

## The Sense of Belonging as a Predictor of Life Goals among Turkish Counselor Candidates

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to examine the predictive roles of three domains of the sense of belonging (family, friends, occupation) on intrinsic and extrinsic life goals in a sample of Turkish Counseling and Guidance undergraduate students. 189 participants (151 females, 38 males) completed the Belonging Scale and the Life Goals Scale. Results of stepwise multiple regression analyses revealed that belonging to counseling profession and friends together are positive predictors of intrinsic life goals. Belonging to counseling profession is the strongest predictor of intrinsic life goals among counselor trainees. However, none of the three domains of the sense of belonging are predictors of extrinsic life goals. Results are discussed with regard to implications for counselor education.

**Keywords:** Sense of belonging, Life goals, Counselor candidates.

Counselor education in Turkey is a relatively new field, starting at the 1960s (Kuzgun, 1991). Therefore, how to select and educate counselor candidates is an important focus of interest. Although, in Turkish higher education system, it is not possible to consider personal characteristics of the applicants as a part of undergraduate counselor education programs' selection processes, it is still an essential responsibility of Turkish counselor educators to examine and improve the positive and appropriate personal characteristics of the candidates during their training years, since personal characteristics of a counselor have the potential to determine the effectiveness in working with clients (Hutchinson, 2012), and delivering the best services and serving ethical as a counselor is closely related to the "person" of the counselor.

In counseling literature, there have been many attempts to list the specific characteristics of effective counselors (e.g., Cormier & Cormier, 1998; Hackney & Cormier, 2005; Pope, 1996). Some of the listed characteristics are teachable, whereas others seem least teachable. To focus on the improvable is a task for counselor educators. The focus of this study, investigating counselor trainees in regard to their life goals and belonging levels, is a topic of "personal development" of counselor trainees. Examining the association between those two personal characteristics has a potential to provide a more comprehensive understanding of personal characteristics of counselor trainees.

#### Life goals among counselor candidates

Defined as the personally meaningful pursuits that we construe for ourselves and try to attain in our everyday activity (Brunstein, 1993) life goals are our aspirations for who we want to become and what kind of life we want to live (McAdams, 1994). In the literature, based on their content, life goals classified into two categories as intrinsic (e.g. self-acceptance, community feeling, and physical health) and extrinsic (e.g. financial success, attractiveness, and popularity) life goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996, 2001). While the former focus on inherent psychological needs common to all humans – e.g. autonomy, relatedness, competence, growth-, the latter focus on more controlled, stressful and ego-involved activities (e.g. gaining rewards, approval). As a result, in many studies intrinsic goals associated with higher well-being indicators (e.g greater psychological well-being, less depression, fewer physical symptoms, healthier lifestyles, adjustment), whereas extrinsic goals associated with lower well-being indicators (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Kasser & Ryan, 2001; Niemiec, Ryan & Deci, 2009; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Vansteenkiste et al., 2007).

However, considering socio-economic and cultural differences, the relationship between intrinsic life goals and positive well-being seems more definite in the literature, whereas in regard to extrinsic life goals researchers reported either negative correlations or no correlation with well-being (Martos & Kopp, 2012; Ryan et.al., 1999). According to Sheldon and Kasser (2008), when people are threatened existentially, economically, or interpersonally, they orient more towards extrinsic goals rather than intrinsic ones.

Although there is no specific empirical research on the life goals of counselor candidates, regarding the literature on life goals it could be expected that a focus on having intrinsic life goals rather than extrinsic ones seems to be more compatible with the characteristics of an effective counselor.

#### The sense of belonging (SB) of counselor trainees

As a broad and widely accepted concept, SB has been examined in studies throughout numerous fields (e.g., education, psychology, sociology, psychiatry, nursing, geography, anthropology, and religion). In psychology literature, the ability to connect with others and feel an SB has been recognized as a primary human goal/need, since Adler's (1991) theory of Individual Psychology and Maslow's (1954) theory of human motivation. Recently Hagerty and colleagues (1992) defined SB as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves be an integral part of that system or environment" (p.173).

