CHILDHOOD MENTAL TRAUMAS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF FORGIVENESS

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Summary

Background: Childhood trauma can disrupt one's sense of the meaning of life. Forgiveness can be an important strategy in restoring the meaning of life and gaining a new meaning. In this context, the present study aims to test the theoretical model evaluating the hypothesis that forgiveness repairs the meaning of life deteriorated after traumas and makes positive contributions.

Subjects and Methods: A total of 552 individuals, 369 female (66.8%) and 183 male (33.2%), participated in the study. The sample group of the study was found by using a convenience sampling method via online survey. Introductory information form, The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-28), Heartland Forgiveness Scale, and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire were used as data collection instruments. Means and standard deviations of the variables and the correlation coefficients between the variables were calculated using descriptive analysis and Pearson correlation. The hypothesized model was tested by using structural equation modelling.

Results: In the model, childhood traumas have a negative and significant direct effect on forgiveness (β:-.362) and meaning in life (β:-.256). Forgiveness has a positive and significant effect on meaning in life (β:.715). Also, the mediating (indirect) effect of forgiveness in the relationship between childhood mental traumas and meaning in life was statistically significant (β:-.259).

Conclusions: Structural equation modeling showed that forgiveness was the mediating variable affecting changing meaning in life after traumas. With this result, it can be said that forgiveness is an important intervention tool in the process of making life meaningful.

Keywords: child abuse; childhood trauma; forgiveness; meaning in life; neglect.

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INTRODUCTION

The traumatic experience is defined as an event in which a person experiences or witnesses a real death or a death threat, a severe injury, or a threat to bodily integrity (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Compelling events that affect a person's ability to cope negatively such as natural disasters, wars, sexual or physical assault, torture, emotional and physical abuse in childhood, and accidents are reported as traumatic experiences (Öztürk & Erdinç 2020). It is emphasized that unlike daily stressful events, traumatic events lead to important changes in the victim's life and have many physical and mental effects on the victim (Van Der Kolk et al. 2019). These effects include psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, alcohol and substance use disorder, suicide, self-harm, eating disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder (DePierro et al. 2019). It is known that traumatic experiences make individuals powerless and desperate; and make their coping system ineffective by taking away their control of life (Yüksel 2000). According to Herman

(1992), in this aspect, traumatic experiences disrupt the usual behaviour system, which gives individuals a sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman 1992). In this context, one of the most in-depth and most harmful consequences of traumas is an erosion of a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Solomon 2004). It has been shown that the meaning of life is most intertwined with the question "Why did this happen to me?" and that individuals try to give meaning to life again in this context (Park 2010, Steger 2012). It was theorized by Frankl (1963) that the meaning of life is distorted after traumas, while finding a meaning for life can help dealing with traumas (Frankl 1963, Steger 2012, Wolf et al. 2010). It has been assumed that making sense of a traumatic event helps the person to adapt to and cope with that event, and finding a meaningful interpretation creates a response to the emergence of that negative event (Fife 1995, Silver & Updegraff 2012, Updegraff et al. 2008). Similarly, related studies have shown that finding positive inferences or making sense of negative events facilitates adaptation processes (Davis et al. 2010). Considering that traumas

take individuals' power to control their lives, it can be said that finding the meaning again repairs the feeling of control (Heintzelman & King 2014, Koolhaas et al. 2011, Napier et al. 2008).

In addition to stressful events eroding the meaning of life, forgiveness is an important factor in repairing the eroded meaning and recreating a meaning (Van Tongeren et al. 2015). Forgiveness is a process in which an individual gradually changes the negative feelings (for exp. anger, avoidance, revenge) towards the event, self, and the offender with positive feelings (for exp. empathy, sympathy, affection) gradually (Strelan & Covic 2006). When traumas occur, feelings of anger, avoidance, or revenge often intensify when the victim thinks that he/she is exposed to injustice (Van Tongeren et al. 2012). The inconsistency between how the victim deals with the injustice and the actual state of injustice creates "a gap of injustice" (Exline et al. 2003). Individuals may use a large number of ways to decrease injustice; to restore justice, to take revenge, to hold a grudge, to punish, to forget, to understand, and to forgive (Van Tongeren et al. 2015, Worthington 2014). In this respect, forgiveness may have a role in decreasing the effects of stressful life experiences by intervening in the gap of injustice (Van Tongeren et al. 2015, Worthington & Wade 2019).

