Toward a Developmental Psychology of *Sehnsucht* (Life Longings): The Optimal (Utopian) Life

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The topic of an optimal or utopian life has received much attention across the humanities and the arts but not in psychology. The German concept of *Sehnsucht* captures individual and collective thoughts and feelings about one's optimal or utopian life. *Sehnsucht* (life longings; LLs) is defined as an intense desire for alternative states and realizations of life. Presenting a first effort at capturing this phenomenon, the authors conceptualize LLs as composed of 6 interrelated core characteristics: (a) utopian conceptions of ideal development; (b) sense of incompleteness and imperfection of life; (c) conjoint time focus on the past, present, and future; (d) ambivalent (bittersweet) emotions; (e) reflection and evaluation of one's life; and (f) symbolic richness. Self-report data from 299 adults (19–81 years) support the postulated structure and support predictions regarding the functional role of *Sehnsucht*. Having LLs was evaluated as providing direction to development and helping to manage life's incompleteness. At the same time, the frequent and intense experience of LLs was associated with lower well-being. When LLs were perceived as controllable, however, this negative association disappeared.

Keywords: life longings, *Sehnsucht*, life span psychology, psychological utopia, developmental regulation

The idea of an optimal (utopian) life[1] is a central topic in much public and individual discourse and has received a lot of attention, especially in the humanities and the arts (Cazès, 2001; Vosskamp, 2004). With few notable exceptions (e.g., Boesch, 1998), however, people's conceptions of utopias of their lives have not been a research subject in psychology. In this article, we aim at a first theoretical conceptualization and empirical operationalization of such representations of utopian lives.

In the German context, thoughts and feelings about one's optimal or utopian life are best captured by the concept of *Sehnsucht*. In the most comprehensive dictionary of the German language, *Sehnsucht* is defined as "a high degree of intense, (recurring), and often painful desire for something, particularly if there is no hope to attain the desired, or when its attainment is uncertain, still far away" (Grimm & Grimm, 1854–1871/1984, p. 157). In Germany, the word *Sehnsucht*, more so than would be true for similar English words such as *nostalgia*, carries a solid dose of positivity and moreover possesses high everyday saliency. For instance, in a recent contest of the "most beautiful German word," *Sehnsucht* was nominated third most often (Spiegel Online, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to outline a developmental psychological conception of the psychology of *Sehnsucht* (life longings; LLs). We present (a) a theoretical frame that specifies the phenomenon from a life span–developmental point of view, (b) a self-report-based method to assess LLs, (c) findings on the association of LLs with indicators of psychological well-being, and (d) findings on age-related differences of LLs across adulthood. In addition, we briefly highlight the kind of research that we consider important in the further specification and empirical elaboration of *Sehnsucht*.

Although the field of developmental psychology has attended to topics similar to *Sehnsucht*, for instance, when referring to notions

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[1] By *utopian life*, we mean representations of alternative (i.e., different to the present), ideal (desired), or unrealized life states and scenarios. We chose to label these representations *utopian*, but one could also think of them as ideal or desired life scenarios.

of optimal development (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandstädter & Schneewind, 1977; Lerner, 2002), ideal selves (Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987), or subjective well-being and life satisfaction (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Ryff, 1989), developmental researchers have not made major strides into exploring the structure and function of a notion of an ideal, optimal, or utopian life with due consideration for the objective and subjective gains and losses associated with life as a whole (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997). This article is an effort to fill this niche and draw attention to the potential of such an intellectual journey and the possibility that developmental psychologists may be important players in the enterprise of identifying to what degree individuals engage in beliefs, thoughts, and emotions about their better if not utopian life.

Toward the Study of *Sehnsucht* (LLs)

There is a large body of humanist writing about *Sehnsucht* and other forms of utopian thinking and feeling (Cazès, 2001), for example, in German conceptions of life-long education (*Bildung*; see also Groffmann, 1970; Plessner, 1965). An important facet in these writings is the role of *Sehnsucht* in the continuous search for collective and individual progress and innovation. This notion also pays a critical role in the work of Tetens and Rousseau on "perfectibility" (Tetens, 1777; Vosskamp, 2004; see also Lindenberger & Baltes, 1999). Another important facet is the proposition that *Sehnsucht* can be multifunctional (e.g., enhancing or debilitative) in its consequences. Although important to positive development, the construction and subsequent experience of *Sehnsucht* can be too intense and out of control. If that happens, *Sehnsucht* is expected to activate a sense of unhappiness and chronic loss, perhaps even despair, and may exhibit a close association with melancholy (Lepenies, 1992). In this case, *Sehnsucht* takes on a meaning that comes closer to that of the English term *nostalgia*.

Yet, the very core of *Sehnsucht* is not only negative in tone. It carries also positivity. People want to have *Sehnsucht* and share with others in such experiences. Humanists, art historians, and artists themselves (Clair, 2005) argue that *Sehnsucht* is a powerful motivator and creator and therefore an essential part of the flourishing context in which human development and peaks of life evolve. *Sehnsucht* then represents a constructive sense of the highs and lows, the gains and losses of life; its emotional tone is fundamentally *bittersweet*, perhaps even closer to *sweet–bitter*. Thus, *Sehnsucht* is inherently multidimensional in emotional tone and multifunctional in its potential consequences. It combines the search for progress and utopia with the insight of the fundamental unattainability of optimal states and the essential imperfection of human life on the level of outward behavioral realization. This gain–loss dynamic of *Sehnsucht* seems to be ubiquitous in private and public discourse. Recent books written for the educated public, for instance, aim at capturing this fundamental aspect of the human condition already in their titles: *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (note the word *culture*; Schivelbusch, 2001/2003) or *The Art of Making Mistakes* (note the word *art*; Osten, 2006). Attempting the best and failing are seen as the contrapuntal singing of two developmental voices.

The German word *Sehnsucht*, similar to *Zeitgeist* or *Schadenfreude*, is difficult to translate into English. The phenomenon, however, seems to be relevant for many people's recurring thoughts and feelings in countries other than Germany, such as in the United States. This relevance is exemplified by Brim (1992) in his insightful treatment of how people manage success and failure in life that result from the often-unfulfilled but deeply seated motivation of ambition. We suggest keeping the German word *Sehnsucht* but also using the term *LLs*. In future work, we will inquire more carefully into its semantic meaning structure in different cultures and languages.

Delineating *Sehnsucht* (LLs) From Goals and Regret

Before moving to the specifics of our theoretical conceptualization of *Sehnsucht* (LLs), we offer a few observations on convergences and divergences with other psychological concepts that psychologists may regard as already in existence and well-articulated and, therefore, making the concept of *Sehnsucht* superfluous. *Sehnsucht* is related to concepts such as goals, regrets, hopes, wishes, possible or ideal selves, and life tasks. We argue, however, that none of these related concepts is fully equivalent with *Sehnsucht*. For space reasons, we will delineate *Sehnsucht* only from two of these concepts that might be considered as most similar, goals and regret. So far, we can offer primarily theoretical arguments, but we are currently investigating the differentiation of *Sehnsucht* from these rival constructs empirically.

Most notable as a related construct is the concept of *goals*, defined as cognitive representations of states people want to achieve or avoid (e.g., Freund, 2006; McGregor & Little, 1998). Unlike LLs, goals are typically not ambivalent in emotional tone but evaluated as positive. Further, goals are mostly future oriented rather than an expression of larger time segments of the past, present, and future as is true for *Sehnsucht* (what we call the *tritime focus of Sehnsucht*; see below). Moreover, we suggest that goals operate primarily on the level of behavioral expression, that is, people strive at attaining their goals by formulating specific implementation intentions and by engaging in goal-relevant behaviors (e.g., Gollwitzer, 1999). LLs, in contrast, are unattainable in principle and their primary level of expression is in imagination and fantasy (see also Boesch, 1998; Vosskamp, 2004). Although we argue that LLs and goals differ in their experiential quality, they are possibly functionally related. Some LLs are likely to emerge out of a positive goal that is not attainable or no longer attainable but that persons are unable to relinquish completely. In this sense, *Sehnsucht* is relevant for psychological models of goal transformation and disengagement (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandstädter, 2006; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, & Schulz, 2003). In turn, feelings of *Sehnsucht* may generate and stimulate the pursuit of goals that are seen as instrumental in approaching an optimal life.

Regret (e.g., Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002) is another concept related to *Sehnsucht*. In contrast to the ambivalent character of *Sehnsucht*, however, regret is a clearly negative experience. Most often, regret is experienced when persons feel that they have omitted to do something that might have made them happy or that they have made bad choices in the past. Regret usually involves a sense of controllability and responsibility for one's past (in)actions; not so for *Sehnsucht*. The focus of regret is on negative outcomes of one's life, whereas *Sehnsucht* is directed at positive, optimal states. In addition, regret may be associated with feelings of personal failure and shame and there-

fore does not have the positive, energetic striving inherent in *Sehnsucht*.

The distinction between *Sehnsucht*, on the one hand, and goals and regret, on the other hand, will become more explicit when presenting our conception of *Sehnsucht* in more detail below. Although *Sehnsucht* might share single characteristics with other constructs such as life goals and regrets, the overlap does not extend to all characteristics that we postulate as essential to the thoughts, feelings, and desires that characterize *Sehnsucht*. In the long run, of course, this assertion will need to be examined by empirical work. At present, we argue on the theoretical level that LLs have unique characteristics that in their full experiential gestalt are not adequately captured by existing psychological concepts.

