Just what is this sensation we call longing? And why do we experience longing at all? These were the kinds of questions that interested Paul Baltes and his project team – Alexandra M. Freund, Susanne Scheibe and Dana Kotter-Grünn – in his work at Berlin’s Max Planck Institute for Human Development. The former Director, who died in 2006, was still able to see the first results of his project on life longings get accepted for publication.
In an unofficial contest staged by the German magazine *Stern*, Optiz to find “the best German word,” the word *Sehnsucht* made the winner’s podium, coming in second. The concept is a quintessentially German one – evoked in the restless search for societal and individual development and perfection, particularly in the tradition of German Bildungsroman (novel of formation), Erziehungsroman (novel about upbringing), and Entwicklungsroman (novel about character development) of the 18th and 19th centuries, as in the works in these genres by Goethe and Gottfried Keller. In these biographical novels, the authors describe a person’s passage through life from childhood to old age. What they are telling us with these tales is that man rarely, if ever, attains the level of perfect, faultless action – and certainly not without any missteps, confusion or transgressions along the way.

In these works, the literary text elicits the ways in which life longings promote lifespan development, and liberate people or paralyze them. In fact, Susanne Scheibe says, “longing is bittersweet by nature” – an emotionally ambivalent experience. But even though this complex feeling evidently carries a risk of melancholy, “people appear to actively search out the state of longing from time to time,” as Alexandra Freund points out: they listen to music that has a connection to their longing, or read books or poems of a certain kind. Writers and artists themselves frequently allude to the creative potential of longings that propelled them to achieve great things.

**Positive life states are ephemeral**

In light of all these aspects, Paul Baltes considered it imperative to integrate the literary concept of life longings into lifespan psychology. This discipline examines people’s psychological development over the course of their lifetime – how they cope with gains, losses and upheavals. Over the past few decades, the Max Planck scientists from Berlin have investigated many different aspects – from the initial search for goals or repeated, be it due to time constraints, lack of resources, or the fact that many goals are completely unattainable, or are attainable only in part. The scientists took the findings from lifespan psychology and the literary sources as their basis in creating a theoretical concept of life longings as comprising six – partially overlapping – core characteristics:

- **Utopia:** Life longings juxtapose the reality of one’s life, which is perceived as imperfect, against an imagined state – in some cases a state that one has experienced in the past. This works best when the connection with reality is minimal. (Example: “I always wanted a house by the sea.”)
- **Feeling of incompleteness:** The personal utopias almost inevitably involve feelings of the imperfection of one’s life. (“The house by the sea is something that’s missing in my life.”)
- **Tri-time focus:** Certain memories may blend with present wishes and insecurities, as well as with future

**The armamentarium of longing**

“Longing is a complex feeling,” says psychologist Alexandra Freund from the University of Zurich. In order for people to feel life longings, they need certain social-cognitive abilities. Scandinavian studies have demonstrated that life longings are lost on toddlers. Such young children have not yet developed physical capabilities.

But it is much earlier – certainly by the time they reach young adulthood – that most people realize that they can form team members. Many positive life states cannot be attained or repeated, be it due to time constraints, lack of resources, or the fact that one’s maxims are irreconcilable with the demands of others, and

In the movie *Desire*, Marlene Dietrich as Madeleine de Beaupré first fixes her longing gaze on a pearl necklace, then discovers her yearning for Gary Cooper, alias Tom Bradley.

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Life longings make you open and likeable

Applying a method known as self-report, the new questionnaire asks about concrete life longings, defined as financial matters, social values and religion; one should note that the majority of study participants came from the Berlin-Brandenburg region, which tends to be fairly athiestic. Astonishingly enough, men do not long for a better job situation any more than women do. The higher a person’s education level, the more they demand perfection in their own personality. The lower the education level, the greater the longing for a stable family.