When the current literature was reviewed, it was found that the relationships between mental traumas and forgiveness and meaning of life have been examined, while no studies were found in our literature review in which a conceptualization that included these three variables together was tested with a structural model. Although it is known that the existing concepts are used in the treatment of traumas, making contributions to interventions with theoretical models can be stimulating for future research.

In the light of existing information, we assume that mental traumas distort the meaning of life, finding meaning and search for meaning makes a significant contribution in rebuilding the distorted meaning, and forgiveness supports the search for meaning with its intervention to a gap of injustice that develops (Toussaint et al. 2017). In other words, forgiveness can restore meaning by providing an integrative perspective to the lost meaning in life. Following the literature review, it was found that the relationship of these concepts with each other was examined a large number of times (Silver & Updegraff 2012, Van Tongeren et al. 2012, Worthington 2014), while our review showed that the existing relationships were not discussed by establishing a structural equation modelling. We established a structural equation model to test this assumption, placed forgiveness as a mediating variable in the relationship between mental traumas and meaning in life, and aimed to evaluate the existing relationships with

this model tested. To do that we conducted this study on general population in Turkey.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Research Model

The present study tests the mediating effect of forgiveness in the effect of childhood mental traumas on the meaning of life. In line with this purpose, the present study is based on a correlational survey model, one of the general survey models.

Sample and Procedure

The sample group of the study was found by using an convenience sampling method. Participants consist of 552 adult individuals older than 18 years of age. The data were collected with an online survey between June 10 and 30, 2020. The invitation survey link was shared via social media platforms to reach the participants. Before starting the study, the study's aim was explained to all of the participants. They were told that the data's confidentiality would be protected, and the data would be used only for academic purposes. The informed consent form was taken from each participant who agreed to participate in the study. Participants were informed about that they were free to not parcipitate or leave the study in any step, but it was required to answer all questions to be able to complete the questionnarie, therefore there were no questionnaires that were incomplete. There was 557 questionnaries completed but 5 participant were excluded from the study due to being under the age of 18 during the review of the data. Personal information form, Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-28), Heartland Forgiveness Scale, and Meaning in Life Questionnaire were used as data collection instruments. Ethical approval was taken from clinical researches ethics committee to conduct the present study.

Data Collection Instruments

Personal Information Form. The personal information form consists of questions including information about the participants' age, gender, level of education, marital status, and socio-economic level.

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) Short version. The scale, which included 53 items when it was first developed by Bernstein et al. (2003), was reduced to 28 items by the same researchers (Bernstein et al. 2003). This 5-Likert type scale is evaluated in five sub-dimensions:

childhood sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and also physical and emotional neglect. A total score is obtained from these five sub-dimensions. Three items that evaluate trauma denial are not included in the total score. The scale was adapted to Turkish culture by Şar et al. (2012), and Cronbach alpha value was found as .93 (Bernstein et al. 2003, Sar et al. 2012).

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). This scale, which Thompson et al. (2005) developed, includes 18 items and measures the individual's level of forgiveness (Thompson et al. 2005). The scale has three sub-dimensions as forgiving self, others, and the situation. High scores taken from each sub-dimension and total of the 7-Likert type scale indicate that the individual has a high forgiveness level. Bugay and Demir (2010) adapted the scale to Turkish culture, and Cronbach alpha value was found as .81 (Bugay & Demir 2010, Thompson et al. 2005).