The Basic Developmental Agenda of *Sehnsucht* (LLs)

What is the developmental significance of *Sehnsucht* or LLs? We suggest two main points: On the one hand, *Sehnsucht* is intrinsically tied to the search for optimization or perfection (Tetens, 1777). To this end, *Sehnsucht* can be seen as giving a general direction to the most desired outcomes and pathways of living a good and meaningful life and striving for the best. On the other hand, as individuals move through life and attempt to develop as agents (Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981), they increasingly realize that, for reasons of limited time and resources or incompatibility of aspirations, many positive and exciting experiences or states cannot be reproduced and that many goals either cannot be pursued at all or can be reached only partly (Freund & Baltes, 2000). To this end, experiences of *Sehnsucht* may operate as imagined realizations of psychological utopias, especially if under psychological control. In this sense, *Sehnsucht* could be considered as a form of compensation for lost options (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990) or as a special instantiation of secondary control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995) or accommodative coping (Brandt-städter, 2006).

This topic gains in importance as people live longer. As people age, lack of resources or accumulating physical vulnerabilities and illnesses make the pursuit of goals of improvement and optimization more and more difficult and, one could argue, more and more imperfect (e.g., Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006; Freund & Ebner, 2005; Labouvie-Vief, 1981; Lerner, 2006). We posit that LLs may be one way of capturing this fundamental incompleteness and imperfection of one's life and that having a controllable sense of *Sehnsucht* may be one way to make the better (utopian) life part of one's self and life story. With the emergence of *Sehnsucht*, the behavioral search of expression is transformed into fantasy- and imagination-based phenomena (Boesch, 1991, 1998).

The Psychological Phenomenology of Sehnsucht or LLs: Six Core Characteristics as Basic Framework

Combining humanist perspectives with psychological life span theory (P. B. Baltes, 1997; P. B. Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 2006), we argue that *Sehnsucht* develops or crystallizes people's thoughts and desires about their better if not utopian alternative states and realizations of life and at the same time offers (primarily imaginary) mechanisms to deal with the gains and losses of life.

The conceptualization presented below has general, differential, and developmental aspects, many of which require future theoretical and empirical elaboration. The general perspective on *Sehnsucht* characterizes the basic structural cognitive, motivational, and emotional experiential core of *Sehnsucht*. The differential aspect involves differences in level and expression of LLs including variations in content, sense of control, and functionality. As to development, there are two major issues. One is the question of the developmental course of *Sehnsucht*: How does it emerge, what is its relationship to related constructs such as goals, and finally if and how does it function as a directional guidepost and/or compensatory mechanism in development? The other developmental issue is the question of age-related differences in the experiential manifestation of *Sehnsucht*. For instance, as elaborated below, we expect adult age differences in the expression of LLs (such as frequency, intensity, and content) and the functional significance of LLs (such as its role in life planning, evaluation, and management).

As the basic conceptual framework of *Sehnsucht*, we propose six partially overlapping characteristics (Figure 1 summarizes our conceptualization; Table 1 illustrates it with an idealized example). We derived this family of six characteristics from an analysis of two bodies of literature. The first is the existing psychological and humanist literature on *Sehnsucht* and longing, most notably humanist works articulated in Vosskamp (2004) as well as first treatments by psychologists, such as Boesch (1998); Holm (1999); Palaian (1993); Ravicz (1998); Vogt (1993), and Belk, Ger, and

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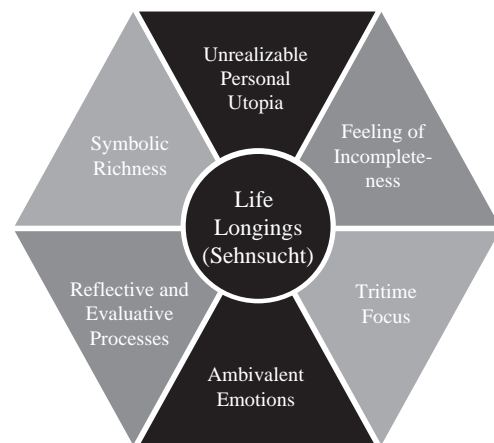
Additional characteristics:
Intensity/Frequency/Salience, Content, Controllability

Figure 1. A developmental and structural conceptualization of *Sehnsucht* (life longings; LLs): A theory-driven family of six characteristics defines the phenomenological, structural gestalt. Additional characteristics of the experience of *Sehnsucht* can be captured by indicators such as frequency–intensity–salience, content, and perceived controllability.

Table 1
Theory-Based Prototype Example of a Life Longing (LL)

Example: A house by the sea	Structural characteristics of LLs
I always wanted to have a house and live by the sea. It is the missing piece in my life.	Personal utopia, incompleteness
I enjoy imagining myself walking along the seashore and hearing the sounds of the waves and seagulls. Yet, I know that real life will never be that perfect, and this makes me sad.	Nonrealizability of personal utopia, ambivalent emotions
The sea is part of my childhood, and it symbolizes something missing in my life today.	Ontogenetic tritime focus
It has to do with freedom, endless time, and being close to nature.	Symbolic richness
I wonder: How do I want to live?	Reflection
In a way, I would hope that when I am old, I would be able to buy a house by the sea to fulfill my LL.	Continuing presence of personal utopia, ontogenetic tritime focus

Note. The example has been constructed to illustrate the six structural characteristics that our theoretical analysis assigns to the mental representations of LLs (*Sehnsucht*). Because reports about LLs are joint reflections of the six aspects, some of the sentences carry multiple aspects. LLs also vary by frequency, intensity, salience, and content, as well as perceived controllability.

Askegaard (2003). The second source is life span theory and its views on the nature of life span development (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997; P. B. Baltes et al., 2006). Reviewing this literature, we extracted the core characteristics that were consistently and repeatedly mentioned in the different writings. For example, all texts on *Sehnsucht* and longing mentioned ambivalent, bittersweet emotions as an essential aspect. In a second step, we linked these extracted core characteristics to life span theory. In the case of ambivalence, we submit that this aspect also is consistent with the life span view that development inevitably includes both gains and losses. We therefore selected ambivalent emotions as one core characteristic of *Sehnsucht*. We proceeded in a similar way for the identification of the other five characteristics.

Of the six characteristics, two constitute the dynamic core of *Sehnsucht*: (a) thoughts, desires, and emotions associated with personal utopias or the search for an optimal life and (b) the accompanying sense of incompleteness and imperfection. These two core characteristics go hand in hand and reflect the notion that development is a process that strives toward optimality that in human reality, however, is never completed and perfect. Together, these two aspects generate the bittersweetness or sweet bitterness of *Sehnsucht*, the joining of desire and disappointment, and the search for ways to manage this seeming contradiction.

First, we posit that LLs involve personal utopias of ideals or desired alternative expressions of life, that is, the optimal or utopian life. Because of their utopian nature, these ideals can be approximated but they can never be fully attained, neither on the individual nor on the collective level (Boesch, 1998). In LLs, the imperfect present is mentally contrasted with imagined, perhaps once experienced, and often counterfactual alternatives of one's life that are idealized and unrestricted by the limits of reality. Thus, *Sehnsucht* can represent individuals' memories or expectations of highly positive developmental states and conceptions of their own ideal life course or self at a level of imagination.

Second, *Sehnsucht* is proposed to involve feelings of incompleteness and a sense of imperfection of one's life. The longed-for objects or states are more than mere wishes—they are deeply enclosed in the search for a meaningful and complete life (Boesch,

1998; Holm, 1999; Vosskamp, 2004). This is also the reason why LLs are rich in symbolic representations (see sixth aspect below).

The third characteristic of LLs is its ontogenetic tritime focus. LLs involve life as a whole and include simultaneously aspects of the past, present, and future. Retrospection, concurrent evaluation, and prospection operate together in creating the experience of LLs (Vogt, 1993). For example, in a given LL, memories of past peak experiences (e.g., falling in love for the first time) may fuse with the desire to reexperience them while knowing that this is impossible in the present as well as in the future. This does not imply that LLs necessarily encompass the whole life span from childhood to old age, but they are assumed to always extend beyond the present into the past and future. This tritime focus of LLs differentiates them from the notion of goals, which have primarily an orientation toward the future.

The fourth experiential characteristic of LLs is their emotional ambivalence. This is an attribute at the core of life span theoretical assumptions of development as multifunctional, involving gains and losses. There is no gain without loss, and no loss without gain (e.g., P. B. Baltes, 1987; Brandtstädter, 1984; Labouvie-Vief, 1981). Therefore, the emotional quality of LLs is postulated to be inherently ambivalent or bittersweet, combining a positive component (related to the positively valued aspects of the longed-for object or state) and a negative component (related to the absence and unattainability of the longed-for object or state). Consistent with this assumption, both in the humanist (Vosskamp, 2004) as well as the scarce psychological (Belk et al., 2003; Boesch, 1998; Palaian, 1993) literature, *Sehnsucht* is often described as "enjoyable discomfort" or "fervent desire" that may include pleasure, excitement, hope, and energetic feelings, but also the pain of loss, frustration, and regret.

The fifth proposed characteristic of LLs is a reflective and evaluative component. We view LLs as being intimately linked with evaluating one's actual developmental state, not only relative to one's lifetime, but also relative to more general personal or social standards of life quality. Self-critical reflections on the past, present, and (expected) future as well as an exploratory search for optimal ways of living are therefore part of the experience of LLs.

