

Assessment of Positive Psychology Interventions for Elderly Individuals from Gerontological Perspective

Yaşlı Bireylere Yönelik Pozitif Psikoloji Müdahalelerinin Gerontolojik Perspektiften Değerlendirilmesi

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ABSTRACT

Studies on elderly individuals tends to focus on the problems of aging and how to deal with them. On the other hand, a limited number of studies have looked at positive emotions of elderly individuals. Positive emotions play an important role in overcoming problems when integrated with prevention, treatment and coping strategies. The positive psychology approach is closely related to positive emotions and works to understand and improve the positive aspects of life. Positive psychology interventions defined as interventions designed to develop positive emotions, cognitions and behaviors and included practices such as gratitude, forgiveness, life review therapy, reminiscence and self-management. The aim of this review is to identify the general characteristics of the interventions used in studies of positive psychology interventions and how they affect elderly people. In this context, the conceptual and methodological characteristics of the studies and their effects on elderly people were discussed by analysing the studies that directly addressed positive interventions for elderly people. In line with the findings of the analysed studies, suggestions for those working in this field are presented.

Keywords: Aging, old age, positive psychology interventions

ÖZ

Yaşlı bireylere yönelik çalışmalar, büyük ölçüde yaşlanmayla beraber meydana gelen sorunlara ve bu sorunların çözümüne odaklanmaktadır. Buna karşılık sınırlı sayıda çalışma, yaşlı bireylerin olumlu duygularını ele almaktadır. Olumlu duygular; önleme, tedavi etme ve problemlerle başa çıkma stratejileri ile bütünleştirildiğinde sorunların üstesinden gelmede önemli bir role sahiptir. Pozitif psikoloji yaklaşımı, olumlu duygularla yakından ilişkilidir ve yaşamdaki olumlu yanları anlamak ve geliştirmek için çalışmalar yapmaktadır. Pozitif psikoloji müdahaleleri; olumlu duygular, bilişler ve davranışlar geliştirmek için tasarlanmış müdahaleler olarak tanımlanmakta; şükran, affetme, yaşamı gözden geçirme terapisi, anımsama ve öz yönetim gibi uygulamaları içermektedir. Bu çalışmada, pozitif psikoloji müdahalesini konu alan araştırmalarda kullanılan müdahalelerin genel özelliklerinin ve yaşlı bireylere nasıl etki ettiğinin ortaya konması amaçlanmaktadır. Bu kapsamda, doğrudan yaşlı bireylere yönelik pozitif psikoloji müdahalelerini ele alan araştırmalar incelenerek araştırmaların kavramsal ve yöntemsel özellikleri ile yaşlı bireylere etkileri ele alınmıştır. İncelenen çalışmalardan elde edilen bulgular doğrultusunda alanda çalışanlara öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar sözcükler: Yaşlanma, yaşlılık, pozitif psikoloji müdahaleleri

Introduction

The global population of elderly individuals is at an unprecedented level (Tufan 2022). According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), there were 205 million people aged 60 and over in 1950, a number that rose to 810 million by 2012 (UNFPA 2012). The Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) reported that in 2022, 9.8% of the world population was composed of elderly individuals (TUIK 2023). The increasing elderly population has spurred a proliferation of studies in the field of aging. Research on the quality of life and well-being in old age is crucial for improving the mental and social health of elderly individuals (Korkmaz Yaylagül 2023). However, most studies focus on the problems associated with aging and their solutions. Conversely, a limited number of studies address the positive emotions of elderly individuals. Positive emotions significantly contribute to overcoming problems when integrated with preventive, therapeutic, and coping strategies (Fredrickson 2000).

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Positive psychology, closely related to positive emotions, has gained increasing attention in recent years, giving rise to a new approach in gerontology. This approach contrasts with the traditionally accepted view that predominantly focuses on the pathological conditions associated with aging, i.e., the negative aspects. Consequently, new concepts related to aging, such as positive aging, have emerged, focusing on subjective well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, and quality of life in old age (Ramírez et al. 2014).

