Personality and Individual Differences 104 (2017) 460–465

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Exploring and assessing meaning in life in elementary school children: Development and validation of the meaning in life in children questionnaire (MIL-CQ)

Anat Shoshani *, Pninit Russo-Netzer

Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, P.O. Box 167, Herzliya 46150, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 27 July 2016
Received in revised form 7 September 2016
Accepted 8 September 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Meaning in life
Well-being
Children
Mental-health
Measurement

ABSTRACT

Meaning in life, which is almost unanimously recognized as a fundamental component of subjective well-being, has received little research attention when it comes to children, presumably due to a lack of suitable measurement tools for this age range. This study provides evidence for the internal consistency, factor structure, and validity of the Meaning in Life in Children Questionnaire (MIL-CQ), a new 21-item self-report measure of the presence and the sources of meaning in life in children, based on Viktor Frankl's concept of the 'meaning triangle' (Frankl, 1959). The MIL-CQ was administered to 1957 elementary school children aged 9–12 in two diverse samples from several cities in Israel. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported a 3-factor structure (creative, experience, and attitude), representing different sources of meaning in life. Children's level of meaning in life was positively associated with their life satisfaction and positive affectivity (higher positive emotions and lower negative emotions), and negatively with social and emotional difficulties. Girls reported significantly higher overall meaning in life than boys, and lower levels of social, emotional and behavioral problems. Theoretical and research implications of these findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

Meaning in life is a primary personal resource that has consistently been found to be associated with mental health and psychological well-being throughout the human life span (Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). However, studies of meaning in life have focused almost exclusively on adolescents and adults, perhaps because researchers have assumed that the psychological complexity involved in the development of meaning in life could only be achieved by mature individuals (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011). In fact, to date there has been minimal examination of the development of meaning of life in children (Taylor & Ebersole, 1993).

In the last few decades, a few studies have challenged the assumption that a sense of meaning in life can only be achieved by adults or older adolescents, by demonstrating that young adolescents and children can produce viable and significant expressions about the meaning of their lives. In the early 80s, De Volger and Ebersole (1983) found that eighth-grade participants' descriptions of the sources of their life meaning seemed substantively similar to those reported by college students. A decade later, Taylor and Ebersole (1993) asked much younger elementary school children what was the most important to them in their lives as a whole. Most first grade participants were able to express a personal life meaning, especially in the context of their relationships, activities and habits.

In the last 20 years, psychologists have come to increasingly acknowledge the importance of meaning in life for positive youth development (see Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003 for a review). In addition, there has been continual development of diverse methodological approaches to study adolescents' life meaning and related constructs such as purpose in life, and the pursuit of personal goals (e.g. Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). However, research on this topic is still restricted by a lack of assessment tools applicable to young children. Existing tools that measure life meaning in adolescence (e.g. Steger et al., 2006) may fail to reflect the nuances and level of understanding of children at the concrete-operational stage of development (7–12) (Piaget, 1952). In response to this need, the main goals of the present study were to (a) develop and validate a new instrument for assessing meaning in life in children, closely grounded in the notion of the existential framework of meaning in life (Frankl, 1959); (b) identify core components of meaning in life during middle childhood; and (c) examine whether and to what extent the value of meaning in life can account for children's positive social, emotional, and behavioral developmental outcomes.

1.1. Pathways towards a meaningful life

There are numerous definitions of meaning in life. Although their specifics differ, they all converge on the notion that meaning in life

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: ashoshani@idc.ac.il (A. Shoshani), pninit.russonetzer@gmail.com (P. Russo-Netzer).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.09.014
0191-8869/

involves motivational, cognitive, and emotional/evaluative components (Steger, 2012). The motivational component of meaning in life involves a sense of goal directedness or purposefulness (Emmons, 2003), which reflects the extent to which people perceive themselves as living in alignment with their overarching goals through their daily lives. The cognitive component refers to an understanding of the self and its place in the world, and achieving a coherent sense of self and life (Antonovsky, 1993). The emotional/evaluative component is related to sensing a transcendent meaning of life that connects the individual to all human beings and to a higher power, God, or an 'Ultimate Reality' (Walsh, 1999), or feeling that life is significant within the larger scheme of the universe (George & Park, 2014). Thus, meaning in life encompasses a sense of purpose, comprehension, and mattering (King, Hicks, Krull, & Gaiso, 2006).

One of the fullest theoretical conceptualizations of meaning in life is Viktor Frankl's theory of Logotherapy (Frankl, 1959). Frankl (1959) posited that human beings have a "will to meaning", which he defined as a powerful drive to find significance and meaning in their lives. He saw the search for meaning in life as the main motivation for living, and argued that people can find meaning even under the most difficult circumstances. Frankl characterized a range of human motivations for meaning, and suggested three primary needs for meaning in life: the need to create meaning in daily life and to live a fulfilling life, the need to construe and make sense of events and experiences through cognitive processes, and the need to make sense of human existence and to explore ultimate meanings of life (Wong, 1997). To a certain extent, this distinction constituted one of the first building blocks of meaning structure, in terms of its motivational, cognitive, and affective/evaluative components.