Note that we posit that self-critical reflections in themselves are not purely negative. On the contrary, critical reflexivity is also a sign of advanced developmental standing.

Finally, we assume with Boesch (1998) that LLs are rich in symbolic meaning. Symbolic richness implies that LLs are more than a specific, concrete behavior or experience. Instead, specific objects or targets of LLs are linked to more encompassing mental and emotional representations for which they stand. According to this feature of *Sehnsucht*, a specific longing (e.g., for an embrace by a loved one) is not necessarily an instantiation of *Sehnsucht*. Such a wish is regarded as an instantiation of *Sehnsucht* only if the mental and emotional representations associated with this desired state are linked with a broader configuration of thoughts and feelings about the course of one's life (e.g., an embrace as wish for intimacy in general).

Although we define LLs as the experience of all of the six characteristics together as a gestalt, we also expect them to vary quantitatively: Although most individuals experience *Sehnsucht* as the kind of holistic phenomenon described, the degree to which each of the six characteristics is experienced likely differs. For example, some persons will have stronger feelings of ambivalence, whereas others might have a stronger sense of incompleteness. In addition, the experience of LLs can vary by frequency–intensity–salience, content, and perceived controllability.

First Perspectives on the Role of Sehnsucht (LLs) in Individual Development

At present, the developmental–psychological origin, course, and consequences of *Sehnsucht* are largely unknown. Therefore, the following observations are but a first effort to outline a general frame of reference for the possible role of LLs in development. We will focus on three aspects: (a) the when, why, and how of the ontogenetic emergence of LLs; (b) the changing nature of LL contents across adulthood; and (c) the functional role of LLs for developmental regulation.

Ontogenetic Emergence of LLs

According to our conceptualization, *Sehnsucht* is a complex phenomenon with cognitive, affective, motivational, and lifetime-comparative and lifetime-evaluative components. Similar to other complex phenomena such as wisdom or life narratives (e.g., P. B. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Bluck & Habermas, 2001; McAdams, 1990), such a phenomenon is likely to involve abilities and experiences related to emotional competence and the self-concept that only become fully accessible and more available in middle to late adolescence (e.g., Thompson, 2006). Thus, for the majority of individuals, the basic structure of LLs can be expected to be established by the time adulthood is reached and remain available throughout adulthood. Subsequent changes of LLs during adulthood are expected for the more quantitative expression of LLs such as frequency, intensity, salience, and content. For instance, some of the contents and themes of LLs are likely to change as individuals move through the tasks and settings of life. This assumption follows from the general causal frame of life span development (P. B. Baltes, 1987), namely that individual development is constituted by a triangulated age-graded, history-graded, and idiosyncratic (nonnormative) pattern of internal and external influences. Development toward higher and novel forms of functioning is closely associated with the degree to which individuals have acquired resilience and the multiple abilities to master this matrix of developmental goals and influences (see also Staudinger, 1999, on the "art of life").

Contents of LLs

What are adults of various ages longing for? To begin with, there are probably the general great meta-themes of the human condition and individual lives: love, power, achievement, identity, and social connectedness (Shweder, 1996). From a life span developmental perspective, there are the age-specific themes described by Erikson (1980) or the developmental tasks outlined by Havighurst (1972; see also Freund & Baltes, 2005). These theories suggest that social connectedness, self-confidence, identity, and occupational development likely are in the foreground in younger adulthood. LLs of middle-aged adults can be expected to focus more often on work, family, and partnership (Lachman & Bertrand, 2001). LLs of older adults are likely to add to these themes related to generativity, wisdom, health, generational dynamics, and death and dying (Johnson, 2005).

For each of these tasks, our assumption is that *Sehnsucht* becomes relevant as individuals wrestle with developmental attainment issues and experience incompleteness and imperfection in achieving these aims, and as they review, manage, and plan their lives as a whole. Accordingly, LLs are expected to deal with current and past developmental themes. Here lies another difference to goals, which are likely directed primarily at developmental concerns in the present. In the partnership domain, for example, finding a partner is an important developmental task in young adulthood. This task can be expressed as a concrete, controllable, and action-relevant goal that stimulates active goal striving on the behavioral level. At the same time, young adults may have a utopian and symbolically rich image of an ideal partner that is less concrete, not fully attainable, and possibly accompanied by ambivalent emotions and reflective processes. Here LLs enter the developmental dynamic. Thus, goals and LLs can exist simultaneously in the same life domain. In addition, LLs may be directed at past developmental tasks that have not been (fully) achieved. In the partnership example, being single in middle or late adulthood may lead to strong feelings of failure and incompleteness and, given the lower probability of establishing a satisfactory partnership in later phases of adulthood, may give rise to a partnership-related LL.

Functional Role of LLs

We assume that *Sehnsucht* has multifunctional significance for self-regulatory processes such as life planning, evaluation, and mastery. For example, we expect, and here *Sehnsucht* shares the greatest overlap with the concept of life goals, that *Sehnsucht* as desire for an optimal life may (especially in early phases of life) give a general sense of desirable directionality to development by outlining ideal life trajectories and producing powerful incentives to act toward the realization of these ideals. The further development proceeds, the more topics of nonrealizability and imperfection become important. Here, LLs may evolve and help to regulate (irreversible) losses and unrealizable life paths. Probably, LLs

often deal with former goals that are unattainable but continue to exist on the level of fantasy (Boesch, 1998). In this way, *Sehnsucht*, especially through its operation on the imaginary rather than the behavioral level, may serve as a mechanism of managing conditions of loss, failure, and unattainability.

These developmental functions of LLs, giving directionality and regulating nonrealizability and imperfection, are likely to change with age. For instance, using LLs to derive a general sense of direction for development may be more important in late adolescence and in early adulthood. At this time in life, the future seems infinite and the primary challenge is to select the most suitable developmental tracks, in which environmental demands and support systems converge with individual motivations, skills, and biological capacity (e.g., Lerner, Freund, De Stefanis, & Habermas, 2001; Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Rosser, & Davis-Kean, 2006).

Already during adolescence and young adulthood, however, experiences of LLs may occur and be elaborated together with the emerging insight that not all desirable goals of life can be realized. Some personal goals that are perceived as being unlikely to be achieved may be transformed into LLs. They have less reality status but may continue to operate on the imaginary level as occasional dreamlike motivators. Later stages of life bring more serious threats to the realization of personal goals. Given that peak performances are difficult to achieve (Brim, 1992) and that aging is associated with accumulating and more broadly based losses (P. B. Baltes, 1997), as well as a shortening in the perceived lifetime left to live (Lang & Carstensen, 2002), it seems plausible to argue that using LLs as a strategy to manage loss and unattainability becomes increasingly important with advancing age. In this sense, *Sehnsucht* may be one way for what cultural anthropologists claim to be the essence of successful human aging: finding ways for the mind to outwit biology and the shortcomings of society (P. B. Baltes, 1991; Plessner, 1965).

Given these proposed functions of *Sehnsucht* (giving directionality and regulating nonrealizability), LLs, if effectively managed and under a functional level of control, could be related to positive developmental outcomes such as subjective well-being. This is the basic assumption of the humanist tradition (Vosskamp, 2004). However, because of the close association of *Sehnsucht* with melancholy, we expected the relationship to be curvilinear, with most positive outcomes at medium levels of scope and intensity of LLs. A moderate amount of LLs is assumed to be a part of a life well lived, especially if the activation of LLs is perceived to be under control and in the service of utopian experiences at the level of imagination and activation of latent potential. High levels of LLs that are uncontrolled and predominantly negative in tone, however, were expected to be an indicator of chronic incompleteness, failure, and pathological melancholy.

The Present Study

Within the outlined framework, the major goal of the present study was to develop a psychometrically sound measurement of the subjective experience of LLs. In addition, the study aimed at exploring some of the predictions derived from our characterization of LLs. Specifically, we asked a sample spanning young, middle, and old adulthood to report their three most important LLs and rate these in terms of the six LL characteristics (unrealizable

personal utopia, feeling of incompleteness, tritime focus, ambivalent emotions, life reflection and evaluation, symbolic richness) and other features of LLs (content, controllability, functional significance). We expected that the six characteristics would be positively interrelated and, in terms of psychometric structure, form a meaningful structure that is rather similar across adulthood. To examine this question, we performed comparative and confirmatory factor analyses.

In addition, we inquired into the role of LLs in conducting and experiencing one's life and development. We focused on two possible functional outcomes: LLs as (a) giving a general positive direction to development and as (b) helping to manage losses and nonrealizability of desirable developmental outcomes and trajectories. In line with the notion of accumulating losses and a shortening of lifetime with advancing age, we hypothesized that older adults would report using LLs as a strategy to manage loss and unattainability more so than younger adults. Young adults, in contrast, were expected to assign a stronger goal-related role to LLs in deriving a general direction for their future development.