Mood disorders, such as depression and anxiety, are prevalent in old age, often resulting from age-related losses. The grieving process is also common among elderly individuals due to experienced losses and/or existing illnesses (Meichsner et al. 2020). These conditions make elderly individuals more vulnerable to losing happiness and well-being (Charles 2010). Therefore, encouraging elderly individuals to develop strategies and engage in activities to maintain and sustain positive emotions is essential. Positive psychology is particularly important in this context, as its primary goal is to enhance/improve people's lives and prevent the onset of mental disorders and illnesses (Seligman 2002).

Positive psychology aims to understand and enhance the positive aspects of life, focusing on happiness and well-being, positive attributes, and forming meaningful relationships (Carr 2016). Through its unique interventions, positive psychology provides an evidence-based understanding of human development. Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) are defined as interventions designed to develop positive emotions, cognitions, and behaviors, including practices such as gratitude, forgiveness, life review therapy, reminiscence, and self-management (Sutipan et al. 2017).

PPIs have been shown to increase positive outcomes, such as life satisfaction, gratitude, well-being, psychological resilience, hope, and positive affect, while effectively reducing depressive symptoms, negative affect, and pessimism (Ho et al. 2014; Hendriks et al. 2020). However, studies examining the appropriateness and effectiveness of these interventions for elderly individuals are limited (Ho et al. 2014). This study aims to reveal the general characteristics of the interventions used in research on PPIs and their impact on elderly individuals. A traditional literature review method was employed, analyzing key research in the field. Traditional literature reviews synthesize findings and results without adhering to a specific method, compiling information from different sources (Karaçam 2013). This study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What are the conceptual and methodological characteristics of studies on PPIs for elderly individuals? (2) How do PPIs affect elderly individuals?

Positive Aging

The literature includes concepts such as positive aging, healthy aging, active aging, successful aging, and productive aging. These concepts, while similar, emphasize different aspects of aging in gerontology literature. Positive aging aims to highlight the contributions that aging can bring to individuals and society, contrary to the traditional view that aging is associated with negative outcomes (Bartholomaeus et al. 2019). Positive aging is subjective and influenced by cultural and societal factors, making it difficult to provide a clear definition due to its multidimensional and multifaceted nature.

Chong et al. (2006) distinguish positive aging from other concepts by emphasizing the importance of financial security at both individual and societal levels, in addition to health, activity, and participation in the aging process. They reference the “Positive Aging Strategy” adopted by the Ministry of Social Policy in New Zealand in 2001, which includes health, financial security, independence, self-realization, community attitudes, individual safety and security, and physical environment. Thus, positive aging encompasses aging well both individually and societally.

In the literature, the concepts of positive aging and successful aging are often used interchangeably (Bowling, 1993). Although these concepts have different meanings in gerontology literature, for the purposes of this study, they are considered similar. Therefore, the concept of positive aging will be used in place of successful aging. The three main components of positive aging are reported to be the absence of disease or disability, high physical and cognitive capacity, and active participation in life (Rowe and Khan, 1997). Subsequent studies have expanded these components to include psychological and social dimensions, such as physiological function, well-being, social activities, environmental conditions, and individual resources (Cosco et al. 2014).

Definition and Concepts of Positive Psychology

Lee Duckworth et al. (2005) define positive psychology as the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, as well as the factors that facilitate their development. Peterson (2013) describes positive

psychology as “the science of what makes life most worth living.” Carr (2016) associates positive psychology with a pleasurable and meaningful life.

Seligman (2002) notes that prior to World War II, psychology had three main functions: treating mental illnesses, improving/enhancing people's lives, and researching superior abilities. However, psychology has since focused more on pathology and repairing damage. Positive psychology addresses a dimension of psychology that has been neglected for many years by emphasizing the improvement of human life and the positive aspects of human beings. The goal of positive psychology is to concentrate on the positive qualities that make life worth living, rather than solely repairing the worst aspects of life (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

The fundamental concepts of positive psychology vary. For instance, Hart and Sasso (2011) discuss concepts such as well-being, psychological resilience, strengths of character, growth, and flow. Carr (2016) includes happiness, positive personality traits, hope, optimism, flow, creativity, wisdom, positive self, and positive relationships as fundamental concepts. Bulut and Subaşı (2020) mention flow, optimism, psychological resilience, well-being, and self-compassion. Positive psychology focuses on positive personality traits at the individual level and virtues and elements that guide individuals to be better citizens at the group level (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Positive psychology scientifically approaches its fundamental concepts and employs scientific methods to enrich individuals' quality of life.