The first empirical results uphold an elementary hypothesis expressed by Paul Baltes: “Life longings serve as a means of reviewing one’s life and assessing one’s own development,” emphasizes Susanne Scheibe. At the level of the imagination, they convey a sense of a different – and better – state, thereby giving life a new direction, sometimes with a very long-term orientation. “A life longing is a kind of meta-goal,” explains Alexandra Freund. It may indeed lead people to take action, thus turning the longing into a goal. But it doesn’t necessarily have to. Whether life longings mature into goals depends on numerous parameters: how insecure people feel about realizing them, how hopeful they are, how positively they view life, and whether they see their life longings as controllable.

Apropos goals: The studies conducted to date show that life longings can be measured as a separate psychological variable. However, it is one of the findings of initial studies by the former Max Planck scientist and her colleagues. Furthermore, the phrase “life longing” is a fairly blurred concept for Americans – proof that there really is no fitting translation for the word Sehnsucht in English. However, Americans can cite specific life longings just like Germans can. They are similar in substance, too, although Americans often appear to have religious life longings, unlike the test subjects in Germany.
logical concept, distinct from categories such as goals or regrets. “None of these concepts entirely corresponds to life longings,” explains Susanne Scheibe. When you regret something, you experience only negative feelings – guilt, shame, sorrow, bitterness. People traditionally regret (what they see as) wrong decisions. Regrets therefore focus on negative outcomes in one’s life, whereas life longings aim at the attainment of an optimal state.

Furthermore, regret is associated with feelings of personal failure, without any of the positive energy of a life longing. In an emotional sense, goals are exclusively positive, without any bitterness; they are purely future-oriented. People set their goals and proceed – at least in most cases – to take action. “Goals are more specific,” as Alexandra Freund puts it, “and are perceived as something attainable and controllable.” All of this fits with the function psychologists ascribe to goals: they guide our daily conduct. Life longings, on the other hand, are vague and abstract. “No one would say ‘I long for a doctorate,’” says Dana Kotter-Grühn.

THE DESIRE TO HAVE CHILDREN: FROM GOAL TO LIFE LONGING

One of the studies headed by Dana Kotter-Grühn shed light on the longing to have children. For many women of childbearing age, having children is a central goal in life. The questions raised in the study were: Can a goal become a life longing if the goal recedes into the distance or is no longer attainable? And does having this life longing bring any benefits? To this end, 168 childless women between the ages of 35 and 55 used a standardized self-report method to provide information on, for example, how important the desire to have children is or was to them, how long they had had this desire, how much they had invested in it mentally, and how realistic they considered their chances of having a child to be. Finally, on the basis of certain criteria, the women were able to assess whether their desire to have children was a goal or a life longing.

“Many of the women cannot shake the desire,” says Dana Kotter-Grühn, summarizing an initial finding of the study. “Even if their chances of its being realized are approaching zero.” The more a woman had invested in it, the slimmer were her chances of detaching emotionally from the desire. As long as a woman saw her desire to have children as a goal, its fulfillment appeared to be a realistic prospect to her. But if a woman longed for a child, the attainability aspect played but a minor role.

“All of these women have had this desire for a long time,” explains the psychologist, “and the goal has become a life longing.” The stronger the life longing, the less likely it is that the desire to have children will become a reality. However, the study also found that, during the gradual transition phase, the goal and the life longing can both exist in parallel in a woman’s mind for some time – in these cases, the hope remains alive, even though its attainability “is a good way off,” in Kotter-Grühn’s words.

One thing stands out when you look at the connection between the longing for a child and a woman’s well-being: “Women who are desperate for a child feel bad.” But as soon as the women say a mental ‘stop’ to the melancholy and thus gain cognitive control over the longing, “they savor the sweet aspect of the longing to the full and feel better than the others,” explains Dana Kotter-Grühn. In these cases, the stronger the longing, the better! For these women – about a third of all study participants – being unable to shake the desire to have children was not such a problem.

This also confirms Paul Baltes’ second hypothesis: Life longings can be a way of coping with loss and dealing with blocked life goals. Just when that happens and how – these are questions for the next life longing studies – as is whether people can learn strategies that enable them to use life longings for their own benefit.