Furthermore, to obtain a first estimate of the functional significance of LLs for development, we examined correlational associations with various indicators of psychological well-being, testing two hypotheses. On the one hand, given the assumption of a positive function of LLs regarding directionality and managing nonrealizability, LLs were expected to be positively related to indicators of successful development. On the other hand, however, frequent, intense, and uncontrollable LLs may be an indicator of chronic feelings of incompleteness and a lack of perceived developmental progress and success. To explore these alternative possibilities, we considered positive and negative indicators of well-being and psychological functioning. We also tested on a correlational level the moderating role of a sense of control over LLs on associations between LLs and well-being. In general, we assumed that if LLs were perceived to be under control, their functional role would be more positive.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited via a random dialing procedure in the city of Berlin, Germany. Upon recruitment, participants were informed that the present study investigated the nature of personal longings and what persons think and feel when they experience longing. The original sample comprised 316 participants aged 19–81 years. Of these, 7 participants were excluded because they did not report any longings, 3 participants were excluded because they failed to provide data on more than half of the questionnaires, and 7 participants were randomly excluded from overrecruited cells to ensure approximately equal cell compositions. The resulting sample of 299 adults had a mean age of 49.9 ± 17.0 (*SD*) years and was stratified by age (about equal numbers of persons in each of the 6 decades), gender (51% men, 49% women), and education (44% with primary or lower secondary education, 56% with high school or higher education). For several analyses, the sample was divided into three age groups: young adults (19–39 years; *n* = 98), middle-aged adults (40–59 years, *n* = 102), and old adults (60–81 years, *n* = 99).

Participants attended three group testing sessions that included an assessment of personal LLs (Session 1); subjective well-being,

negative affectivity, and other measures not relevant for this report (Session 2); and a reassessment of LLs to test their short-term stability (Session 3; approximately 5 weeks after Session 1). Participants were reimbursed €50 ($65.05).

Although the sample was stratified for education, participants with a college or university degree were somewhat overrepresented (39% of the total sample), particularly among older adults (50% in the group aged 60 or older). More than half of the sample (57%) reported living in a partnership, and 66% of the sample reported having children. Among young adults (19–39 years), 41% were employed, 18% were unemployed, 35% were students or in training, and 5% were homemakers. Among middle-aged adults (40–59 years), 51% were employed, 25% were unemployed, 12% were retired, and 6% were homemakers. Among old adults (60–81 years), 8% were still employed, 90% were retired, and 2% were homemakers. Age differences in marital and work status are largely comparable with the general German population (Federal Statistical Office Germany, 2002).

As can be expected, older adults reported somewhat poorer physical health than did younger adults on a single item "How would you rate your physical health at present?" ($M = 3.43 \pm 1.12$ [SD], $r_{age} = -.17$, $p < .01$), with responses ranging from 0 (*very poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). No age association emerged for self-rated mental health ("How would you rate your mental health at present?"; $M = 3.62 \pm 1.13$ [SD], $r_{age} = .10$, $p > .05$) and fitness ("How would you rate your mental fitness at present?"; $M = 3.81 \pm 0.88$ [SD], $r_{age} = -.04$, $p > .05$). Older adults performed more poorly in a mental speed test (Digit-Symbol-Coding; Wechsler, 1955; $M = 48.79 \pm 11.33$ [SD], $r_{age} = -.58$, $p < .01$) and better in verbal knowledge (Spot-A-Word, adapted from Lehrl, 1977; $M = 26.36 \pm 4.27$ [SD], $r_{age} = .42$, $p < .01$). Overall, the sample, although certainly not representative of the relevant age population, was reasonably heterogeneous to achieve a moderate range of generalizability and first insights into sample differences, for example by gender and by education.

Measures

Personal LLs. Participants generated a list of personal LLs defined as "strong wishes for persons, things, events, or experiences from your personal past, present, or future that are intense, enduring, and not easily attainable at present." This task was supported by a "guided mental journey through life," in which participants visualized five different life phases (childhood, youth, young adulthood, middle adulthood, old age) by means of images of significant persons, places, or experiences. Depending on the age of participants, some of these life phases were past, whereas others were future phases. In the latter case, participants were asked to imagine their future. After visualizing each life phase, participants were asked to report LLs related to this phase if they had any that were still relevant today (the exact wording of instructions are provided in Appendix A). Subsequently, they selected their three most important LLs.

For example, as her three most important LLs, a 26-year-old woman reported first to have a child of her own (for which she is being treated in an infertility center); second, to have a secure job; and third, to stay healthy (as she already suffers from knee problems). The three most important LLs of a 63-year-old man were

first to finish writing an outstanding book; second, to have strong, dependable friendships; and third, to find "the ideal partner."

Next, participants rated each of their three LLs on a newly developed Life Longing Questionnaire (items are listed in Appendix B; for further information on the questionnaire, see Scheibe, 2005). In addition to scales covering the six theoretically identified characteristics of LLs (personal utopia, sense of incompleteness, tritime focus, ambivalent emotions, life reflection and evaluation, symbolic richness), this questionnaire contains scales aimed at measuring the perceived functions of LLs (directionality, managing nonrealizability) and a sense of control over the experience of LLs. Sample items and psychometric characteristics are listed in Table 2.

The questionnaire was developed in a theory-guided, top-down approach. First, we formulated 6–8 items for each of the aspects of *Sehnsucht* identified as central in our conceptualization. A panel of experts then discussed the items' appropriateness and wording. In two small pilot studies (Ns = 4 and 8, respectively), young and older adults completed the questionnaire face to face with Susanne Scheibe, providing comments on the items. This procedure aimed at double checking whether participants did in fact understand the items in the intended way. Items were reformulated and refined on the basis of these interviews. The resulting item pool was used in a third pilot study with 34 young and older adults. Items with unfavorable characteristics (skewness or kurtosis values divided by its standard error greater than 2; substantial restrictions in the range of response options used) were reformulated or substituted prior to this study.

To assess the contents of LLs, participants also rated how much their LLs were related to each of 13 life domains that are often considered relevant in age-comparative studies (e.g., partnership, health; see Table 3) and to what degree they felt eight positive (e.g., cheerful; Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$) and eight negative (e.g., sad; $\alpha = .90$) emotions during their experience of each LL. Responses were given on a scale ranging from 0 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*applies very much*).

Moderate to high associations among corresponding scales relating to each of the three LLs indicated that there were no major differences among the three LLs in the overall pattern for each person.[2] Therefore, with the exception of life domain ratings, scores were averaged across the three instances. Life domain ratings were not combined, as there were substantial differences among the contents of the three LLs reported by each person. As shown in Table 2, all scales showed acceptable internal consistencies (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .72$) with substantial 5-week retest stabilities between the first and second measurement occasion ($r \geq .59$). Life domain and emotion ratings evinced retest stabilities of .43–.77.

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[2] First, confirmatory factor models were derived on data for the first LL and then were applied to data for the second and third LLs of each person according to the methods described below. CFI indices ranged from .87 to 1.00 in these models, and RMSEA indices ranged from .00 to .08, which is largely acceptable. Next, parameter invariance was tested across the three LLs by successively constraining sets of parameters (factor loadings, intercepts, factor variances, factor covariances) to be equal across the three LLs. There was no substantial drop in fit, providing evidence of measurement invariance. Latent correlations among corresponding factors (i.e., scales) correlated moderately to highly (.41–.75), indicating substantial consistency among the three LLs of each person. Thus, it appeared adequate to aggregate items across the three instances.

Table 2
Sample Items and Psychometric Characteristics (Cronbach's α, 5-Week Stability) of the Life Longing (LL) Questionnaire

Scale (no. of items)[a]	Sample item[b]	M	SD	α	r[c]
Structural Elaboration					
Personal Utopia (3 × 3)	I am longing for something that is too perfect to be true.	2.44	1.05	.72	.67
Incompleteness (3 × 3)	My longing means that something essential is missing in my life.	2.83	1.17	.81	.79
Tritime Focus (2 × 3)	My longing is related to people, things, experiences, or events . . . in my past–present–future.[d]	3.17	0.81	.75	.59
Ambivalent Emotions (4 × 3)	My longing is a bittersweet feeling.	2.01	1.06	.83	.71
Reflection (4 × 3)	My longing makes me think a lot about the meaning and sense of my life.	3.14	1.07	.88	.80
Symbolic Richness (3 × 3)	What I am longing for is heavily filled with meaning.	3.20	1.04	.74	.66
Subjective Developmental Function					
Directionality (3 × 3)	My longing gives direction to my life.	2.67	1.20	.88	.83
Managing Nonrealizability (3 × 3)	Experiencing my longing to some degree compensates for something I cannot have in reality.	2.04	1.26	.81	.79
Control Over LL Experience (3 × 3)	I can always control my feelings of longing very well.	2.84	1.06	.84	.71

[a] This index indicates the number of differently worded items multiplied by the three LLs, as each item was rated for each of the three LLs of a person. [b] Responses ranged from 0 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*applies very much*). [c] Correlation between first and second measurement occasion. [d] The indicator was derived by calculating the mean of the three items.

Additional analyses reported in Scheibe (2005) support the generality of the questionnaire's reliability and factor structure in different subsamples (young, middle-aged, and old adults), separately for the three LLs of a person, and for baseline and retest assessments.

The questionnaire shows meaningful convergent and divergent associations with self-regulation strategies, intelligence measures, and social desirability. Specifically, the six structural characteristics were unrelated to goal selection and pursuit (measured by the strategies of selection, optimization, and compensation; SOC questionnaire; P. B. Baltes, Baltes, Freund, & Lang, 1999), general self-efficacy (General Self-Efficacy Scale; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), mental speed, verbal knowledge, and socially desirable responding (Social Desirability Scale-17; Stöber, 2001; all *p*s > .01). They were positively related to a measure of private self-consciousness (Self-Consciousness Scale; Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1986): Correlations ranged from .21 for personal utopia to .50 for life reflection and evaluation (*p*s < .01).