Positive Psychology Interventions

The increasing interest in positive psychology and human development has led to the expanded use of positive psychology interventions (PPIs). PPIs are defined as interventions designed to develop positive emotions, cognitions, and behaviors (Sutipan et al. 2017). Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) report that factors enhancing the effectiveness of PPIs include the characteristics of the activity, the characteristics of the individuals participating in the activity, and person-environment fit. Therefore, for a PPI to be successful, the form, duration, content, and implementation of the intervention are important, the activity should be tailored to the characteristics of the participants, and individuals should be able to adapt to the activity.

PPIs are reported to be particularly effective in increasing well-being (Kashaniyan and Khodabakhshi 2015). They generally include positive activities, which come in various forms. Examples of positive activities include gratitude practices, optimism exercises, utilizing strengths, and meditating on positive thoughts. Positive activities are typically short, simple, accessible, and cost-effective. During the intervention, participants are often asked to create lists at specific intervals, such as “five things to be grateful for” or “three good things.” The primary aim is to help individuals establish a routine to focus on positive aspects (Layous et al. 2014). In addition to positive activities, practices such as reminiscence (Chen et al. 2020) and forgiveness (Ramírez et al. 2014) are also included in PPIs. A systematic review focusing on the impact of PPIs on well-being in elderly individuals reported that the most effective methods are reminiscence and gratitude programs (Sutipan et al. 2017).

PPIs have been widely used in studies aimed at understanding their various effects on the general population or individuals with certain diseases. However, studies conducted with elderly individuals are more limited in number (Sutipan et al. 2017). Therefore, the next section reviews key studies addressing PPIs for elderly individuals, focusing on their general characteristics and effects.

Positive Psychology Interventions Research for Older Persons

To evaluate PPIs for elderly individuals, this section reviews studies that directly address PPIs in elderly individuals, focusing on the general characteristics and effects of PPIs. National sources reveal only one study from Turkey.

In Spain, a PPI study aimed at improving the quality of life of individuals aged 60 and above who receive services from a daytime senior center included practices of autobiographical memory, forgiveness, and gratitude. The intervention comprised nine sessions, each lasting one and a half hours, conducted face-to-face once a week. A total of 46 individuals aged between 60 and 93 participated in the study, which was designed in a quasi-experimental format with two groups: an intervention group (n=26) and a placebo group (n=20). Measurements were carried out using the State and Trait Anxiety Inventory, Beck Depression Inventory, Autobiographical Memory Test, Mini-Cognitive Exam, Life Satisfaction Scale, and Subjective Happiness Scale. The findings indicated that participants in the intervention group, compared to the placebo group, showed a significant decrease in state anxiety and depression levels and a significant increase in specific memories, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness levels (Ramírez et al. 2014).

In China, a positive psychology-based reminiscence therapy was applied to spouses caring for advanced cancer patients. The study, conducted in the oncology centers of three hospitals, was designed as a randomized controlled trial with two groups: an intervention group (n=27) and a control group (n=29). The average age of the intervention group was 69, and the average age of the control group was 66. The intervention included reminiscence therapy practices and consisted of eight sessions, each lasting 45-60 minutes, conducted face-to-face. Measurements were taken using The Zarit Burden Interview, Positive Aspects of Caregiving, and Herth Hope Index. The findings indicated that participants in the intervention group had a statistically significant reduction in caregiver burden and higher levels of positive emotion and hope compared to the control group (Chen et al. 2020).