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire. This 7-Likert type questionnaire, which Steger developed, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006) to measure meaning in life, includes ten items (Steger 2012). The scale has two sub-dimensions as presence and search. High scores taken from the sub-dimensions of the scale show that the individual has a high level of having that sub-dimension feature. High scores taken from the total scale show that the individual has a high level of having meaning in life. The scale was adapted to Turkish culture by Akın and Taş (2011) (Akın 2015). Cronbach alpha value was found as .77 for presence sub-dimension and as .83 for search sub-dimension (Akın 2015, Steger 2012).

Data Analysis

In this study, SPSS 24.0 and AMOS 23.0 statistical applications were used to test the hypotheses. Means and standard deviations of the variables and the correlation coefficients between the variables were calculated using descriptive analysis and Pearson correlation. The hypothesized model was tested by using structural equation modelling. In Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), maximum likelihood estimation model was used. In SEM analyses, the fit of the model obtained was evaluated by using the goodness of fit indices. The goodness of fit indices used was chi-square (CMIN), chi-square/degree of freedom (CMIN / df), root mean square error of approach (RMSEA), Goodness of fit index (GFI), and CFI. In literature, the criteria for good model fit are CMIN / df <3.0 / 5.0, RMSEA <0.08, GFI <0.90, ve CFI <0.90. Also,

to examine the direct and indirect effect caused by the three variables of the model, the significance of the indirect path coefficient from the independent variable to the dependent variable in the presence of mediating variable and bootstrapping were used.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

Five hundred fifty-two individuals between the ages of 18 and 64 participated in the study (Mean:31.19, SD:8.93). 369 (66.8%) were female, while 183 (33.2%) were male. 65 (11.8%) were primary and high school graduates, while 340 (61.6%) were undergraduates and 147 were postgraduates. While 351 (69%) of the participants had a relationship, 201 (31%) did not. 80 (14.5%) of the participants stated that they did not have a job, while 472 (85.5%) stated that they worked in a job. Other variables related to socio-demographic data are shown in Table-1.

Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics

		(n)	(%)
Gender	Female	369	66,8
	Male	183	33,2
Educational Status	Primary/ high school	65	11,8
	Undergraduate	340	61,6
	Postgraduate	147	26,6
Relationship Status	No relationship/ divorced	201	36,4
	Dating, boyfriend/ girlfriend/engaged	180	32,6
	Married	171	31,0
Who are you living with	Alone	95	17,2
	With my spouse and/or children	168	30,4
	With my parents	208	37,7
	With my friends	44	8,0
	Other	37	6,7
Level of income	250 $ and less	136	24,6
	250 $ TL – 500 $	157	28,4
	500 $ – 750 $	113	20,5
	750 $ – 1000 $	60	10,9
	1000 $ and more	86	15,6

Correlations between means, standard deviation, and the variables

Correlations between means, standard deviation, and the variables are shown in Tables 2 and 3. In the data analysis stage, Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to test the associations between the main variables of the study. Table 3 shows the associations of all variables with each other. As another finding, it can be said that sexual abuse did not have any correlations with other scale scores. While other traumatic experiences were found to have small and moderate level correlations with meaning in life and forgiveness, no such correlation was found in sexual abuse. Also, a significant positive correlation was found between the "search" sub-dimension and only emotional neglect.

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, and min-max values of the scales

Scales	Mean	SD	Min-max
CTQ_EAbuse	8.28	4.27	5-25
CTQ_PAbuse	6.48	3.53	5-25
CTQ_PNeglect	7.18	2.84	5-21
CTQ_ENeglect	11.42	5.04	5-25
CTQ_SAbuse	6.69	4.08	5-25
HFS_Self	27.63	6.25	9-42
HFS_Other	25.17	7.69	6-42
HFS_Situation	27.77	7.11	6-42
MLQ_Existing	25.47	6.60	5-35
MLQ_Finding	24.60	7.75	5-35

CTQ: Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, HFS: Heartland Forgiveness Scale, MLQ: Meaning in Life Questionnaire

Results of the Structural Equation Modelling

After significant correlations were found between childhood traumas, forgiveness, and meaning in life, which are the study variables, the structural equation modelling shown in Figure 1 was established. With this model, it was hypothesized that childhood traumas had an effect on meaning in life and that forgiveness had a mediating role in this effect. When the fit indices of the assumed model were examined, it was found that the model fit indices met the required values. The goodness of fit values obtained was found as CMIN/DF:4.006, GFI:.977, CFI:.957, sRMR:.043, RMSEA:.074 (p<.001).