Table 3
Rank Order of Content Domains of the Most Important Life Longing (LL) by Age Group

Content domain	Young adults (19–39 years; n = 98)	Middle-aged adults (40–59 years; n = 102)	Old adults (60–81 years; n = 99)
Physical well-being	1	1	1
Family	3	2	2
Partnership	4	3	5
Personal characteristics	2	4	6
Health	7	5	3
Friendships	5	6	4
Leisure	10	8	8
Societal values	9	9	7
Living	6	10	9
Work–education	8	7	12
Finances	11	11	11
Politics–world situation	12	12	10
Religiosity	13	13	13

Note. Similar age differences were found for the second and third reported LLs. On an anonymous follow-up checklist, 35% (*n* = 99) of participants reported to have additional, "more private" LLs. Most important categories were, in descending order, sexual experiences (*n* = 56), own death (*n* = 22), infidelity (*n* = 18), revenge (*n* = 15), death of others (*n* = 13), among others (multiple endorsements were possible).

Subjective well-being. Long-term affect was measured with the Multidimensional Affect Rating Scale (Steyer, Schwenkmezger, Notz, & Eid, 1997) containing 12 adjectives each for positive (α = .94) and negative (α = .93) affect. Participants indicated how frequently they had experienced each emotion during the past year. They also completed the 5-item Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) to assess general life satisfaction (α = .85) and the Ryff Inventory (Ryff, 1989) to measure positive psychological functioning in adulthood (covering self-acceptance, positive social relations, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth; 54 items in total). On an adjusted version of the Pressure-to-Change Scale (Filipp & Ferring, 1991), which served as a negative indicator of subjective well-being, participants rated the extent to which they desired a change in 13 life domains (e.g., partnership, health; M = 2.38 ± 0.86 [SD]; α = .79; r_{age} = −.42; p < .01). All well-being measures were rated on 6-point scales: For positive and negative affect, responses ranged from 0 (*very infrequently*) to 5 (*very frequently*). For the Satisfaction With Life Scale and the Ryff scale, responses ranged from 0 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*applies very much*). For the Pressure-to-Change Scale, responses ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Scale scores were created by averaging across individual items.

For reasons of parsimony and highly positive intercorrelations, several subjective well-being scales were aggregated for analyses by computing the mean across scale scores. In line with the literature on subjective well-being (e.g., McGregor & Little, 1998), positive affect, absence of negative affect, and general life satisfaction were aggregated into an index of happiness (M = 2.96 ± 0.83 [SD]; α = .84; r_{age} = .32; p < .01). The six subscales of the Ryff Inventory were aggregated into an index of positive psychological functioning (M = 3.45 ± 0.59 [SD]; α = .83; r_{age} = .12; p < .05).

Negative affectivity (Neuroticism). The 12-item Neuroticism subscale of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) assessed negative affectivity, with responses ranging from 0 (*does not apply at all*) to 5 (*applies very much*; M = 2.08 ± 0.96 [SD]; α = .81; r_{age} = −.15; p < .01).

Results

Contents of LLs

To ensure that the LLs assessed in this study are enduring mental–emotional representations rather than spontaneous, short-term desires, we first assessed the retest stability of reported LLs. Participants were asked to generate their three most important LLs again in the third testing session (approximately 5 weeks after the initial reporting of LLs). Participants then received a copy of their three original LLs and indicated whether they matched their newly generated LLs. The percentages of LLs regenerated 5 weeks later were 85% for LL1, 75% for LL2, and 72% for LL3. Thus, contents of LLs were highly stable across 5 weeks.

Throughout adulthood, individuals confront changing developmental tasks and themes. Are these reflected in the contents of LLs that adults report? To address this question, we considered linear and quadratic age trends in the ratings of the 13 life domains. Positive linear age trends were found for health (rs = .21, .29, and .15 for LL1, LL2, and LL3, respectively), family (rs = .14, .11,

and *n*s for LL1, LL2, and LL3, respectively), and politics–world situation (rs = .27, .16, and .25 for LL1, LL2, and LL3, respectively); a negative linear age trend was found for work–education (rs = −.14, −.23, and –.19 for LL1, LL2, and LL3, respectively; all ps < .03). Thus, LLs of older adults were directed less at achievement themes and more at health and generativity themes (family, politics) than were LLs of younger adults. For the first LL, quadratic age trends were found for partnership (b_1 = −.02, p > .05; b_2 = −.51, p = .001) and finances (b_1 = −.11, p > .05; b_2 = −.30, p = .02), indicating that LLs were most strongly related to these domains in middle-aged adults and less so in young and old adults. A quadratic age trend was also obtained for work–education (b_1 = −.32, b_2 = −.41, both ps < .01), indicating that this domain was rated higher in young and middle-aged adults and lower in old adults. The quadratic age trend for work–education was replicated in LL2 and LL3, and the quadratic age trends for finances and partnership were replicated in LL3.

To illustrate the changing nature of LL contents across age groups, Table 3 shows rank orders of life domain ratings for the first LL for groups of young, middle-aged, and old adults. All three age groups shared the domain of physical well-being as the most important content domain of LLs. Personal characteristics, family, and partnership were the next three domains for young adults. In older adults, family, health, and friendships attained Ranks 2–4. The rank correlations among age groups were .91 (young vs. middle-aged adults), .80 (young vs. old adults), and .86 (middle-aged vs. old adults).

Factor Structure of the Six Structural LL Characteristics

Predictions regarding the factor structure of the six LL characteristics were tested with confirmatory factor-analytic techniques. To accommodate incomplete data, we performed analyses with the full information maximum likelihood algorithm in AMOS 5 (Arbuckle, 2003) on the basis of covariance matrices and mean vectors.[3] Model fit was assessed by the following fit statistics (with corresponding cutoff values): chi-square value (p > .05), comparative fit index (CFI > .90), and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA < .08).[4]

A first confirmatory factor analysis tested the factor structure of the six LL characteristics at the first-order factor level. Consistent with the theoretical conceptualization, a model was specified, with six latent factors and the 19 items from the LLs questionnaire as indicators. Tritime Focus had two indicators; Incompleteness, Personal Utopia, and Symbolic Richness each had three indicators; and Ambivalent Emotions and Reflection each had four indicators. Latent factors were specified as intercorrelated; factor variances were fixed at 1.0 for purposes of model identification. No cross-loadings were allowed.

The fit of this six-factor model was acceptable, χ^2(137, N = 299) = 329.42, p = .001, CFI = .91, RMSEA (90% confidence interval) = .07 (.06, .08). Factor loadings ranged from .44 to .90

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[3] Covariance matrices and mean vectors can be obtained from Susanne Scheibe.

[4] Less conservative fit indices were chosen to account for the decrease in fit that must be expected in mean-and-covariance-structure models (e.g., Pomplun & Omar, 2003).

($M = .69$; two loadings were marginally below the usual acceptance criterion of .50), with associated standard errors between .04 and .10. As predicted, the six factors exhibited a positive manifold with intercorrelations ranging from .16 (Tritime Focus–Personal Utopia) to .74 (Reflection–Symbolic Richness), with a mean of .40 (see Figure 2).

Next, we examined a higher order factor structure. We began by testing a single-factor second-order model as the most parsimonious model. Because this model did not provide a satisfactory fit, we then explored whether there would be further differentiation on the second-order level. We tested a two-factor second-order model with two interrelated second-order factors. The number of factors and their loading patterns were informed by exploratory factor analysis. We specified that one second-order factor comprised the first-order factors of Incompleteness, Tritime Focus, Reflection, and Symbolic Richness; the other represented the first-order factors of Personal Utopia and Ambivalent Emotions. To establish a metric, at the first-order level, we set one loading for each factor equal to 1.0; for the second-order level, this was done with the variance. Residual factors were specified for each of the first-order factors.

As already noted, overall fit indices for the single-factor second-order model were marginally below acceptance level, $\chi^2(146, N = 229) = 377.54$, $p = .001$, CFI = .89, RMSEA (90% confidence interval) = .07 (.06, .08). They were somewhat better for the two-factor second-order model, $\chi^2(145, N = 229) = 346.21$, CFI = .90, RMSEA (90% confidence interval) = .07 (.06, .08). A comparison of these two models revealed that the single-factor second-order model was a significantly poorer representation of

the data than the two-factor second-order model, $\Delta\chi^2(1, N = 229) = 31.33$, $p = .001$.

These findings generally both support and specify our theoretical expectations. First, the baseline six-factor model supports the notion that *Sehnsucht* is a construct with positively interrelated factors reflecting the six theoretical characteristics. Second, the close-to-acceptable fit of the single-factor second-order model is consistent with the notion of substantial common variance among the six baseline factors. Third, the acceptable and significantly better fit of the two-factor second-order model (compared with the single-factor second-order model) yielded a picture of LLs as internally further differentiable, that is, as involving two interrelated factors.

