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## **SELF-HARM AMONG TURKISH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF MEANING IN LIFE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Emerging adulthood is an important developmental period of young adult identity development (Arnett, 1998). During this period the search for meaning in life takes greater salience and has been found to relate with many developmental outcomes (Krok, 2018). **Objective:** This study examined the role of emerging adult meaning in life as a predictor of psychological well-being and self-harm behaviors in a sample of female emerging adults in Turkey. **Methods:** Non-random convenience sampling generated a sample of 275 participants Each participant reported on adulthood status, self-harm behaviors, autonomy, psychological well-being (stress, depression, anxiety) and meaning in life. **Results:** There were three main findings. 1. Self-defined adulthood status was not predictive of well-being or meaning in life but was associated with autonomy. 2. Meaning in life exhibited a positive relationship with self-injury, and a negative relationship with autonomy and well-being. **Conclusions:** Meaning in life is interpreted within the Turkish cultural context and it is suggested that the search for meaning may lead to distress and lower-levels of well-being among emerging adults, whereas the fulfillment of meaning has the opposite effect (Frankl, 1955).

**Keywords:** Self-Harm, Meaning in Life

### **INTRODUCTION**

Emerging adulthood is a period when young people develop skills, characteristics, and personality traits that prepare them for the transition to adulthood. Arnett and others (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Côte, 2006; Luyckx, Goosseens, & Soenens, 2006; Schwartz, Côte, & Arnett, 2005) consider emerging adulthood as an important period

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for identity development. Although there is limited research examining the correlates of individuals' perceptions of adulthood status (Arnett, 1994) there is evidence indicating that individuals who self-identify as emerging adults report engaging in more risk-taking behaviors than individuals self-identifying as adults. Blinn-Pike et al, (2008) reported that of their sample of 302 undergraduate students, individuals classified as emerging adults more frequently drank alcohol, engaged in binge drinking, smoked cigarettes, and gambled with cards than did self-classified "adults." Nelson and Barry (2005) reported that students classifying themselves as adults engaged in less risk taking, were less depressed, and possessed a more mature identity than same-age peers self-classified as emerging adults.

### **Self-Harm in Turkey**

In their study of Turkish youth, Idig-Camuroglu and Gölge (2018) reported that the overall prevalence of non-suicidal self-injury was 28.5%, with males more likely than females to engage in hitting and burning themselves. Further, a link was found between self-injury and childhood abuse, especially for males. Zoroglu et al. (2003) reported the prevalence of self-mutilative behaviors in their study of high school students of 21.4%, and both abuse and neglect were significant predictors of suicide attempts and self-mutilation. Toprak et al. (2011) reported that self-harm and suicidal ideation were associated with substance use, low income, and family relationship problems in a study of over 600 university-attending youth. Oksuz and Malhan, (2005) found that low-income socioeconomic status and gender were the two most consistent predictors of risk-taking and attempted suicide in their study of 650 university students in Turkey

### **Meaning in Life**

Meaning in life is associated with providing individuals hope, and hopelessness is associated with risk-behaviors and self-harm in young adults (Kelly, Rollings, & Harmon, 2005). Beck et al. (1985) reported that hopelessness predicted suicide attempts, whereas there is a positive correlation between hope and meaning in life (Halama & Dědová, M, 2007) and that meaning in life is a predictor of psychological well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Bhattacharya, 2011; Melendro et al., 2020; Xin-qiang, et al., 2016). Brassai, Piko, and Steger (2011), in their study of

adolescents in Romania, reported that meaning in life was a protective factor for self-harm behaviors. A related finding was reported by Piko and Fitzpatrick (2003) in a study of adolescents in Hungary, where school happiness and self-esteem served as protective factors for depression and problem behaviors. Çakır (2014) reported a lack of direction was a negative factor in all dimensions of psychological well-being, personal development and relationships with others. An integrative literature review (Glaw et. al., 2017) highlights the clear link between physical health, mental health and meaning fulfilment.

One of the consistent findings in the literature is that autonomy is associated with meaning in life, both directly and indirectly (Çelik, 2018; Demirbaş-Çelik, & Keklik, 2019; García-Alandete, 2015; García-Alandete, Rosa Martínez, Sellés Nohales, & Soucase Lozano, 2018; Göregenli, 1997; Horner, Sielaff, & Greenberg, 2021; Hui, & Triandis, 1986, Steger, 2018; Steger, et al., 2006). However, autonomy in collectivistic cultures, such as Turkey, may be differentially experienced as there is a greater emphasis on autonomy within relatedness (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007; Sanaktekin & Sunar, 2008), and thus autonomy may not be as strong a predictor in these cultures compared to Western industrialized countries (Côté 2006, 20014).

