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TITLE: Examining the Relationships between Death Anxiety, Meaning in Life, and Parental Attitude

AUTHORS: Umay BALTACI,Zeliha TRAS,Mehmet AK,Sahin KESICI

PAGES: 38-50

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2787546>



Examining the Relationships between Death Anxiety, Meaning in Life, and Parental Attitude

Umay Bilge Baltacı¹  Zeliha Traş²  Mehmet Ak³  Şahin KESİCİ⁴ 

¹Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Kırşehir Ahi Evran University, Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling, Kırşehir Türkiye

umaybilgee@gmail.com

²Prof.Dr, Necmettin Erbakan University, Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling, Konya, Türkiye

zztras@gmail.com

³Prof.Dr, Necmettin Erbakan University, Department of Mental Health and Diseases, Konya, Türkiye

drmehmetak@gmail.com

⁴Prof.Dr, Necmettin Erbakan University, Department of Guidance and Psychological Counseling, Konya, Türkiye

sahinkesici@erbakan.edu.tr

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 22/09/2022

Accepted: 03/01/2023

Published: 30/06/2023

Keywords:

Death Anxiety,
Meaning in Life,
Parental Attitude

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between death anxiety, meaning in life and parental attitude of university students. The survey method, one of the quantitative research methods, was used in the study. The research group consists of 325 people, 242 women and 83 men. Meaning in Life Questionnaire, Scale of Death Anxiety, Young Parenting Inventory and Personal Information Form were used as data collection tools. In the study, descriptive statistics, Pearson Product Moments Correlation coefficients, Spearman Rank Differences Correlation coefficient and multiple linear regression analysis were used. There was a significant negative correlation between the scores obtained from the presence of meaning subscale and the scores of the scale of death anxiety, and emotionally depriving mother, pessimistic/fearful mother, emotionally depriving father, pessimistic/fearful father, belittling/criticizing mother, belittling/criticizing father subscales. There was a significant positive correlation between the search for meaning subscale scores and the scale of death anxiety mean score, and conditional/achievement-focused mother and conditional/achievement-focused father subscale scores. Looking at the results of the regression analysis, it is seen that death anxiety is a significant predictor of both the presence of meaning and the search for meaning. Findings were discussed based on the literature, and recommendations were given.

Citation: Baltacı, U.B., Traş, Z., AK, M. & Kesici Ş. (2023). Examining the relationships between death anxiety, meaning in life, and parental attitude. *Journal of Teacher Education and Lifelong Learning*, 5(1), 38-50.



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INTRODUCTION

The family is the social unit with which the child interacts the most since birth (Seven, 2008). Parent-child relationships are very important in the development of the child (Çekiç et al., 2018). It is thought that parents' attitudes towards their children have a significant impact on the development of positive personality traits and all other developmental areas (Şahin & Özyürek, 2017). The social-emotional compatibility and communicative ability of primary caregivers determine the quality of the infant's early attachment. This determination affects the individuals' perspective on the future, their behaviour and psychopathology (Sheffield et al., 2005). It may be argued that early childhood education in problem solving abilities can prevent later mental states such as anxiety, suicide or self-blame (Shokoohi-Yekta et al., 2018). In the schema therapy model, parenting style, individual needs and early maladaptive schemas are interrelated (Louis et al., 2020). Exposure of individuals to unhealthy parental attitudes and insufficient fulfilment of their psychological needs lead to the formation of early maladaptive schema/schemas (Yalçın et al., 2018). Research on child maltreatment shows that parenting can influence an individual's enduring characteristics (Belsky, 1984). Parental attitudes also influence individuals' SFM in their lives (Yüksel, 2012). Many of the most meaningful moments of life involve other individuals. Sharing a special moment with a child is a main source of meaning (Van Tongeren et al., 2015). In summary, the people in an individual's life and their experiences with these people affect the meaning they attribute to life and their SFM (Elizabeth & Chang, 2021). It is seen that family relationships are a strong source of meaning in life and increase the sense of meaning in an individual's life (Glaw et al., 2017).