Direct, indirect, and total effects of childhood traumas, forgiveness, and meaning in life were tested by using the bootstrap estimation procedure (a bootstrap sample of 2000 was specified). Table 4 and Figure 2 show the results of the hypothetical model. The whole model was found to explain 71% of the variance on meaning in life and 13% of the variance on forgiveness. In the model, the direct effect of childhood traumas on forgiveness (β:-.362) and meaning in life (β:-.256) was negative and significant. The direct effect of forgiveness on meaning in life (β:.715) was positive and significant. In addition, the mediating effect (indirect effect) of forgiveness in the relationship between childhood traumas and meaning in life was found to be statistically significant (β:-.259). The hypothesis established with Figure 1 was tested and confirmed with the structural equation modeling shown in Figure 2. The current results show that meaning in life and forgiveness decrease as childhood traumas increase. Besides, it has been shown that meaning in life increases as forgiveness increases, while forgiveness has a significant role as mediating variable in the negative effect of mental traumas on meaning in life.

Table 3: Correlations between the scales

Scales	HFS_Self	HFS_Situation	HFS_Other	MLQ_Existing	MLQ_Finding
CTQ_EAbuse	-,266**	-,193**	-,095*	-,216**	,092*
CTQ_PAbuse	-,095*	-,092*	-,092*	-,072	-,019
CTQ_PNeglect	-,155**	-,082*	-,117**	,003	,066
CTQ_ENeglect	-,299**	-,254**	-,122**	-,150**	,132**
CTQ_SAbuse	-,074	-,040	-,016	-,018	,042
MLQ_Existing	,285**	,343**	,141**	-	-
MLQ_Finding	-,152**	-,147**	,042	-	-
HFS_Other	,284**	,460**	-	-	-
HFS_Situation	,600**	-	-	-	-
HFS_Self	-	-	-	-	-

**p<0.001, *p<0.05, CTQ: Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, HFS: Heartland Forgiveness Scale, MLQ: Meaning in Life Questionnaire

Table 4: Total, direct, indirect effects and 95% confidence interval values of the final model

Variables	β	SE	95 %CI-Lower Bounds	95 %CI-Lower Bounds	p
Total effect					
F1>F2	-.515	.109	-.586	-.214	.010
Direct effect					
F1>F2	-.256	.107	-.396	-.047	.047
F1>F3	-.362	.083	-.528	-.243	.012
F3>F2	.715	.087	.379	.658	.018
Indirect effect					
F1 > F3 > F2	-.259	.050	-.293	-.124	.009