### **Current Study and Rationale**

Research suggests the importance of understanding developmental transitions through an integration of social and cultural dynamics (Arnett, 1997; Nelson, Badger and Wu, 2004). Arnett, Žukauskienė, and Sugimura (2014) observe that emerging adulthood may be more applicable to high-income countries and that cultural changes are decisive in defining and interpreting this age period. Turkey, as a developing country, has various cultural dynamics that exert a profound influence on the experiences of young adults: high levels of unemployment, gender inequality, increasing years of education, compulsory military service for men, and limited freedom for self-expression (Çok, 2015).

Additionally, intergenerational divergence in lived experiences limits the ability of many younger adults in Turkey to see represented in their parents and grandparents a viable roadmap for adulthood attainment. Research suggests that across generations, contemporary Turkish youth demonstrate a greater orientation toward the value of individualism than earlier generations (Çileli, 2000; İmamoğlu & Zahide

Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 1999). For example, Marcus, Ceylan, and Ergin (2016) reported that the values of harmony and collectivism have decreased in primacy in Turkey, while self-mastery and individualism have increased. Mindful of these findings, the current study acknowledges the cultural variation of young adult experiences, and aims to investigate to which extent the concept of meaning in life explains Turkish emerging adult's psychological well-being and self-harm behaviors. The following research questions guided the current study.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does self-defined adulthood status relate to young adult perceptions of autonomy, meaning in life, and psychological well-being?
2. Does self-defined adulthood status make a meaningful differentiation in self-harm behaviors?
3. Does meaning in life predict young adult well-being beyond what is predicted by demographics and autonomy?

## **MATERIAL AND METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited using an online survey software program (SurveyMonkey) which was distributed across several undergraduate courses in the psychology department. All participants completed an Informed Consent that specified their participation was voluntary and no personally identifying information would be collected. Participants did not receive extra credit or additional incentive for taking part in the study. No funding was received and no conflicts were reported.

### **Measures**

#### **Life Regard Index-Revised (LRI-R)**

The Life Regard Index (LRI) was developed by Battista and Almond (1973) to provide an empirical measure of Frankl's concept of meaning (Frankl, 1988). A revised edition was constructed and validated by Debats (1996). The original version of the LRI asked participants to evaluate a series of 28 statements using a 5-point Likert scale. The revised edition (LRI-R) collapsed response options to a 3-point scale, with possible responses being: 'do not agree,' 'no opinion,' and 'agree' (Debats, 1996).

The LRI-R has two subscale measuring framework of meaning (LRI-Fr) and fulfilment of meaning (LRI-Fu). The framework scale measures the extent to which participants have a framework for meaning in their lives, while the fulfilment scale measures the extent to which they have fulfilled meaning within their meaning framework.

The LRI-R was translated into Turkish and back translated by two individuals fluent in both Turkish and English. Discrepancies were discussed and a final translation was developed that was understandable in Turkish and faithful to the original English. A reliability analysis indicated that the Turkish version of the LRI-R had acceptable reliability. The Cronbach reliability coefficients for each subscale and total scale were .82 (Fr), .78 (Fu), and .89 (LRI-R), indicating high degrees of internal consistency. The correlations of the Framework and Fulfillment scales with the total score were .95 and .94, respectively.

#### Perceived Choice and Awareness of Self Scale (PCASS)

Autonomy was measured using the Perceived Choice and Awareness of Self Scale (PCASS), a short 10-item self-report measure assessing autonomy in two areas: perceived choice and awareness of self (Sheldon & Deci, 1996). The PCASS asks respondents to indicate on a 5-point scale which of two statements is most true for them and to what extent. The PCASS has demonstrated good reliability, with Sheldon, Ryan, and Reis (1996) reporting alpha values ranging from .85 to .93 for internal consistency. The scale was translated from English to Turkish and back translated by someone fluent in both Turkish and English. The reliability analysis for the total PCASS indicated a high degree of internal consistency ( $\alpha=.83$ ). Each of the subscales exhibited good reliability, with alpha scores of .80 for the Perceived Choice and .75 for Awareness of Self.

#### Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS)

Depression, anxiety, and stress were assessed using the 21-item version of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS; Henry & Crawford, 2005). The DASS-21 is a shortened version of the original 42-item DASS, consisting of seven items assessing depression, anxiety, and stress. The DASS is a self-report measure originally developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) for use in clinical settings, although research has demonstrated that the DASS is appropriate for nonclinical settings as well (Crawford & Henry, 2003; Henry & Crawford, 2005; Ruini & Cesetti, 2019). A reliability

analysis revealed that each scale exhibited good reliability in the present study, with subscale alphas of: .82 for the anxiety, .85 for stress, and .80 depression.