The meaning in life is an innate human need that is recognised in many cultures and times (Prinzing et al., 2021). The meaning in life has long been a mystery of human existence (King & Hicks, 2021). The people have constantly endeavoured to understand the life that they consciously perceive and in which they are involved through their actions (Sezer & Saya, 2009). There are as many meanings of life as there are people. It is important to know the meaning of life, how different meanings are differentiated from each other, and how to correct the meaning in life if it is misinterpreted (Adler, 2004). This effort to understand is largely due to the individual's need to survive (Sezer & Saya, 2009). The meaning in life can be examined in two dimensions: the Presence of Meaning (FOM) and the Search for Meaning (SFM) in life. The FOM is used to indicate the existence of one's life meaning and purpose (Steger et al., 2006). The SFM in life can be defined as the intensity of people's desire to create and/or increase their understanding of the meaning in life (Steger et al., 2008). It is important for the individual to experience the "SFM" in order to come to terms with his or her feelings about his or her own death (McClatchey & King, 2015). In addition, the meaning in life also affects individuals' mental health (Orang et al., 2018). People will feel life valuable to the extent that they live a meaningful life (Kardipranoto et al., 2021). Although the meaning in life is related to concepts such as happiness, morality, worthiness and goodness, there is no clear definition (Metz, 2013). Being involved in something bigger than oneself and deriving satisfaction from it will contribute to finding life meaningful (Wolf, 2012). While the meaning in life is not short-term, but long-term satisfaction (Brogaard, 2016), the specific aspect of life that people find most meaningful to them can vary throughout life (Lane & Mathes, 2018). The meaning in life is related to many variables. These can be listed as the purpose of life (Çelik Demirbaş, 2016), optimism (Demir & Murat, 2017), values (Veysi & Hamarta, 2014), internal-external locus of control (Taş, 2011), suicide cognitions (Baltacı et al., 2021) psychological well-being (Carreno et al., 2020) and Death anxiety (DA) (Özyürek & Atalay, 2020).

People's realization that they are "beings that have to die" affects them deeply. As death is a powerful threat to existence, it is a strong human concern that has been conceptualized as the motivating force behind many creative expressions and philosophical inquiries through the ages (Lehto & Stein, 2009). DA can be thought to be an emotion that starts with the birth of individuals and lasts throughout their life and develops after individuals think that they cannot continue their existence and that they may lose themselves and the

world (Öztürk et al., 2011). Because anxiety is a basic experience (Akandere, 1997), DA refers to experiencing it in daily life, not worrying about coping with immediate threats to one's life (Neimeyer, 2015). DA is a normal experience. Many people manage their anxiety about death effectively and these worries do not affect their daily lives. Some people have difficulty in managing DA and this affects their daily lives (Furer & Walker, 2008). It is accepted that DA has important behavioural and emotional consequences (Nia et al., 2016). DA is considered a fundamental fear underlying the development and maintenance of many psychological disorders (MacLeod et al., 2019). DA can vary according to many factors such as age, gender, physical health, religion and culture (Suhail & Akram, 2002). It is important to determine DA, as the negative situations of individuals are important for the correct psychological counselling process (Koç & Arslan, 2020). In line with the literature given above, the aim of the study is to examine the relationships between DA, meaning in life and parental attitude of college students.

METHOD

Research Design

This study was conducted through survey method with the aim to examine the predictive effect of students' DA and parental attitude on the meaning in life. The survey method is a quantitative model that includes a specific form of data collection and types of analysis (De Vaus, 2002; Lewin, 2005). The dependent variable of this study was the meaning in life and the independent variables were DA and parental attitudes.

Study Group

The participants consisted of college students. Non-voluntary students were excluded from the study. The research group consisted of 325 participants, 242 females (74.5%) and 83 males (25.5%). The ages of the participants ranged between 18-38 (average age 21).

Research Instruments and Processes

In order to collect the data, "Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)", "Death Anxiety Scale (DAS)", "The Young Parenting Inventory (TYPI)" and "Personal Information Form" were administered to the participants who volunteered to participate in the study.