The two-factor second-order model of LLs is depicted in Figure 2. Second-order factor loadings were all significantly different from zero, ranging from .46 to .91 ($M = .72$). The two factors were correlated ($r = .58$, $p = .001$) and accounted for 35% and 20%, respectively, of the variance in the six first-order factors. This two-factor second-order model is easily interpretable in our theoretical framework. The first factor can be labeled *Intensity–Scope* (IS), and the second can be labeled *Nonrealizability–Ambivalence* (NA). Together, they represent significant parts of all six characteristics of LLs formulated on a theoretical basis. Specifically, the IS factor comprised incompleteness, tritime focus, reflection, and symbolic richness. Persons high on this factor reported LLs that are characterized by intense feelings of a deficit and strong reflections about a large range of life domains, time periods, and symbolic meanings. The second factor, NA, comprised the remaining two characteristics, personal utopia and ambivalent emotions.
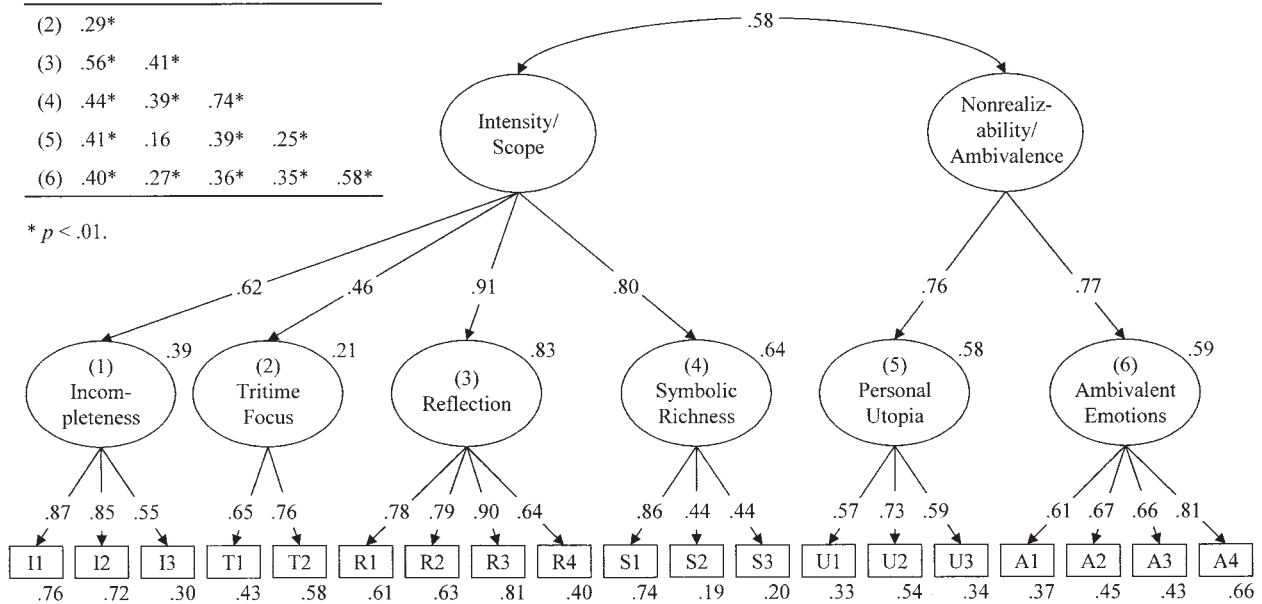

Figure 2. Factor structure of the six structural *Sehnsucht* characteristics. Presented are standardized factor loadings, communalities, and latent intercorrelations among first-order factors. Residual variances of first-order factors are omitted from the model. Standard errors range between .06 and .09. All parameter estimates are significantly different from zero at $p < .05$.

Persons high on this factor rated their LLs as utopian and unrealizable, and as accompanied by bittersweet, ambivalent emotions. These two higher order factors were used in further analyses.

There was little evidence for age differences on the level of factor expressions. The two structural facets, IS and NA, were both unrelated to age on a bivariate level, providing evidence for the general aspect of *Sehnsucht*. Follow-up analyses, with the lower order structural factors, indicated one age difference. Incompleteness was negatively correlated with age ($r = -.17$; $p > .01$); with increasing age, LLs were less strongly associated with a feeling of incompleteness of life. The remaining five characteristics evinced no age association.

We also considered more specific structural aspects of LLs. The current operationalization of LLs permitted the separate consideration of positive and negative emotions (as components of ambivalent emotions) and past, present, and future foci (as components of the tritime focus). We found that the LLs of older adults were marked by more positive emotionality (correlation with age: $r = .24$) and less negative emotionality ($r = -.29$), and were directed more at the past ($r = .23$) and less at the future ($r = -.15$; all $ps < .01$) than the LLs of younger adults.

Expression of Sehnsucht (LLs): Interindividual Differences in Profiles

Regarding differential aspects, we consider *Sehnsucht* as a developmental process and product that requires investment and refinement and reflects accumulated contextual differences in life biographies and individual life mastery skills (e.g., Dannefer, 2003). Therefore, the expression of *Sehnsucht* is likely to differ by individuals. A full and controllable repertoire of *Sehnsucht* would be considered to be a developmental advance.

Our data permitted a first look at this possibility. We used cluster analysis to identify subgroups of individuals who differ in level and shape of their LL profiles. Specifically, the six LL characteristics were subjected to a two-step clustering procedure (Ward's hierarchical procedure, followed by the nonhierarchical *K* means procedure). On the basis of Milligan and Cooper's (1985) criteria for determining the appropriate number of clusters, and further supported by a high replicability of cluster solutions across 10 random splits of the sample (median Cohen's κ = .78; see Breckenridge, 1989), we derived three clusters. The three subgroups were roughly equally distributed across the sample (Cluster 1: 23%; Cluster 2: 34%; Cluster 3: 43%).

Two of the clusters differed by level, and the third cluster differed by shape from the other two. Cluster 1 was characterized by low scores in all six characteristics (ranging from 1.34 for ambivalent emotions to 2.59 for tritime focus; the theoretical scale range was 0 to 5), suggesting that this subgroup perceived their LLs as low in intensity, scope, nonrealizability, and ambivalence. Cluster 2 was uniformly high on all six characteristics (ranging from 3.09 for ambivalent emotions to 3.75 for reflection); this subgroup thus perceived their LLs as highly elaborated, utopian, and associated with a strong feeling of incompleteness. Cluster 2 thus comes closest to our a priori definition of *Sehnsucht*. Cluster 3 had above-average scores on the four characteristics subsumed under IS (ranging from 3.11 for incompleteness to 3.35 for reflection) but below-average scores on the two characteristics representing NA (1.50 for ambivalent emotions; 2.10 for personal

utopia). In other words, this subgroup reported LLs that were temporally complex, highly symbolic, and associated with strong incompleteness and reflection. Yet, persons in Cluster 3 did not perceive their LLs to be utopian (unattainable) or bittersweet.

The reported cluster analysis gives support to the notion that LLs differ in level and shape of profiles. It suggests that some of the reported LLs do not carry the entire set of attributes that the theory assigns to *Sehnsucht*. One may conclude that these individuals, at least at the level of self-report, do not possess or report the kind of *Sehnsucht* that the theory postulates.

Associations of Sehnsucht With Regulatory Functions and Indicators of Psychological Well-Being

Is *Sehnsucht* perceived as functional (facilitative or debilitative) in development and what is its relation with indicators of psychological well-being? Furthermore, is the relationship with psychological well-being moderated by a sense of control over the experience of *Sehnsucht*? Table 4 contains bivariate correlations of LLs with the proposed regulatory functions and indicators of psychological well-being.

Using multiple regression analyses, we first examined the relation between the IS and NA of LLs (as predictor variables) and the directionality and managing nonrealizability functions of LLs (as criterion variables). As expected, associations were positive and accounted for large portions of variance in perceived directionality ($R^2 = .48$) and perceived assistance in managing nonrealizability ($R^2 = .34$, both $ps < .05$).

Specifically, there was a positive association of LLs with people's judgment of whether they perceived LLs as giving them directionality. The IS factor was most predictive ($b = .75$, $p < .05$). The higher the intensity and scope of their LLs, the more participants reported that their LLs gave them direction for their lives. Of note, NA was a negative predictor ($b = -.19$, $p < .05$), probably because of the utopian aspect (associated with unattainability). It is quite plausible that LLs that are perceived as more utopian and unrealizable are also perceived as less useful for the general planning and management of one's life.

Results also support the managing nonrealizability function of LLs. One key item read: "Experiencing my longing partially compensates for something I cannot have in reality." Participants

Table 4
Functional Significance of Life Longings (LLs): Bivariate Correlations With Reported Regulatory Functions and Indicators of Psychological Well-Being

Variable	Intensity–Scope of LLs	Nonrealizability–Ambivalence of LLs
Regulatory functions of LLs		
Giving directionality	.67*	.13*
Helping to manage nonrealizability	.28*	.58*
Psychological well-being		
Happiness	−.26*	−.18*
Desire for change	.29*	.14*
Negative affectivity	.33*	.33*
Positive psychological functioning	−.18*	−.26*

* $p < .05$.

who reported more that their LLs were bittersweet and utopian ($b = .54$, $p < .05$) also regarded their LLs more as an imaginary substitute for losses and unattainable wishes (IS was not a significant predictor).