For many years, deficits in SB have been associated with problems in both social and psychological functioning, whereas a high level of SB has been associated with psychological and social functioning (Hagerty, Williams, Coyne & Early, 1996; Hagerty & Williams, 1999). However, most studies published to date in the higher education literature on the SB have been focused on the sense of school belonging, and its correlates. Results of these studies revealed links with psychological outcomes such as positive self-perceptions (Pittman & Richmond, 2008); depression (Hagerty & Williams, 1999), and suicidal ideation (Ploskonka & Servaty-Seib, 2015), as well as academic outcomes such as motivation, engagement, and achievement (Zumbrunn et al., 2014).

Additionally, most of the SB studies in higher education have been focused on the experiences of some special groups of students, such as racial/ethnic minorities (e.g. Gummadam, Pittman & Ioffe, 2016); first generation students (Stebbleton, Soria & Huesma, 2014); working-class students (Soria & Stebbleton, 2013); or students with disabilities

(Vaccaro & Daly-Cano, 2015). Despite the theory and research support on the crucial role of SB in the development of a healthy personality, the SB of counselor candidates has not yet been researched in the literature.

### The Present Study

The aim of this study was to examine the predictive effects of SB on intrinsic and extrinsic life goals in a Turkish undergraduate counselor trainees population. Although dimensions of SB is under debate in the literature (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Malone, Pillow & Osman, 2012), three domains (family, friends, occupation) proposed by Ersanlı and Koçyiğit (2013) used in the study. It was hypothesized that each of the domains of SB would be significantly and positively associated with intrinsic life goals. Given the emphasis previous research has placed on the culture and threat sensitive nature of extrinsic life goals, unique contributions of all three domains of SB to extrinsic life goals, were not predicted.

### Method

#### *Participants*

This study was conducted on 189 volunteers, who composed 66,08% percent of the total number (N= 286) of undergraduate Counseling and Guidance students in a Turkish state university, at the fall semester of the 2015-2016 academic year. Freshmen composed 25.4% (n=48) of the sample. Sophomores, juniors and seniors composed 24.9 % (n=47) , 28.0% (n=53), and 21.7% (n=41) of the sample, respectively. Of all the participants 151 (79.9%) were females and 38 (20.1%) were males. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 29 with a mean of 20.21 (SD=1.81).

#### *Measures*

Two measures developed by studies carried out on Turkish undergraduate students were used to collect data. Participants were also asked for basic demographic information (age, gender, grade level).

The Belonging Scale (BS). The BS developed by Ersanlı and Koçyiğit (2013) to measure SB on a five-point Likert-type scale, with 22 items and three factors (family, friends, occupation). The possible total scores from the scale range between 22 and 110. The scale demonstrates adequate validity (exploratory and confirmatory factor analyzes) and reliability

evidence (.90, .88, .89, .88 Cronbach  $\alpha$ -coefficients for the total scale, and family, friends, and occupation subscales, respectively; and item-total score correlations ranged between .43 and .75).

The Life Goals Scale (LGS). Based on Self-determination theory, the LGS developed by İlhan (2009), to measure life goals on a seven-point Likert-type scale, with 47 items and two top factors (intrinsic and extrinsic life goals) and nine sub-factors (contribution to society, interpersonal relationships, meaningful life, contribution to family, physical health, personal development, financial success, being famous/recognition and image/attractiveness). The sub-factors of the LGS explain 64.1% of the total variance while the top two factors explain 61.3%. Cronbach's  $\alpha$ -coefficients of the scale ranged between .74 and .93 for sub-factors, whereas the coefficient was .85 for intrinsic goals, and .77 for extrinsic goals top factors.