MLQ

MLQ was developed by Steger et al. (2006). The adaptation study for Turkish culture was conducted by Akın and Taş (2011). MLQ is a 7-point Likert type measurement tool. It is a 10-item scale and consists of two sub-dimensions: the FOM and the SFM in life. The validity and reliability values of MLQ were sufficient. As a result of the confirmatory factor analysis, goodness of fit indices were $\chi^2=77.77$, $sd=31$, $RMSEA=.065$, $NFI=.95$, $CFI=.97$, $GFI=.96$, $AGFI=.93$, $RFI=.93$, $SRMR=.065$. The Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficients of the MLQ were .77 for the FOM Sub-Scale; .83 for the SFM Sub-Scale; and .81 for the entire scale. Based on results of the exploratory factor analysis, the factor loadings of the scale items ranged between .54 and .77 (Akın & Taş, 2011). The Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficient was .85 for the FOM subscale and .85 for the SFM subscale.

DAS

DAS was developed by Sarıkaya (2013). It consists of three sub-dimensions (uncertainty of death, thinking about death and witnessing, suffering) and 20 items in a 5-point Likert type. The scale is also evaluated over the total score. It was found that the scale explained 67.27% of the total variance. As a result of the confirmatory factor analysis, goodness of fit indices were $NFI=.90$, $NNF=.91$, $CFI=.92$, $IF=.92$, $RMSEA=.08$, $GFI=.86$, $AGFI=.83$, $RMR=.07$, $SRMR=.05$. The values were at the desired level. The retest reliability of DAS is .82. The Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficient of the scale was .95. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficient of the DAS total score was .95.

TYPI

TYPI was developed by Sheffield et al. (2005). It was aimed to evaluate the parenting styles that form the basis of early maladaptive schemas defined by Young (1994). The adaptation study of the scale to Turkish culture was conducted by Soygüt et al. (2008). It was found that a common 10-factor structure was appropriate for both mother and father forms. The Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficient of the scale ranged between .53 and .86 for the mother form and between .61 and .89 for the father form (Soygüt et al., 2008). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficient was as follows: Normative Mother (NM) :.79, Normative Father (NF):.84, Belittling/Criticizing Mother (BCM):.72, BCF (BCF) :.72, Emotionally Depriving Mother (EDM) :.84, Emotionally Depriving Father (EDF) :.85, Exploitative/Abusive Mother (EAM) :.09, Exploitative/Abusive Father (EAF) :.26, Overprotective/Anxious parenting (OAM) :.60, Overprotective/Anxious Father (OAF) :.60, Conditional/Achievement Focused Mother:(CAFM) .73, Conditional/Achievement Focused Father (CAFF):.74, Permissive/Unlimited Mother (PUM):.56, Permissive/ Unlimited Father (PUF) :.52, Pessimistic/Worried Mother (PWM):.55, Pessimistic/ Worried Father (PWF) :.55, Punitive Mother (PM):.08, Punitive Father (MF) :.59, Restricted Mother (RM):.36, Restricted Father (RF):.30. The Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficient of the scales above .50 indicates that it is at an acceptable level, albeit weak, but if the value is below .50, it is at an unacceptable level (George & Ve Mallery, 2019). For this reason, the subscales of EAM , EAF , PU, RM, RF with Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficients below .50

Personal Information Form

The Personal Information Form was designed to determine the the participants such as gender and age.

Procedure

The research data were collected in the 2018-2019 academic year. The application to the students was carried out on a voluntary basis in university classrooms. Before the application, the purpose of the research was explained and student volunteers were asked to participate. Students who volunteered to participate in the study filled out the scales and the application lasted approximately 45-50 minutes.

Data Analysis

The data obtained in this study were analysed using SPSS Package Programme. Before analysing the data, outliers were removed, skewness and kurtosis coefficients were checked to see whether the data followed normal distribution.

Table 2. *Skewness and Kurtosis Coefficients of Variables*

Variables	Skewness	Kurtosis
FOM	-.442	-.451
SFM	-.823	.384
DA	.379	-.320
NM	.576	-.111
BCM	1.941	3.968
EDM	.793	.032
OAM	.265	-.213
CAFM	.411	-.257
PUM	1.376	1.379
PWM	.988	.818
NF	.609	-.075
BCF	1.737	2.635

