

**Original Article**

# The Schedule for Meaning in Life Evaluation (SMiLE): Validation of a New Instrument for Meaning-in-Life Research

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**Abstract**

*The Schedule for Meaning in Life Evaluation (SMiLE) is a respondent-generated instrument for the assessment of individual meaning in life (MiL). In the SMiLE, the respondents list three to seven areas that provide meaning to their lives before rating the current level of importance and satisfaction of each area. Indices of total weighting (IoW; range, 20–100), total satisfaction (IoS; range, 0–100), and total weighted satisfaction (IoWS; range, 0–100) are calculated. The objective of this study was to assess the feasibility, acceptability, and psychometric properties of this newly developed instrument in its German and English versions. A total of 599 students of the Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich and the Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin, took part in the study (response rate, 95.4%). The mean IoW was  $85.7 \pm 9.4$ , the mean IoS was  $76.7 \pm 14.3$ , and the mean IoWS was  $77.7 \pm 14.2$ . The instrument was neither distressing ( $1.3 \pm 1.9$ ) nor time-consuming ( $1.9 \pm 1.9$ ), as assessed by numeric rating scales (range, 0–10). Test–retest reliability of the IoWS was  $r = 0.72$  ( $P < 0.001$ ); 85.6% of all areas were listed again after a test–retest period of seven days. Convergent validity was demonstrated with the Purpose in Life test ( $r = 0.48$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), the Self-Transcendence Scale ( $r = 0.34$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), and a general numeric rating scale on MiL ( $r = 0.53$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). There was no correlation of the SMiLE with the Idler Index of Religiosity. Preliminary data indicate good feasibility and acceptability of the SMiLE in palliative care patients. The psychometrics of the SMiLE are reported according to the recommendations of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the Medical Outcomes Trust. *J Pain Symptom Manage* 2008;35:356–364. © 2008 U.S. Cancer Pain Relief Committee. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.*

**Key Words**

*Meaning in life, purpose in life, respondent-generated, idiographic instrument*

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## Introduction

Many definitions and concepts of meaning in life (MiL) refer to the theoretical work of Viktor Frankl, whose personal history as a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps led him to develop “logotherapy.”<sup>1</sup> Frankl defines meaning as the manifestation of values, which occurs via three main paths: creativity (e.g., work, deeds, dedication to causes), experience (e.g., art, nature, humor, love, relationships, roles), and attitude (one’s attitude toward suffering and existential problems). He hypothesizes that MiL is pre-existent and can be discovered by the individual. Other researchers describe MiL as a personal construct that is actively constructed or created.<sup>2</sup> Reker and Wong define personal meaning as the “cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment.”<sup>2</sup> (p.221).

In palliative care, MiL has recently become a central element of psychotherapeutic interventions.<sup>3,4</sup> Patients with limited life expectancy, whose MiL is sustained, are still able to consider their life as worth being lived.<sup>5–7</sup> However, a distinct psychiatric syndrome termed “demoralization” has been described, in which loss of meaning and hope can potentially spoil any sense of a worthwhile life and future.<sup>8</sup> A lack of MiL is often associated with the wish to hasten death or a request for active euthanasia.<sup>8–10</sup>

Many existing MiL instruments measure only the intensity of meaning but ignore the type or content of the reported meanings.<sup>11</sup> MiL is a highly individual construct, which varies from person to person and from situation to situation.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, measurement of MiL based on standardized models and pre-selected domains may not yield an adequate representation of this complex construct.<sup>13</sup> We hypothesized that respondent-generated, idiographic outcome measures could be an additional way to assess the individual’s MiL.

In quality-of-life (QoL) assessment, researchers faced similar problems.<sup>14</sup> O’Boyle et al. developed the Schedule for the Evaluation of Individual Quality of Life—Direct Weighting (SEIQoL-DW).<sup>15</sup> In the SEIQoL-DW, the respondent himself or herself indicates the domains that are most important for his or her individual QoL and rates the current level of

satisfaction and relative importance of each area. The Schedule for Meaning in Life Evaluation (SMiLE) was developed analogously to the SEIQoL-DW methodology as an attempt to provide an individualized assessment of MiL.

The objective of this study was to validate the German and English versions of the SMiLE in native-speaking samples. More specifically, the study aimed (1) to evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of the SMiLE, (2) to test the reliability and validity of the SMiLE (3) to provide a valid English translation of the SMiLE, and (4) to report preliminary data of the SMiLE in palliative care patients.

## Methods

The study was conducted at the Ludwig-Maximilians University (LMU), Munich, Germany and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), Dublin.

### *Schedule for Meaning in Life Evaluation (SMiLE)*

*Step 1 (area listing):* In the SMiLE, the respondents first indicate a minimum of three and maximum of seven areas ( $n$  = number of areas) that provide meaning to their lives in their current situation.

*Step 2 (weighting):* Next, the importance of each area ( $w_1 \dots w_n$ ) is rated with a five-point adjectival scale, ranging from 1 “somewhat important” to 5 “extremely important.”

*Step 3 (level of satisfaction):* Finally, the respondents rate their current level of satisfaction with each area ( $s_1 \dots s_n$ ) on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from –3 “very unsatisfied” to +3 “very satisfied.”

The *Index of Weighting* (IoW) indicates the mean weighting of the MiL areas (range, 20–100, with higher scores reflecting higher weights). Because the scale starts with “somewhat important,” the floor is set to 20 instead of 0.

$$\text{IoW} = 20 \circ \frac{w_{\text{ges}}}{n};$$

$$w_{\text{ges}} = \sum_{i=1}^n w_i$$

The *Index of Satisfaction* (IoS) indicates the mean satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the

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