### **Self-Harm**

14 items were selected from a review of previous measures of self-harm behaviors. Participants were asked to indicate using yes/no response options whether they had engaged in the described behavior within the last year. Questions assessed self-harm behaviors ranging from cutting oneself to thinking about and attempting to commit suicide. The items were summed to create an overall self-harm score for each individual, with a total range from 0 (never having engaged in self-harm behavior) to 14 (engaged in all behaviors).

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

A total of 275 female participants completed the survey, with an age range of 18 to 25 ( $M = 21.31$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ). The average reported grade point average (GPA) was 2.82 ( $SD=.57$ ), with a range from 1.00 to 3.96. Participants were asked to state whether they consider themselves to be an adult. Over half of participants ( $n=166$ , 60.4%) indicated they were adults, 38.9% ( $n=107$ ) reported they were sometimes an adult, sometimes not.

### **Correlational Analysis**

An inspection of the intercorrelations between variables indicates that meaning in life exhibited a positive and significant relationship with measures of psychological distress and autonomy. Participants scoring higher on the measure of meaning in life showed higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, and lower levels of autonomy. Autonomy was negatively related to both anxiety and depression. The relationship between autonomy and stress approached conventional levels of significance ( $p=.07$ ). All distress variables were positively related.

Table 1. Correlations between variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Stress	--				
2. Anxiety	.77**	--			
3. Depression	.74**	.71**	--		
4. Autonomy	-.13	-.20**	-.31**	--	
5. Meaning in life	.28**	.30**	.53**	-.49**	--

\*p = .05, \*\*p = .01

#### Research Question 1: Adulthood status and main variables

A series of independent t tests were conducted to determine if self-defined adulthood status related to autonomy, meaning in life, and psychological distress. Results are listed in table 1. The only significant difference between self-identified adults and non-adults was with the variable autonomy, with adults (M=38.48, SD=7.48) scoring higher than non-adults (M=36.59, SD=7.04),  $t(263)=2.05$ ,  $p<.05$ .

#### Research Question 2: Adulthood status and self-harm behaviors

Perceptions of adulthood status were unrelated with chronological age,  $t(193) = 1.60$ ,  $p > .05$ , but were related with student grade point average,  $t(193) = -2.13$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating that participants classified as adults had lower grade point averages (M = 2.64) than participants classified as emerging adults (2.81), although the difference was relatively minimal. A 2 x 2 Chi-Square analysis was conducted to determine a relationship between having self-harmed with the past year (yes, no) and adulthood status (adult/non-adult). Results of the analysis indicated no significant relationship,  $\chi^2(1)=.68$ ,  $p > .05$ .

#### Research Question 3: Predicting psychological distress (stress, anxiety, and depression)

Separate multiple regression analyses were conducted to predict stress, anxiety, and depression through a linear combination of demographic characteristics, adulthood status (dummy coded), self-harm (dummy coded), autonomy, and meaning in life (total LRI-R). The multiple regression analysis for stress was significant,  $F(6,$

160)=4.21,  $p=.001$ ,  $R^2=.14$ . Results of the analysis indicated that meaning in life ( $\beta=.24$ ,  $t=2.86$ ,  $p=.00$ ) and self-harm ( $\beta=.20$ ,  $t=2.69$ ,  $p=.00$ ) were the only significant contributors to the model, indicating that meaning in life and self-harm were positively associated with stress. The model for depression was also significant,  $F(6, 160)=14.35$ ,  $p=.00$ ,  $R^2=.35$ , with student GPA ( $\beta=-.15$ ,  $t=-2.23$ ,  $p=.03$ ), self-harm ( $\beta=.20$ ,  $t=3.12$ ,  $p=.00$ ), and meaning in life ( $\beta=.43$ ,  $t=5.99$ ,  $p=.00$ ) all contributing significantly. For anxiety,  $F(6,160)=5.33$ ,  $p=.00$ ,  $R^2=.17$ , GPA ( $\beta=-.18$ ,  $t=-2.41$ ,  $p=.02$ ), self-harm ( $\beta=-.20$ ,  $t=2.72$ ,  $p=.00$ ), and meaning in life ( $\beta=-.21$ ,  $t=2.51$ ,  $p=.01$ ) were all significant predictors.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to determine the role of meaning in life and autonomy in predicting young adult self-harm behaviors and psychological distress (stress, anxiety, and depression). It was predicted that participants' meaning in life would demonstrate an inverse relationship with measures of ill-being and would be higher in those participants identifying as an adult. Several research questions investigated these predictions.