EDF	.333	-.646
OAF	.341	-.089
CAFF	.427	-.276
PUF	1.274	.957
PWF	.939	.417
PF	.764	.855

Before the analyses, 21 values that were determined to be outliers using Mahalanobis distance were removed from the data set. Mahalanobis distance was used to remove outliers (Leys et al., 2018). For the assumption of normal distribution, skewness and kurtosis values should be between -1.96 and +1.96 (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012). As seen in Table 1, all scales, except Belittling/Criticising Mother and Belittling/Criticising Father subscales, meet the assumption of normal distribution. In research, parametric analysis should be performed with the scales that follow normal distribution and non-parametric analysis should be performed with the scales that do not follow normal distribution (Dixon, 1954; Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012). For this reason, parametric analysis was used in the sub-dimensions that meet the assumption of normal distribution and non-parametric analysis was used in the sub-dimensions that do not meet the assumption of normal distribution. In the study, descriptive statistics were used to obtain demographic information, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation coefficients and Spearman Rank Difference Correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the relationships between variables. Multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine the predictive effect of independent variables on dependent variables.

Ethic

Ethics approval of the study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Necmettin Erbakan University, dated 27.05.2019 and numbered 2019/14. The scales were transferred to a single form for the application phase of the research.

FINDINGS

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Results between Variables

	FOM	SFM
DA	-.123*	.175**
NM	-.075	.072
EDM	-.212**	.001
OAM	-.058	.005
CAFM	.010	.126*
PUM	-.048	.065
PWM	-.200**	.062
NF	-.089	.037
EDF	-.197**	.029
OAF	-.058	.005
CAFF	-.003	.139*
PUF	-.057	.027
PWF	-.192**	.054
PF	-.084	-.035

**p<.01, *p<.05

Table 2 shows that there was a significant negative relationship between the scores obtained from the FOM subscale and the DAS scores ($r = -.123$, $p < .05$), EDM ($r = -.212$, $p < .01$), PWM ($r = -.200$, $p < .01$) EDF ($r = -.197$, $p < .01$), PWF ($r = -.192$, $p < .01$) subscales. Insignificant correlation was found between the scores of the FOM subscale and the scores in the subscales of NM, OAM, CAFM, PUM, NF, OAF, CAFF, PUF, PF.

Table 2 also shows that there was a significant positive relationship between the scores in the

subscale of the SFM ($r=.175$, $p<.01$) and the subscales of DAS, CAFM ($r=.126$, $p<.05$) and CAFF ($r=.139$, $p<.05$). Insignificant correlation was found between the scores in the subscale of the SFM and the scores in the subscales of NM, EDM, OAM, PUM, PWM, NF, EDF, OAF, PUF, PWF, PF.

Table 3. Spearman Correlation Results between Variables

	FOM	SFM
BCM	-.210 **	-.007
BCF	-.211 **	-.003

** $p<.01$

Table 3 demonstrates that a significant negative relationship was found between the scores in the subscale of FOM and the scores in the subscales of Belittling/Criticising Mother ($r=-.210$, $p<.01$), Belittling/Criticising Father ($r=-.211$, $p<.01$). There was insignificant relationship between the scores in the subscale of the SFM and the scores in the subscales of BCM, BCF.

The results of the regression analysis are given in Table 4 and Table 5. Some basic assumptions need to be fulfilled for regression analysis. One of the assumptions is to look at the Durbin Watson values as an indication that there is no auto-correlation between the variables. Durbin Watson value is expected to take a value close to 2 (Mayers, 2013). To avoid multi-connection problems, tolerance and VIF values must be within certain ranges. (O'brien, 2007). Tolerance value must be greater than .20 (Cleophas & Zwinderman, 2015). The VIF value is expected to be less than 5 (Daoud, 2017). As seen in Table 4 (Tolerance: .391-.983, VIF: 1.038-2.558, Durbin Watson: 2.024) and Table 5 (Tolerance: .289-.981, VIF: 1.019-3.459, Durbin Watson: 2.019), Tolerance, VIF, Durbin Watson values are in the expected range. It is seen that the necessary assumptions for the regression analysis were provided.