However, the value of Frankl's theory goes beyond the recognition of human needs to discover meaning in that it explicitly focuses on the drive to actively create meanings, and depicts the behavioral and cognitive processes that enable it. This is the crux of Frankl's 'meaning triangle': the three creative, experiential and attitudinal pathways through which one can discover or create meaning (Frankl, 1959, p. 133). The creative pathway inquires what individuals give to the world in terms of their creations (e.g., work, school, deeds, dedication to personal goals). This pathway incorporates using individual assets to fulfill one's vocation in life and contribute to the society more broadly and is hence a self-transcendent goal. The experiential pathway focuses on what the individual takes from the world in terms of experiences and encounters (e.g., nature, art, humor, roles, love, relationships). The attitudinal pathway relates to the ways a person approaches suffering in life and experiences pain. Through the implementation of a positive attitude in the face of negative or traumatic events, Frankl believed that the individual can find increased meaning (Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Frankl, 1959). In its simplest form, Frankl's (1959) theory views meaning as enacted through one's personal accomplishments, interactions with others, art, and the natural world, while overcoming inevitable negative experiences.

Several assessment batteries have been developed to measure Logotherapy related concepts (see Melton & Schulenberg, 2008 for a review). Research has primarily utilized the Purpose in Life test (PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969) and/or the Life Purpose Questionnaire (LPQ; Hutzell, 1989) that were constructed to be general measures of meaning and purpose in life. Studies that used these measures have reported associations between perceived meaning in life and positive affect, happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being (King et al., 2006). By contrast, less meaning in life has been related to mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). However, no studies have attempted to adapt these measures to assess meaning in life in young children. The prime reason is the highly abstract and general formulations of meaning in life in these questionnaires that are too difficult for children to comprehend.

1.2. Exploring meaning in life in children

Based on the theory of Logotherapy, meaning in life can be viewed as an abstract, individual concept, demanding a high level of self-awareness and higher-order thinking to achieve full comprehension of one's life experiences and commitment to lifelong purpose and goals. From this standpoint, it is likely that children would have difficulties experiencing a sense of meaning of life because of their emotional and cognitive immaturity. Piaget (1952) suggested that children's concrete thinking makes it difficult for them to consolidate a coherent sense of self and life, which demands formal, abstract thought operations that emerge after age 11. Steger, Bundick, and Yeager (2011) also posited that the cognitive capacities required to describe and comprehend one's life experience only develop actively during early adolescence.

However, a few studies challenge these hypotheses by finding that children as young as 8–10 can think abstractly (Davydov & Kilpatrick, 1990). In addition, it is likely that children do express certain aspects of meaning, which however are manifested differently than in adults. A qualitative analysis of interviews in a study on the posttraumatic growth of children who survived a traffic accident reported a significant increase in their reported sense of meaning in their life, in terms of a change in their life priorities and goals, and a re-evaluation of what was important to them (Salter & Stallard, 2004).

In one of the very few studies that has examined the meaning in life of children directly, Taylor and Ebersole (1993) asked children aged six and seven: "In your whole life what is most important to you?" The responses were classified into different categories of meaning in life, including relationships, helping others, beliefs, objects, personal growth, health, schooling, pleasure, activities, school achievement, and appearance. The authors concluded that when children are asked concrete questions about meaning rather than when asked more abstract and global queries, they are capable of providing lucid, clear descriptions of the sources of meaning in their life.

The present study adapted Frankl's (1959) 'meaning triangle' conceptualization to construct an instrument to measure life meaning in children, which is dubbed the Meaning in Life in Children Questionnaire (MIL-CQ). Qualitative studies have shown that the three meaning triangle pathways (e.g., creative, experiential, and attitudinal) are crucial to successful intervention protocols in both children and adults who are confronted with difficulties or negative life events, such as patients in the advanced stages of disease or diagnosed with mental health issues (Frankl, 1969; Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000; Kang, Kim, Song, & Kim, 2013). Because the three pathways present a concrete range of cognitive, interpersonal, behavioral, and emotional manifestations of meaning in daily life, it is likely that they can be successfully expressed in a clear, concrete, and child-friendly manner.

The questionnaire is made up of three subscales that reflect Frankl's three Creative, Experience, and Attitude pathways towards discovering a meaningful life. The creative subscale assesses children's sense of meaning stemming from their self-concordant actions, deeds, everyday behaviors, and habits. The experience subscale examines the child's connectedness experiences to family, friends, all humans, or to transcendent states and entities such as nature, art, beauty, God, or a supreme power. The attitude subscale examines children's positive approach to experiences of pain, hardship, difficulties, disappointments, and suffering that are part of life experiences.

The current study involved an evaluation of the MIL-CQ on two large samples of children aged 9–12. In addition, it examined the relationships between the three pathways of meaning in children and their socio-emotional functioning (behavioral problems, emotional symptoms, peer relations problems, hyperactivity, and pro-social behavior), and their subjective well-being (life satisfaction, and positive and negative emotions). In line with previous research that found positive associations between meaning in life and subjective well-being (King et al., 2006), we hypothesized that we would also find positive associations between children's life meaning, life satisfaction, and positive affectivity (lower negative emotions and higher positive emotions). In addition, consistent with the literature reporting negative relationships between meaning in life and mental health problems (Zika & Chamberlain,