F1: Childhood Traumas, F2: Meaning in Life, F3: Forgiveness

Figure 1: Hypothesized model
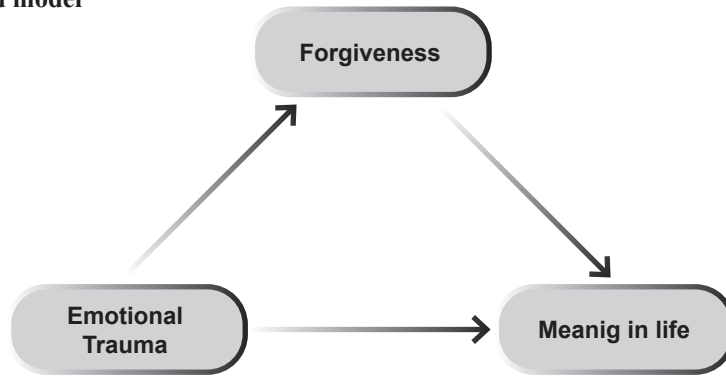
Figure 2: Structural Equation Modelling
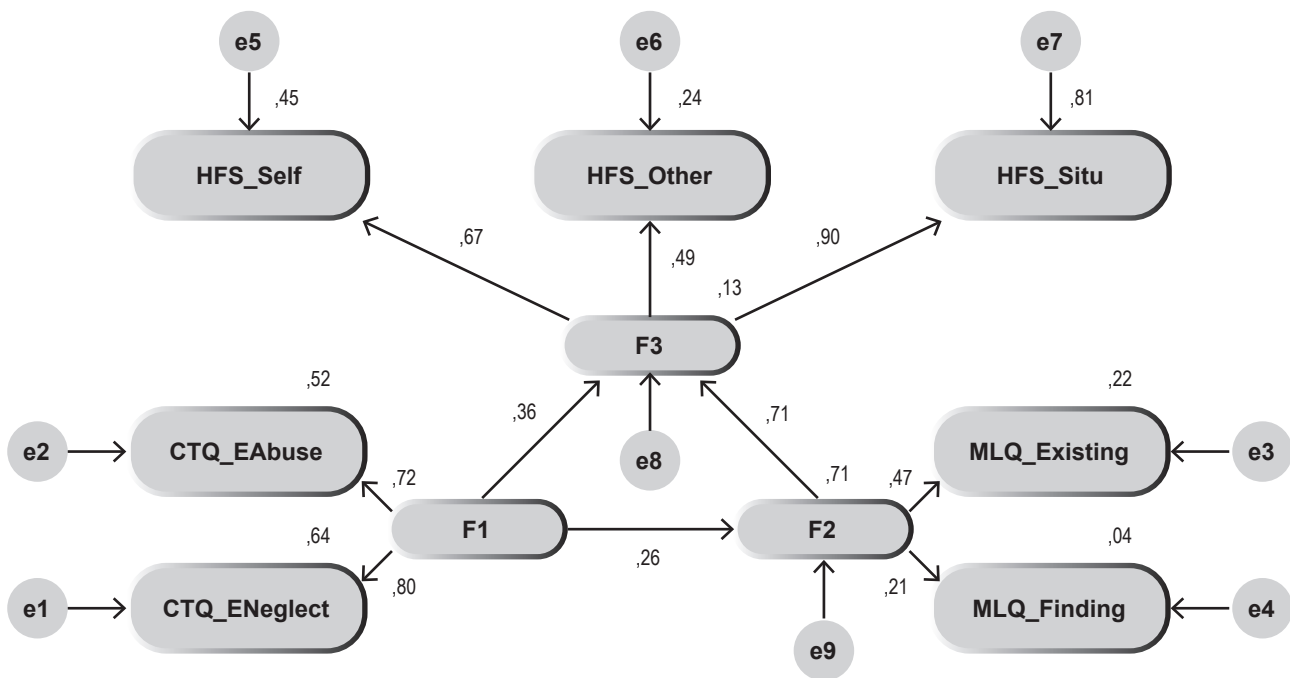
F1: Childhood traumas, F2: Meaning in life, F3: Forgiveness

DISCUSSION

The present study aims to determine the role of forgiveness in the relationship between emotional traumas and meaning in life. For this purpose, the relationships between the sub-dimensions of the scales related to emotional trauma, meaning in life, and forgiveness were examined. The structural equation modelling results showed that especially emotional traumas had a negative effect on the meaning of life, and forgiveness had a mediating role in this effect. It was found that especially traumas with a heavy emotional burden had a negative effect on individuals' capacity of forgiveness, while the high capacity of forgiveness supported the meaning of life positively.