Table 4. Regression Results for the Subscale of FOM

Variable	B	SE _B	β	T	p	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	33.251	1.319		25.218	.000		
DA	-.034	.016	-.113	-2.081	.038*	.963	1.038
EDM	-.122	.063	-.149	-1.937	.054	.482	2.075
PWM	-.179	.161	-.094	-1.112	.267	.398	2.511
EDF	-.049	.058	-.066	-.854	.394	.471	2.123
PWF	-.137	.166	-.071	-.827	.409	.391	2.558

* $p<.05$ R =.30 R² =.09 F(319-5) =6.387, $p<.001$, Durbin Watson:2.024

Table 4 illustrates that the FOM subscale was predicted at a significant level (R =.30, R² =.09, F(319-5) =6.387). Considering the relevant values, the DAS was the most powerful and significant predictor of the single variable ($\beta=-.113$, T=-2.081, $p<.05$). EDM, PWM, EDF and PWF subscales were not significant predictors. In addition, the independent variables together accounted for 9% of the total variance of the FOM subscale.

Table 5. Regression Results for the Sub-scale of SFM

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	β	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Tolerance</i>	<i>VIF</i>
Constant	19.471	1.388		14.029	.000		
DA	.056	.019	.159	2.890	.004**	.981	1.019
CAFM	.041	.114	.036	.355	.723	.291	3.433
CAFF	.098	.113	.088	.863	.389	.289	3.459

** $p < .01$, $R = .21$, $R^2 = .05$ $F(321-3) = 4.990$, $p < .001$, Durbin Watson : 2.019

Table 5 shows that the SFM subscale was predicted at a significant level ($R = .21$, $R^2 = .05$, $F(321-3) = 4.990$). When the related values were analysed, DAS was the single most powerful and significant predictor variable ($\beta = .159$, $T = 2.890$, $p < .01$). CAFM and CAFF subscales were not significant predictors. In addition, the independent variables together accounted for 5% of the total variance in the SFM subscale.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, DA was found to be negatively related to the FOM and positively related to SFM. In addition, DA was a significant predictor of both the FOM and SFM. In similar studies, a negative relationship was found between DA and FOM and a positive relationship was found between DA and SFM (Aghababaei et al., 2016; Latha et al., 2013; Sübeten, 2018, Dursun et al., 2022). In another study, it was found that the SFM in life was significantly positively correlated with the fear of dying and death in young adults (Lyke, 2013). Similar studies have also found a negative relationship between the meaning in life and DA (Yoon, 2009; Yüksel et al., 2017). In another study, a negative significant relationship was found between DA and attitude towards life (Azarian et al., 2016). There are studies reporting a negative relationship between fear of death and the purpose in life (Ardelt, 2008; Viswanathan, 1996). In other articles conducted on college students, it was found that meaning in life predicted DA (Niksirat et al., 2019). For human consciousness, ‘annihilation’, in other words, ‘the finitude of existence’ is a difficult situation to accept (Sezer & Saya, 2009). For this reason, it is thought that individuals with high DA may SFM in their lives.

Another finding of this study, a significant negative relationship was found between the FOM subscale and Belittling/Criticising Mother and Belittling/Criticising Father subscales. Belittling/Criticising parenting style reflects behaviour that belittles the child and makes the child feel defective (Sheffield et al., 2005). The love and acceptance perceived by children in the family feeds their spiritual feelings and contributes to the meaningfulness of their lives (Bilici, 2018). Most individuals gain the meaning in their lives through the closest people in their lives such as mother, father and children (Eagleton, 2012). In this respect, it can be thought that individuals with Belittling/Criticising attitude in perceived parental attitudes decrease their FOM in life.

Moreover in this study, a significant positive relationship was found between the SFM subscale and the Conditional/Achievement-Oriented Parents subscales. Conditional/Achievement-Oriented parenting style reflects the behaviour of the parent who implies that looking at the child positively depends on the child’s success. A high level of this parenting style indicates a high level of conditional acceptance of the parent (Sheffield et al., 2005). It can be argued that Conditional/Achievement-Oriented parenting style is related to approval seeking schema. Individuals’ perceptions of trying to gain the approval of others in order to maintain their self-esteem are in the approval-seeking schema (Soygüt et al., 2009). The meaning in life crisis reveals the individual’s inability to recognize important life tasks and self-actualization (Zhurba & Dokukina, 2021). Self-actualization is an internal process and involves

knowing one's own goals and needs (Tekke, 2019). The reason for the positive correlation between the sub-scale of the SFM and Conditional/Achievement-Oriented parental attitude may be the inability of individuals to achieve self-actualization due to the need to gain the approval of others. In a qualitative study, the theme of unconditional acceptance was found for individuals who found life meaningful (Kılavuz Çalışkan, 2019). The related literature supports the findings of this study.

