00	-1,309	,191
	Total	96					
UCLA Loneliness Scale	Own House/Alone	10	58,50	585,00			
	With Family	86	47,34	4071,00	330,00	-1,201	,230
	Total	96					

As can be realized in table 4, the results of the Mann Whitney-U Test applied to reveal the significance of the difference in the scores of Meaning in Life, Life Satisfaction and UCLA Loneliness Scales depending on the participants' home-environment variable showed no statistically significant difference between groups ($p > .05$). According to the results, elderly individual's meaning in life, life satisfaction and perceived loneliness do not differentiate significantly by living alone at their home or with their family.

Table 5. Results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis Applied to Identify the Relationship between the Scores of Meaning in Life Scale, UCLA Loneliness Scale and Life Satisfaction Scale

Variables	1	2	3
1. Meaning in Life	1		
2. Loneliness	-.154	1	
3. Life Satisfaction	.266*	-.388*	1

* $p < .01$

According to the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis as it is seen in the figure above, determines elderly people's meaning in life, life satisfaction and loneliness, there is no meaningful relation between meaning in life and loneliness levels of elderly individuals ($p > .05$); positive relation between meaning in life and life satisfaction; medium-level negative relation between perceived loneliness and life satisfaction ($p < .01$). In other words, as elderly individual's meaning in life level increases, life satisfaction increases too, yet when they feel lonely it decreases the life satisfaction.

Discussion:

The research findings show that the total scores of the participants in the Life Satisfaction Scale do not differ depending on the socio-demographic variables defined for the study. However, according to Karataş (1990), life satisfaction levels of the elderly people differ depending on the gender, age, education and marital status variables (cited in Kurt, Erkol and Beyaztaş, 2010). In an earlier study, Karataş (1988) found that age and life satisfaction variables were related to each other. In addition, Özer (2001) collected data from elderly people living in nursing homes and from those living with their families and concluded that there was a relationship among educational background, marital status and life satisfaction levels of the elderly individuals (cited in Özer and Karabulut, 2003).

On the other hand, Hamarat, Thompson, Steele, Matheny and Simos (2002) revealed that life satisfaction levels of the elderly did not show significant differences depending on the age variable. For these researchers, the personality characteristics of the elderly do not change in time and their perspectives of life remain the same. It is argued that to what extent elderly individuals are satisfied with life rests on their personality characteristics; therefore, there is no change in their life satisfaction levels depending on their ages. Thus, it would be true to state that their findings corroborate with the results of the current study.

As can be realized from the total scores of the participants in the Meaning in Life Scale, their scores do not significantly differ depending on the demographic variables similar to the scores of the Life Satisfaction Scale. Regarding the gender and age variables, Steger, Oishi and Kashdan's (2009) study also revealed findings overlapping with the results of the present study.

Moreover, another finding of the study is that the total scores of the UCLA Loneliness Scale do not differ with regards to the variables in the demographic form. In Routasalo and Pitkala's (2003) study, it was pointed out that the results pertaining to the relationship of gender and marital status with loneliness were conflicting. Still, in the same research study, it was indicated that the loneliness levels differ depending on the age, educational level and their home-environment variables. Low educational level and living in a nursing house are considered to be related to high loneliness scores.

Furthermore, the present study yielded the finding that there was no significant relationship between the total scores of Meaning in Life Scale and UCLA Loneliness Scale. On the contrary, the relationship between the scores of the Meaning in Life Scale and the Life Satisfaction Scale was found to be significant. Similarly, Steger and associates (2009) revealed the same finding, and found a positive significant relationship between these two ($r=0.61$; $p<0.001$). From a theoretical point of view, the relationship between meaning in life and life satisfaction was first presented by Neugarten. According to Neugarten, there are five conditions for life satisfaction in the old age period: to delight in activities, find life meaningful, feel that their objectives are accomplished, have a positive self-perception and look at the positive aspects of life (cited in Özer and Karabulut, 2003).

In Reker and Woo's (2011) opinion, elderly people have existential needs and concerns. These concerns arise from various feelings such as the sense of mortality, the feeling of exclusion and finding life meaningless. When these concerns are not taken into consideration, existential stress occurs, meaning the decrease of life satisfaction. Individuals who cannot find a meaning in life in the existential context are regarded as the ones regretful of the things they have experienced or have not been able to experience. The relevant finding of the present study is in parallel with this reality.

In conclusion, the results of the study provide valuable data in the field of old age psychology. Rather than variables such as age and gender, elderly individuals' perception of life is a factor determining their life quality. People shaping their own lives in a positive way, actively taking part in social activities, and thus being aware of the reason for their existence can enjoy every bit of their lives. Besides, as they feel self-worth, they more strongly believe that they can make a difference in the world. This belief positively influences their physical and psychological health.

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