The associations so far are consistent with the positive functional view on the role of LLs in giving direction and managing the losses of one's life. Another less positive side of associational linkage of LLs emerged for indicators of psychological functioning: LLs were negatively correlated with subjective well-being and were positively correlated with desire for change and negative affectivity. Individuals with higher expressions of LLs (higher scores on IS and NA) tended to be less satisfied with life and experience less positive affect (IS: $b = -.23$; NA: $b = -.08$) and reported more desire for change (IS: $b = .28$; NA: $b = .02$) and higher negative affectivity (IS: $b = .23$; NA: $b = .23$). There was also a negative association with the Ryff (1989) measure of successful development in adulthood (IS: $b = -.09$; NA: $b = -.22$; $p < .05$ for b values above $\pm .10$). Having highly intense and broadly ranging LLs, then, is associated with negative states of well-being and a desire for change.

We hypothesized that associations between LLs and outcomes signaling (dys)functionality would be moderated by the degree of a sense of control over LLs. We therefore repeated the above analyses with interaction effects of the predictor variables with Control Over LL Experience (C) added in a second step (a main effect of C was included in Step 1).[5] Supporting expectation, the magnitude of the negative association between the IS of LLs and subjective well-being was reduced when control beliefs were considered (for happiness, IS $\times$ C: $B = .17$, $p < .05$; $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $p < .05$; for positive psychological functioning, IS $\times$ C: $B = .13$, $p < .05$; $\Delta R^2 = .02$; $p < .10$). To illustrate this interaction, we divided the sample into three equal groups based on controllability. The negative correlation between IS of LLs and well-being indicators became smaller, approaching zero, as perceived LL control increased (for groups with low, intermediate, and high LL control, respectively: happiness, rs = $-.39$, $-.25$, and $-.13$; positive psychological functioning, rs = $-.35$, $-.08$, and $-.11$; $p < .05$ for rs above .15). In all, LL characteristics accounted for 12%–20% of variance in the four indicators of psychological well-being.

Age-Related Differences in Regulatory Functions, Controllability, and Associations With Indicators of Psychological Well-Being

Next, we explored whether the regulatory function of *Sehnsucht* differed across age groups. We first considered age trends in the regulatory functions and controllability of LLs. True to our proposition, older adults reported somewhat more than younger adults that their LLs helped them to regulate loss and nonrealizability ($r = .14$, $p > .01$). Our expectation that younger adults would report a higher directionality function of LLs was not confirmed, however. Furthermore, in agreement with previous findings of older adults' greater ability to regulate their emotions, older adults reported a stronger sense of control over LL than did younger adults ($r = .22$, $p < .01$). There were no quadratic age trends.

As a second possible indication of age-related differences in the regulatory function of *Sehnsucht*, we tested whether age moderated the previously found associations between LLs and indicators of psychological well-being. Multiple regression analyses were per-

formed with IS, NA, and control over LLs, as well as age entered at Step 1, and interaction effects of the three *Sehnsucht* variables and age entered at Step 2. The regulatory functions of LLs and the four indicators of well-being served as dependent variables. No significant age moderation effects were obtained (all ps > .05).

Thus, in this study, there was no major effect of age in the regulatory role of LLs, however, with two important theory-consistent exceptions. First, older adults reported more than younger adults that *Sehnsucht* helped them to manage loss and nonrealizability of life goals. Second, older adults reported a stronger sense of control over LLs. Both age effects obtained are consistent with the changing gain–loss dynamic that can be observed as adult lives unfold and the notion that older age gives an advantage in the mastery of LLs.

Discussion

In this study, we made an effort to identify the new territory of a psychology of *Sehnsucht* (LLs). We define *Sehnsucht* as an intense desire for alternative states and realizations of life and as the search for an optimal or utopian life. We proceeded on the assumption that a psychology of *Sehnsucht* might be a fruitful territory for research, especially in the context of life span development. The results of this first study are encouraging, although only a first step on a long journey.

It was possible to obtain a first theory-consistent operationalization of *Sehnsucht* by means of a self-report questionnaire. Correlations with other indicators of developmental states and age point in expected directions and offer promise for new insights into processes of lifelong development and the management of the change toward a less positive balance between gains and losses (P. B. Baltes, 1997; P. B. Baltes & Smith, 2004). Specifically, we showed that individuals were able to generate a list of LLs that they considered part of their everyday lives and thoughts. The experiential gestalt or structure of the LLs reported can be described in terms of six interrelated characteristics that we had identified a priori as core aspects of the experience of a fully expressed *Sehnsucht*: (a) utopian (unattainable) conceptions of ideal development; (b) a sense of incompleteness and imperfection of life; (c) a conjoint focus on the personal past, present, and future (tritime focus); (d) ambivalent emotions; (e) a sense of life reflection and evaluation; and (f) richness in symbolic meaning. These characteristics were derived from a review of previous, predominantly humanist literature on *Sehnsucht* as well as from basic tenets of life span developmental psychology (P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997; P. B. Baltes et al., 2006).

On a higher level of aggregation, the six core characteristics could be organized into two higher order factors representing both integration (sizable positive intercorrelations) and differentiation (two factors). The first factor, IS, describes the strength of feelings of incompleteness, the scope of LLs across a wide range of life domains and symbolic meanings, its lifetime extendedness (past, present, future), and the amount of reflection and evaluation that is elicited. The second factor, NA, refers to perceptions that LLs are directed at idealized images that are unattainable in principle and

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[5] All variables were *z* standardized before creating interaction terms and conducting analyses.

that LLs involve feelings of an ambivalent, bittersweet quality. In our view, this result supports the notion that LLs are a construct that signals a general evaluation of one's state in life and one's development; moreover, that it conveys on the level of fantasy and imagination a sense of alternative, better states; and finally that *Sehnsucht* tilts the territory of operating from behavioral (objective) to imaginary (subjective) expressions.

Does the concept of LLs add anything unique to existing motivational concepts, such as goals, values, regret, or hope? This question deserves more attention in future work. Our theoretical conception suggests that there is overlap but that none of these constructs covers the whole spectrum of *Sehnsucht* (see introduction). Empirical data from a first study on the differentiation of LLs and goals provide initial supportive evidence with regard to the concept of goals (Mayser, Scheibe, & Riediger, 2006).[6] Goals, in comparison with LLs, were found to be perceived as more closely linked to everyday actions, more strongly related to the future, and more controllable and achievable. LLs, in contrast, were evaluated as being more emotionally ambivalent (involving pleasant and unpleasant affect at the same time), as more strongly related to the past, and as involving a stronger sense of incompleteness of life. These results suggest that in contrast to goals, the concept of *Sehnsucht* may tap intense wishes that are at the core of persons' personal utopia of life and are marked by less controllability and attainability. One developmental implication worthwhile of further study is whether LLs are the outcome of transformations that result from the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal from important goals that are not (or are no longer) achievable.

As to age-related variations in the basic experiential structure of *Sehnsucht*, our assumption was that the six qualitative core characteristics evince generality and therefore do not undergo major structural changes across adulthood. This assumption was based on findings on the developmental course of other complex phenomena such as wisdom (Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001) or life narratives (Bluck & Habermas, 2001; McAdams, 1990), whose basic structures are available to most individuals in early adulthood. Subsequent changes are determined more by factors other than chronological age, such as personality, cognitive style, motivational orientations, and life experience associated with the gain–loss dynamic of life span change (e.g., P. B. Baltes & Staudinger, 2000).

Results are consistent with this expectation: In terms of mean levels, the six core characteristics of LLs (except incompleteness) were invariant across the adult age groups studied. Some theory-consistent age differences emerged: Compared with younger adults, older adults reported less incompleteness as well as more positive and less negative emotions accompanying LLs. Older adults also reported more that *Sehnsucht* helped them to manage loss and nonrealizability of life. In addition, older adults reported a stronger past and lesser future focus of LLs. These findings are in line with previous research showing that older adults are more past oriented and by shifting horizons achieve a closer fit between their actual and ideal views of themselves (Ryff, 1991). This is likely to lead to fewer feelings that life is incomplete or imperfect.

As a life span conception of developmental tasks would predict, age differences in the contents of LLs were obtained. Younger adults reported that their LLs related more to work–education and less to health, family, and the political–world situation than did older adults. Middle-aged adults reported the highest prevalence of

partnership-related LLs. Findings are consistent with theoretical notions of age-specific identity themes (Erikson, 1980) and developmental tasks (Havighurst, 1972) as well as empirical findings on the domains that adults of various ages think about or take action on (e.g., Heckhausen, 1999; Staudinger, 1996). The age-specific variations in the contents of LLs support the suggestion that for each age group, LLs are directed at the domains in which incompleteness and utopian conceptions are most salient and that are in the foreground when adults review, manage, plan, and reconstruct their lives.

Regarding the postulated differential aspects of *Sehnsucht*, a cluster analysis provided first evidence for interindividual differences beyond age. Only one third of the participants reported LLs that were high on all of the six attributes by which we define *Sehnsucht*. It will be interesting to explore antecedents, correlates, and consequents of such subgroups of individuals who express different manifestations of LLs. This finding is not unlike many others in developmental research, such as in moral or intelligence development, where individuals distribute themselves across a priori defined levels of functioning (Lerner, 2006). *Sehnsucht* then might be a developmental construct that is expressed by individuals in different levels of quantity and quality. This also suggests that for some individuals, LLs may be more similar to life goals or regrets.

One of the intriguing findings of the present study is the double-edged finding about the functional role of LLs in the conduct of life and life development. On the one hand, in line with our assumptions, LLs were reported to provide a sense of directionality to development and help in regulating losses, incompleteness, and imperfection. The latter function was more strongly endorsed by older adults, supporting notions that aging is associated with a higher need to manage accumulating losses and blocked developmental pathways. Older adults might also become better, or develop more expertise, in using LLs for this purpose. Thus, *Sehnsucht* (not unlike wisdom) may be a subject matter in which positive change is possible into the older ages (Scheibe, Kunzmann, & Baltes, in press).