### *Procedure and Data Analysis*

Before the data collection phase, approval to carry out the data gathering activity was sought from the university administration and the participants' professors. Additionally, participants informed regarding the aims and measures of the study both with written and oral instructions. Anonymity was guaranteed. Participants were administered the instruments in classroom settings, before the class hours. The administration took about 15 minutes. No prize was given to the participants. SPSS 20.00 was used for all data analyses. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to investigate the relationships between life goals and SB scores. Stepwise multiple regression analyses (SMRA) were performed to investigate the predictive effects of SB scores on life goals.

### Results

Two separate SMLRAs were conducted to predict the effects of the independent variables (belonging to family, friends, occupation) on two separate dependent variables (intrinsic-extrinsic life goals). Before conducting the analyses, crucial assumptions were checked out for SMLRA. In terms of sample size requirements, Tabachnick and Fidell's (2001) formula  $N > 50 + 8m$  ( $m$ =number of independent variables) was used ( $189 > 50+8.3$ ). The data also met the recommended ratio (forty cases for every independent variable) criterion for SMLRA. Univariate outliers were checked through visual inspection of histogram and frequency distributions, and multivariate outliers were checked by taking into consideration of Mahalanobis distance (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). No outliers exceeding

the critical value (16.27) for three independent variables were detected. To examine the normality, descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis; visual inspection of data (Osborne & Waters, 2002) were conducted. Finally, no intercorrelation higher than .80 among independent variables, no tolerance value less than .20, and no VIF higher than 4 were detected indicating no multicollinearity (Stevens, 2002). Results presented in Table 1. show descriptive statistics for and intercorrelations among variables.

*Table 1*  
Descriptive Statistics for and Correlations among Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intrinsic goals					
2. Extrinsic goals	.34**				
3. SB to family	.21*	.12			
4. SB to friends	.37**	.09	.37**		
5. SB to occupation	.39**	.12	.31**	.32**	
<i>M</i>	203.32	78.05	27.28	30.37	38.65
<i>SD</i>	16.56	15.27	3.04	4.03	5.29
Skewness	-.68	-.66	-1.45	-.86	-1.14
Kurtosis	-.36	-.35	-.35	-.35	-.35
Cronbach's $\alpha$	.82	.80	.86	.88	.89

Not: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

Results of the Pearson product-moment correlation analysis revealed significant positive correlations between intrinsic life goals and all three SB scores. Intrinsic life goals found to be correlated with SB to family ( $r = .21, p < .05$ ), SB to friends ( $r = .37; p < .01$ ), and SB to occupation ( $r = .39, p < .01$ ). As SB to family, friends, and occupation scores increased, intrinsic life goals scores increased. However, external life goals were not found as a significant correlate of SB to family, friends or occupation. Further, two separate SMRA's were performed to examine the predictive effects of the three domains of SB on intrinsic-extrinsic goals. Table 2. shows the results of the first SMRA, conducting for the predictors of intrinsic goals.

*Table 2*  
SMRA Results for Variables Predicting Intrinsic Goals

Variables	B	SE of B	$\beta$	t
Step 1				
SB to occupation	1.22	.211	.39	5.77*
Step 2				
SB to occupation	.94	.214	.30	4.40*
SB to friends	1.14	.280	.28	4.06*

Note. \* $p < .001$ .

SB to occupation accounted for 15% of the variance in intrinsic goals ( $R^2 = .15$ , Adj.  $R^2 = .15$ ,  $F(1, 187) = 33.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ). SB to friends, when entered at the second step, accounted for an additional 6% of the variance. Overall, SB to occupation and SB to friends explained 21.3% of the total variance in intrinsic goals ( $R^2 = .47$ , Adj.  $R^2 = .22$ ,  $F(2, 186) = 26.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This model as a whole is statistically significant. The t- test results also showed that the variables of SB to occupation and SB to friends, both had significant influences on intrinsic goals, and that SB to occupation was the strongest predictor. However, in the second SMRA for the predictors of extrinsic goals, no variable entered into the regression equation, indicating that SB to family, friends or occupation are not predictors of extrinsic goals.