Besides In this study, a significant negative relationship was found between the subscales of the FOM and Pessimistic/Worried Parents. Pessimistic/Worried subscales reflect worried and pessimistic characteristics in parents. An increase in these characteristics indicates a worried parent with a pessimistic view of life (Sheffield et al., 2005). Parenting styles are associated with early maladaptive schemas (Louis et al., 2018). Pessimism schema, one of the early maladaptive schemas, is related to focusing on the negative aspects of life and the expectation that things will go wrong in various areas of life (Soygüt et al., 2009). Individuals' ways of thinking and being affect each other mutually. If individuals have negative attributions towards the world, they may not live their existence sufficiently (Dökmen, 2009). Kömürcü (2014) found a significant positive relationship between the need for meaningful existence and the Pessimism sub-dimension of perceived father attitude. In another study conducted on young adults, the meaning in life of individuals with protective parental attitudes was significantly lower than individuals with democratic parental attitudes (Demir & Murat, 2017). In another qualitative study, a positive perspective theme was found for people who find life meaningful (Kılavuz Çalışkan, 2019). In addition, Dursun (2012) found a significant positive relationship between meaning in life and optimism in his study. It is seen that similar studies also support the findings of this study.

In this study, a significant negative relationship was found between the scores in the subscales FOM and Emotionally Depriving Parents. A child whose need for affection and understanding cannot be adequately met by the caregiver is likely to develop emotional deprivation (Louis et al., 2018). Emotional deprivation schema is related to the expectation that the individual's emotional needs will not be met by others (Soygüt et al., 2009). The individuals' need for parents or individuals who will replace them in childhood is important not only for care and safety but also for preparing themselves for life and perceiving their individualism (Geçtan, 2019). With self-consciousness, human beings can recognise living beings, events, objects and think that they are meaningful (Dökmen, 2009). Adult individuals may dislike loneliness because they perceive themselves in relationships with other individuals. An accompanying feeling of meaninglessness is the fear of being alone or loneliness (Geçtan, 2019). According to Adler (2004), individuals who were neglected in childhood will have problems in interpreting life. In a study conducted on young adults, a positive relationship was found between early parental support and FOM. In addition, early parental support is a significant positive predictor of FOM (Kealy et al., 2020). In a study conducted on adolescents, adolescents' satisfaction with parental and maternal social support is a significant positive predictor of meaning in life (Brassai et al., 2013). In another study, a positive relationship was found between parent-child adjustment and the meaning of life (Sun et al., 2023). The theoretical knowledge and research support the findings of this study.

In this study, ,insignificant relationship was found between the scores in the FOM subscale and the scores in the subscales of Normative Parents, Overprotective/Anxious Parents, Conditional/Achievement-Oriented Parents, Permissive/Unlimited Parents and PF. Insignificant correlation was found between the scores in the sub-scales of SFM in Life and in the sub-scales of Normative Parents, Emotionally Depriving Parents, Over-Protective/Anxious Parents, Permissive/Unlimited Parents, PWM, PF and Belittling/Criticizing Parents. The reason for this finding may be the study group or the structure of the measurement tools. In addition, insignificant relationship was found between the Meaning in Life and parental attitudes in similar studies. In Saraç et al. (2018)'s study, Insignificant difference was found between the scores in the sub-dimensions of FOM and the SFM with regards to perceived parental attitude. In another study, Insignificant relationship was found between the need for meaningful existence and the sub-dimensions of Normative Parents, Protective/Anxious

Since parental attitude was analysed in this study, individuals with both parents alive were included in the study. In this respect, it could be considered as a limitation in terms of generalisability of the study. The lack of individual psychiatric assessment for possible psychiatric disorders of the individuals participating in the study can be a limitation.

This study was conducted on college students. In future studies, the same study can be conducted on different age groups such as adolescents and older adults. In this study, a positive relationship was found between the SFM and DA, and a negative relationship was found between the FOM and DA. Individual or group psychological counselling studies can be conducted to increase the meaning in life of individuals with DA. In this study, the meaning in life and parenting styles in the schema therapy model were examined and various relationships were found. In future studies, the meaning in life and early maladaptive schemas can be studied.

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