At Istanbul Darülaceze, a study examined the effects of the Positive Psychology Interaction Group Program on the anger and hope levels of elderly individuals. A total of 32 elderly individuals aged 65 and above participated in the study, with an intervention group (n=16) and a control group (n=16). The study was designed in a quasi-experimental format based on pre-test and post-test measurements. The intervention program's content included five stages covering positive psychology, active aging and quality of life awareness, self-compassion and empathy, stress and anger management, communication skills, values, and life satisfaction. The intervention was planned face-to-face and consisted of ten sessions, each lasting 50 minutes. Measurements were taken using the Trait Hope Scale and the State-Trait Anger Scale. The findings indicated that participants in the intervention group showed a statistically significant increase in hope levels and a significant decrease in anger levels compared to the control group (Gümüüş Demir et al. 2021).

In Brazil, a positive psychology intervention for retired individuals living in the community included activities focused on self-care, optimism, empathy, gratitude, forgiveness, and the meaning of life. The intervention comprised six face-to-face sessions, each lasting two hours per week. The study was designed in a quasi-experimental format with two groups: an intervention group (n=47) and a control group (n=34). Participants' ages ranged from 49 to 83, with an average age of 65. Measurements were taken using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, General Health Questionnaire-12-item, Life Orientation Test-Revised, Perceived Stress Scale, Resilience Scale, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale. The findings indicated significant improvements in participants' levels of depression and anxiety, perceived stress, life satisfaction, and resilience (Durgante et al. 2020).

In Hong Kong, a PPM study for elderly individuals living in community health centers and nursing homes included eight themes: optimism, gratitude, enjoyment, happiness, curiosity, courage, altruism, and the meaning of life. The program consisted of face-to-face sessions held once a week for an hour and a half over nine weeks. The study involved 74 elderly individuals aged between 63 and 105 and adopted a single-group pre-test and post-test research design. Measurements were taken using the Geriatric Depression Scale, Life Satisfaction Scale, Gratitude Questionnaire, and Subjective Happiness Scale. The findings indicated that PPM reduced the number of depressive symptoms and increased levels of life satisfaction, gratitude, and subjective happiness (Ho et al. 2014).

A PPM study in Iran involved residents aged 65 and above living in a nursing home. The study was designed as a quasi-experimental research based on pre-test and post-test measurements. A total of 30 elderly residents participated in the study, with an intervention group (n=15) and a control group (n=15). The intervention content included writing about five important abilities, writing three things one is grateful for, expressing appreciation, deriving great pleasure from minimal activities, forming positive sentences, and engaging in charitable activities. The intervention comprised face-to-face sessions held once a week for 90 minutes over ten sessions. Measurements were taken using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Mini-Mental State Examination, and Satisfaction with Life Scale. The findings indicated that participants in the intervention group showed a statistically significant increase in the meaning of life and life satisfaction compared to the control group (Kashaniyan & Khodabakhshi 2015).

In Australia, a PPM was applied to a group of elderly individuals (aged 60 and above) who were members of a city council, aimed at enhancing well-being and resilience. The study was designed as a quasi-experimental research with pre-test and post-test measurements involving two groups. A total of 58 elderly individuals participated in the study, with an intervention group (n=29) and a control group (n=29). The intervention comprised a multi-component program including mind development and thinking activities, gratitude, mindfulness, interpersonal problem-solving, constructiveness, activities based on strengths, and value-based goals. The intervention was planned face-to-face, repeated once a week for eight weeks, with each session lasting between 90-120 minutes. Measurements were taken using The 23-item PERMA Profiler, Brief Resilience Scale, Life Orientation Test-Revised, and the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The findings indicated that compared to the

control group, the intervention group showed a significant decrease only in social isolation scores. No significant differences were found in well-being, optimism, and resilience levels (Bartholomaeus et al. 2019).

In the United States, a PPM was applied to participants (aged 50 and above) from two local senior centers. The effectiveness of an eight-week intervention program titled “The Art of Happiness Course” was evaluated. The intervention included lessons on themes such as the meaning of happiness, stress management, compassion, forgiveness, transforming pain, mindfulness, and humor. The program was planned face-to-face, comprising weekly 90-minute sessions. The study was designed as a quasi-experimental research with pre-test and post-test measurements involving two groups. A total of 52 participants were included in the study, with an intervention group (n=34) and a control group (n=18). The average age of the participants was 71. Measurements were taken using the Gratitude Questionnaire, Diener Satisfaction with Life Scale, a four-item scale (subjective happiness), Perceived Stress Scale, the PHQ-9 (depression), the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, and a four-point scale assessing various mood states (e.g., tense, tired, energetic). The findings indicated that compared to the control group, participants in the intervention group experienced significantly less perceived stress and reported feeling significantly calmer and less tired compared to before the intervention (Greenawalt et al. 2019).