### Discussion

This study examined the degree to which the three domains of SB explained intrinsic and extrinsic life goals among Turkish undergraduate counselor students. As hypothesized based on previous studies on the associations between intrinsic life goals and healthy personality (Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Kasser & Ryan, 2001; Niemiec, Ryan & Deci, 2009; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Vansteenkiste et al., 2007), both belonging to counseling profession (the strongest predictor) and belonging to friends appeared to have positive predictive relationships to counselor trainees' intrinsic life goals. Also, in line with previous studies on the ambiguous correlations or uncorrelations between extrinsic life goals and well-being (e.g. Martos & Kopp, 2012; Ryan et al., 1999) none of the three domains of SB appeared as significant predictors of extrinsic life goals. Belonging to the family, despite its low relationship with intrinsic life goals, is the only SB-domain which did not predict intrinsic life goals.

Finding a relationship between belonging to the counseling profession and having appropriately intrinsic life goals for counselor candidates was an expected result for this

study. Similarly, considering that the most impactful relationships for an adolescent and young adult are the relationships with their peers (Berndt, 1996), it was expected to find a predictive effect of belonging to friends together with belonging to counseling profession on intrinsic life goals. The only surprising finding in this study was that belonging to family did not predict intrinsic life goals. However, considering college years as the 'leaving home and becoming a single young adult' stage of life, probably for young counselor trainees, belonging to family became less important than belonging to occupation and friends.

These findings have implications for counselor educators, college counseling centers, and researchers concerned with the development of undergraduate students. To facilitate counselor trainees' belonging to their occupation and friends seems a key element. Therefore, counselor educators could provide opportunities for their students to examine and expand themselves personally in terms of their SB and life goals. Even answering questions of measures used in this study could be an opportunity for an "examined self" for the counselor trainees. Additionally, specific prevention (e.g. orientation programs, first-year seminars, common book experiences, etc.) and intervention programs could be useful to foster SB and intrinsic life goals of counselor trainees. The effectiveness of these programs could be examined by empirical studies.

Additionally, future research on undergraduate counselor trainees could search other types of academic or social activities they engage in, and the effects of this kind of participation in SB and life goals. For instance, Soria, Troisi, and Stebleton (2012) reported that participation in community service is positively associated with students' SB in college years. If students found community service on their own SB decreases, but if they connected through other organizations SB increases. Similarly, in Adlerian theory (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) contributing to others is a primary way to achieve the goal of belonging. Accordingly, promoting students to engage in opportunities for community service efforts could be helpful. Further studies could investigate undergraduate counselor trainees' participation in community service in relation to their SB and life goals.

#### Limitations

This study has several limitations, which need to be addressed in future studies. First, causality cannot be stated in this study, because of the correlational study design. Second, this study based on self-reports of the participants. And third, since data collection for this study took place at a single institution, the generalizability of the findings to all counselor trainees

in Turkey is limited. Examining the effects of SB improvement interventions or programs on students' intrinsic life goals' development; replicating this study with a more representative sample of colleges including counseling undergraduate programs across the country; and collecting multi-sources data to reduce single-source biases would be useful ways for future studies to eliminate these shortcomings.

### Conclusion

Findings from this study have demonstrated that the more counselor candidates feel belonging to their future profession and to their current friends the more they have intrinsic life goals which in turn have the potential to affect their effectiveness as a counselor. This result supports the need to foster the development of specific prevention and intervention strategies for counselor trainees to improve their belonging both to counseling profession and to friends. Accordingly, counselor educators, in hand with college counselors, academic advisors, other student affair practitioners, and college administrators, could provide opportunities to help counseling students to improve their “person”, in addition to the professionally required counselor skills, during undergraduate years.

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