Our hypothesis that younger adults would report a stronger sense of directionality of LLs was, however, not confirmed. Perhaps, the unique focus of *Sehnsucht*—the transformation of goals and behavioral goal pursuit into counterpart mechanisms on the level of fantasy and imagination—has not yet taken center stage.

The putative multifunctionality of *Sehnsucht* also received empirical support. Higher expressions of LLs were associated with lower psychological well-being. Specifically, people with higher LLs reported lower happiness and psychological functioning, more desire for change, and higher negative affectivity. As expected, this relationship was moderated by perceived control over LLs.

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[6] In two counterbalanced sessions, participants were asked to report their three most important LLs (according to the procedure used in this study) and their three most important goals (defined as "ideas about the conduct of your life, about what you want to attain and avoid . . . that are personally relevant at present and will probably still be important in the near future [weeks, months, or years]"). Reported goals and LLs were then rated on the same questionnaire that included scales for cognitive (e.g., level of abstraction) and emotional (e.g., intensity and ambivalence of accompanying emotions) aspects, and perceived controllability (e.g., knowledge of means for their realization).

The negative relation between high levels of LLs and subjective well-being was lower (reaching zero) in persons who reported that they were able to influence the onset, course, and end of LL-related thoughts and feelings. Such a finding reinforces the important role that a sense of control plays in the conduct and evaluation of life (M. M. Baltes & Baltes, 1986; Eisenberg et al., 2004; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Lachman & Bertrand, 2001) and supports the argument that *Sehnsucht* can be an important strategy to manage the changing gain–loss dynamic of development on the level of fantasy and imagination. Such double-sided results in the relationship of *Sehnsucht* to indicators of developmental function and levels of well-being are intriguing and await further longitudinal and experimental analysis. In such work, it is critical to consider linkages to other research on the role of objective and subjective self-regulation in adulthood (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). We expect that there are individual variations in the degree to which *Sehnsucht* contributes to a continuing search for a "flourishing personality" and a "life well-lived" (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lerner, 2006).

So far, it remains an open question to what extent the present findings generalize to cultural contexts outside of Germany. As we have noted at the outset, in German and European culture (Clair, 2005), the concept of *Sehnsucht* is omnipresent and seen as central to historical and individual advances in human productivity including the arts. For these cultural territories at least, the concept of *Sehnsucht* captures psychological processes (such as the notions of nonrealizability and emotional ambivalence as well as their management) that are universal and essential components of psychological identity. Cross-cultural work on LLs will help to gain new insights both into universal psychological processes and into cultural contexts that give meaning and significance to these aspects of human experience (see also Diener & Suh, 2000; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Preliminary findings of a first study comparing a German and an American sample with an online version of our questionnaire suggest generalizability in terms of the structure of *Sehnsucht* but also cultural specificities.

In our future work, we will extend research in at least four directions. First, there is the need for methodological extension. We plan to use additional techniques of activating and generating a list of LLs. We are interested in strengthening the evidence on the phenomenon of LLs by applying multiple methods of observation (e.g., experience sampling, narratives, in-depth life span interviews). Currently, we are already conducting work in which we are exploring whether using domains of life (e.g., work, sexuality, intimacy, power, etc.) as opening cues (rather than ages of life as done in this study) may produce a different set of contents and profiles of *Sehnsucht*.

Second, we are interested in pursuing in more detail the goal–LLs connection. Specifically, we expect that the development of LLs may be one outcome of disengaging from formerly held goals. Third, it is crucial to further examine the convergent and discriminant validity as well as the predictive uniqueness of LLs in relation to constructs such as goals, regrets, hope, wishes, and possible selves. Finally, we are striving to capture the microgenetic evolution and operation of *Sehnsucht* by using techniques of experimental activation of LLs. As we pursue these aims, we hope that these lines of inquiry remain research goals rather than becoming matters of *Sehnsucht*.

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(Appendixes follow)

Appendix A

Instructions Used for the Assessment of Life Longings

Definition of Life Longings Given to Study Participants Prior to Guided Mental Journey Through Life

By *personal longings*, we mean strong wishes for persons, objects, experiences, or events that are remote, not easily attainable at present, or very unlikely. They may be persons, objects, experiences, or events from your past that you are missing. They may also be persons, objects, experiences, or events that you are longing for for the present or the future.

We do not mean your goals, plans, or projects that have nothing standing in the way or that you know you can easily attain in the near future. We mean longings that are enduring or recurring. We do not mean fleeting ideas or desires that emerge in a particular situation but do not return thereafter. For example, some people experience longing when they think about their life dreams, ideals, or missed opportunities. Other persons experience longing when they remember intense past experiences or life periods they would like to relive.

In brief, what we mean by *personal longings* are wishes for persons, objects, experiences, or events from your past, present, or future that are intense, enduring, and not easily attainable at present.

Excerpt From Guided Mental Journey Through Life (Read by Research Assistant)

Perhaps, you are not always completely aware of your longings. We would therefore like to take you on a mental journey through your life. That is, we would like to ask you to visualize important images from five periods of your life, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and old age. We hope this will help you become aware of your longings that are linked with different times in your life. Depending on your age, some of these periods of life will be in the past, whereas others will lie ahead. In the latter case, please try to imagine your future. In the following, we will go through the five life periods one by one. While you visualize each life period, you will not have to write anything

down. Only after you have pictured each life period, will we ask you to add something to your list of longings.

We will now begin the mental journey through life. . . . Please try to sit on your chair as comfortably as possible. Find a comfortable position. If you like, close your eyes. Try to let go of all the concerns and worries you have in your mind today. Try to relax your muscles. Please let your thoughts wander off to your childhood now.

Maybe there are *particular places* that are especially linked to your childhood, such as a town, a house, a room, or a particular landscape or scenery. Picture these places. Take your time until these images appear in your mind's eye. [*Pause for 15 s*]

Maybe there are *special persons* who are important during this life period. Picture these persons. Take your time until you can see these individuals in your mind's eye. [*Pause for 15 s*]

Maybe there are also *particular events* linked to your childhood, for example a vacation, a celebration, a conversation, or a personal project. Picture these events. Take your time until these events come to your mind's eye. [*Pause for 15 s*]

Now you have visualized your childhood by means of these images. At this point, we want to turn to your longings. Maybe you have longings that are linked to this period of your life, that is, longings which you had in your childhood and which are still present today—or longings for this period of your life, or for particular people, places, or events belonging to this period in your life. If this is the case, please make a note of this longing or these longings on your list of longings—just one note after the other. [*Pause for 1.5 min*]

Note. Prior to the guided mental journey, participants were given a blank page with the heading *List of Life Longings*, which they were asked to fill in during the course of the guided mental journey. The instruction was repeated in abbreviated form for the periods of adolescence, young, middle, and old adulthood.

Appendix B

Life Longing Questionnaire

Personal Utopia

- If my longing were fulfilled, it probably would not be as great as it is in my fantasy. (U1)
- Reality will never be the way I long for it to be. (U2)
- I am longing for something too perfect to be true. (U3)

Sense of Incompleteness

- My longing means that something essential is missing in my life. (I1)
- My longing means that I am missing one of the most important

things in my life. (I2)
- As long as my longing is unfulfilled, something essential is missing for me. (I3)

Tritime Focus

- My longing has to do with people, things, experiences, or events . . . in my past / . . . in my present / . . . in my future. (T1; *The construct was derived by calculating the mean of the three items.*)
- When you have this longing, how much do you think about your past, present, or future? Please express the extent of your thoughts in points. You have 100 points. Please distribute these 100 points

among the three time periods. Time periods can also be assigned 0 points. (T2; *The construct was derived by calculating the standard deviation of the three values and performing linear transformations so that higher values indicate a stronger tritime focus.*)

Ambivalent Emotions

- Experiencing my longing is pleasant and unpleasant at the same time. (A1)
- My longing is a bittersweet feeling. (A2)
- Feeling my longing is a bit like enjoying sad music. (A3)
- My feeling of longing is both painful and pleasurable. (A4)

Life Reflection and Evaluation

- When this longing appears I think for a long time about how far I have gotten in my life. (R1)
- My longing makes me think a lot about the meaning of my life. (R2)
- My longing often makes me start thinking intensively about myself and my life. (R3)
- When I am having this longing, I think about ways to better shape my life. (R4)

Symbolic Richness

- What I am longing for is heavily filled with meaning. (S1)
- What I am longing for embodies some higher aim (e.g., success, happiness, or love). (S2)
- What I am longing for symbolizes something important to me. (S3)

Directionality

- My longing is like a vision towards which I orient my life.
- My longing shows me clearly what really matters in my life.
- My longing gives a direction to my life.

Managing Nonrealizability

- Experiencing my longing partially compensates for something I cannot have in reality.
- Experiencing my longing helps me a bit to get over something I do not have any more.
- Through my longing I keep my memories of something past alive.

Control Over Longing Experience

- I can always control my feelings of longing very well.
- Whenever I want to, I have means and ways to quickly distract myself from my feelings of longing.
- If my longing becomes too unpleasant, I can immediately change my thoughts to feel better again.