In Switzerland, an online study applied a PPM to participants over the age of 50. Participants were recruited through a university-affiliated website and primarily consisted of readers from a German magazine predominantly read by women. Consequently, all participants included in the analysis were women. Initially, 510 people participated in the study, but only 163 completed it. The placebo-controlled study had five groups: gratitude letter (n=30), three good things (n=44), three funny things (n=20), strengths (n=35), and childhood memories (n=34), with the latter serving as the placebo control group. Participants were randomly assigned to groups. The intervention content included writing a gratitude letter, listing three good things that happened each day, listing three funny things each day, identifying and trying five strengths in new ways, writing about childhood memories, and finding similarities with these memories before bed each night for a week. Participants aged 50 to 79, with an average age of 56, were asked to perform these activities for a week. Measurements were taken using the Authentic Happiness Inventory and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale. The findings showed an increase in average happiness scores and a decrease in average depressive symptoms in the intervention groups. The “three funny things” activity was the most effective intervention for reducing depressive symptoms, although no significant difference was found between the control group and the three funny things group in terms of happiness. Measurements repeated six months post-intervention indicated an increase in happiness scores. The intervention aimed at identifying and using one's strengths in daily activities was the most effective for increasing happiness. The gratitude letter contributed to a marginally significant increase in subjective well-being and a decrease in depressive symptoms in the one-month post-intervention measurement (Proyer et al. 2014).

Various PPM studies conducted in different countries predominantly occur in institutional centers or healthcare facilities. Structured intervention programs for small groups are evaluated using various measurement tools. While the content of intervention programs varies, practices of reminiscing, forgiveness, and gratitude are more frequently used. Session durations and the length of each session also vary. Such intervention programs can be more easily implemented in institutional centers providing services to the elderly. The ease of structuring interventions and the inclusion of simple applications allow these programs to be adapted to all age groups. Therefore, it can be said that PPM is applicable for elderly individuals as well.

Conclusion

The increasing human lifespan and the associated outcomes have prompted scientists and policymakers to conduct more research on leading a quality life in advanced age. The principle of adding life to years has led many research fields to explore how to ensure a better and happier life during old age. Positive psychology is one of these fields. This study, which focuses on positive psychology interventions for elderly individuals, aims to examine the fundamental research in the field, highlighting their conceptual and methodological features as well as their effectiveness. The findings of the reviewed studies indicate that PPM is effective in improving mental health outcomes in elderly individuals. PPM is particularly significant in enhancing well-being, happiness, hope, and life satisfaction among the elderly. In this context, it is crucial to promote PPM for elderly individuals receiving institutional services as well as those living at home.

PPM research involving elderly individuals predominantly employs quantitative quasi-experimental techniques with small sample sizes. Future studies should consider increasing sample sizes, conducting long-term follow-ups, and supplementing quantitative data with qualitative interviews. Additionally, existing research would

benefit from being supported by longitudinal studies. In Turkey, there is a limited number of studies on PPM for the elderly. Therefore, it is essential to conduct more research in this field.

The increasing elderly population has led to a rise in the problems faced by older individuals, necessitating diverse intervention options. At this juncture, the ease of implementation and low cost of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) make them a promising option. Therefore, it is recommended to plan PPI-based applications in institutions and organizations that provide services for the elderly. Additionally, collaboration between mental health professionals and gerontologists is crucial to planning interventions that enhance and sustain the well-being of both community-dwelling and institution-dwelling elderly individuals. It is also suggested to organize awareness-raising seminars and/or training sessions for professionals working in the field of aging to provide them with updated and evidence-based practices in PPI.

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