The present study results showed that emotional neglect and abuse in particular, stood out in the relationship between childhood traumas and meaning in life. It has been shown in the literature that emotional neglect and abuse in children cause a negative effect on meaning in life (Weibel et al. 2017). It has been emphasized that this effect is moderate and high in terms of emotional neglect and abuse, while it shows small correlations in terms of physical and sexual abuse (Pilkington et al. 2020). This result of the present study supports the literature.

Behaviours such as being left alone, despising, frequently criticizing, not paying attention, excessive pressure, sarcasm, intimidation, threatening and overprotection (Kütük et al. 2017, Vidourek 2017) may interfere with the basic representations and schemas of life, such as the development of a sense of security, formation of solid self-esteem and formation of healthy attachment, especially in childhood (Pilkington et al. 2020). Early maladaptive schemas begin to form when the nature of a child's earliest relationships with caregivers begins to tell them who they are and what the world is like, and once established, early schemas remain stable throughout life (Nicol et al. 2020), therefore it has strong influence on meaning of life. In this context, the loss of individuals' healthy schemas and representations about self, the others, and the world may disrupt life events' healthy representations. Emotional neglect and abuse related maladaptive schemas have been found to cause a decline in mental health and result in various psychiatric problems; including depression, personality disorders and attachment difficulties (Nicol et al. 2020, Pilkington et al. 2020).

Another hypothesis evaluated in the model is the relationship between emotional neglect and abuse and individuals' capacity to forgive. Existing findings have shown that emotional traumas negatively affect forgiveness, and there is a decrease in forgiveness as traumas increase. Forgiveness is a process in which an individual gradually

turns negative feelings (for exp. anger, avoidance, revenge) towards an offender into positive feelings (for exp. empathy, sympathy, compassion) (Strelan & Covic 2006). However, emotional traumas, especially in childhood, are often caused by primary caregivers (Kütük et al. 2017). Children's experiencing these from primary care givers who meet their needs such as protection and care may be a factor reducing forgiveness. Especially emotional traumas that start at an early age when children's abstraction capacity is not developed may cause them to perceive the events as their own fault. Individuals who grow up thinking that what happened is their fault may become less forgiving of themselves and the situation (Street et al. 2005). In parallel with our results, the existing literature shows the relationship between traumas and forgiveness (Doran et al. 2012, Finch 2007, Karairmak & Güloğlu 2014).

Another important finding of the study is that the mediating role of forgiveness in the theoretical model established between mental traumas and meaning in life was significant. Meaning in life, which is disrupted with traumas, is supported positively by forgiveness's mediating effect. In other words, the effect of forgiveness on the reconstruction of meaning in life is significant and positive. This positive relationship between forgiveness and meaning in life is supported by the existing literature (Van Tongeren et al. 2015). Forgiveness can play the role of attributing a new meaning to the meaning gap created by emotional traumas (Van Tongeren et al. 2013). The feeling that life can be controlled can disappear with the effect of traumas, and forgiveness can be contributing to this feeling of control by adding a new meaning to life (Toussaint et al. 2017). Traumas can also damage the sense of justice, which is another important representation of life. Forgiveness can repair this gap in order to alleviate the perceived injustice (Worthington & Wade 2019). Also, forgiveness may mediate the restoration of broken relationships. Re-strengthening relationships can reduce people's gap of meaning and support developing a new sense of security (Van Tongeren et al. 2016). In this context, forgiveness can be an intervention tool for creating meaning created by emotional traumas (Akhtar & Barlow 2018).

LIMITATIONS

The present study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the possibility of interfering with causal relationships. The model put forward to verify the mediating effect was created by the researchers and should be validated in future studies. Also, the fact that the data collection process was maintained online and the sampling method used was another

limitation of the study. The fact that the presence of traumatic experiences was not considered individually but collected with a scale and the retrospective memory bias may be other limitations of the study.

CONCLUSION

Emotional neglect and abuse during childhood is associated with impaired meaning in life. Forgiveness has a mediating effect between mental traumas and meaning in life. In the treatment of emotional traumas, forgiveness can play an important role in the content of interventions to meaning problems.

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