The first research question examined whether there existed any significant difference between participants' adulthood status and the distress variables, autonomy, and meaning in life. An examination of the results indicated that only in the area of autonomy was there a significant difference between adults and non-adults, with adults showing higher levels of autonomy. Considering that autonomy is conceptualized as a key developmental outcome of emerging adulthood (Bernal Romero, Melendro, & Charry, 2020; Inguglia et al., 2015; Lamborn & Groh, 2009; Steinberg, 1990), participants' perceptions of being an adult may reflect this transition and development. This is further confirmed with the correlational analysis showing no significant relationship between autonomy and chronological age. Our finding confirms previous research showing the importance of assessing how young adults view their adulthood status rather than grouping individuals into an 'emerging adulthood' category. For example, Smith et al. (2014) reported that participants labeling themselves as adults engaged in less substance use than did participants who felt in-between adolescence and adulthood.



The next research question sought to determine the relationship between adulthood status and self-harming. Results indicated no significant difference in whether participants self-harmed based on their adulthood status. Although few studies of emerging adults include a question asking participants' perception of their adulthood status, the findings from this study are similar to previous research results that explicitly ask for self-identification as an adult (Rarick, 2011, Smith et al., 2014). One possibility in the current study is that the low prevalence of self-harm did not allow for meaningful comparison between adults/non-adults, and thus, conclusions must be tentative.

The final research question examined the predictors of the three measures of psychological distress (anxiety, stress, and depression) among participants. One surprising finding was that participant meaning in life was positively associated with the distress outcomes, and this relationship did not differ based on participant adulthood status. This contradicts much of what has been written on the protective role of meaning in mental health outcomes (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010; Kleftaras & Psarra, 2012; Rathi & Rastogi, 2007; Steger, Oishi, & Kesebir, 2011; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

One possible explanation relates to the concept of purpose anxiety (Rainey, 2014), which refers to the negative emotions associated with the search for purpose or meaning, and which can be associated with both how to enact meaning in one's life and the struggle to find meaning. While 'having' meaning may be associated with psychological well-being, the search for meaning that precedes the actual 'having' has been found to be associated with negative outcomes (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009).

Frankl (1955) used the term *noögenic neurosis* to refer to symptoms of the search for meaning that represent existential frustration. *Noögenic neurosis* may present with depression and anxiety, but have as their root cause not underlying psychological conflicts or problems, but a frustrated search for meaning and purpose in one's life. Steger, Oishi, and Kashadan (2009) reported that the presence of meaning was associated with positive well-being, especially at later ages, but the search for meaning exhibited a negative relation with well-being and was descriptive of younger developmental stages. In a study of nearly 9,000 young adults (aged 18-25), DeZutter et

al. (2014) reported that the presence of meaning and search for meaning were conceptually different components and demonstrated a different set of relationships with well-being. In the study, participants were low in meaning but high in the search for meaning showed the greatest amount of maladaptive behaviors and lower levels of well-being.

The relationships reported in this study between meaning in life and well-being measures may indicate the challenge facing contemporary Turkish youth as they contemplate the changing landscape on which their lives will be built. Turkish society has undergone profound social and cultural changes during the last two decades. Urbanization has continued unabated; economic challenges have increased and provided youth with limited job opportunities; religion has declined in importance, and more youth identify as atheist or agnostic; and with traditional values being challenged, Turkish youth have more options for where and how to construct meaning than at any point previously. As Keyes (2011) has written, “humans have a purpose in life, but the ability to choose from multiple opportunities complicates the nature of this purpose” (p. 281).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

A limitation of the study was the sample characteristics. The participation was voluntary and the participants were recruited by a non-random convenience sampling technique. While some characteristics of the sample might make it difficult to generalize the findings, the numerical size of the sample was large enough to allow for tentative conclusions. A second limitation concerns the psychometric properties of the Life Regard Index-Revised (LRI-I; Debats, 1990; Debats, Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993). The LRI-R consists of two subscales, meaning fulfilment (Fu) and meaning framework (Fr), and can be used as a single scale measure of meaning or using both the subscales. The Fu subscale nominally measures the search for meaning, but the high correlation between Fu and Fr subscales (in this study,  $r=.79$ ,  $p=.00$ ) suggests they measure conceptually similar constructs and do not make a meaningful distinction.

## Contributions of the Current Study

Our findings suggest a unique interpretation of how meaning related with psychological distress and self-harm, and points to a greater focus on differentiating between the search for meaning and its attainment.

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