

# **Exploring the Sense of Coherence in Past and Future Perspectives of Refugees**

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## **Bachelor Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the sense of coherence (SOC) as an operationalization of resilience in the context of refugees. A sense of coherence consists of viewing the world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. In the last years, many refugees who have come to Germany have experienced severe stressors and continue to do so after arriving in Germany. A need to explore their needs and how these can be met has been repeatedly expressed by researchers and therapists. Previously, the SOC has not been used to measure resilience in refugees, nor has research been conducted on how the SOC is depicted in different temporal perspectives. In this study, a qualitative approach is adopted and the SOC is explored in past, present and future perspectives of refugees. Five refugees were first asked in an interview to describe past situations in which they felt resilient. Then, they were asked to imagine a desired future, and wrote a letter from this perspective. The participants were able to think of situations in which they felt resilient, despite this often being connected to stories of hardships. On the other hand, imagining a desired future and then writing a letter from that situation was more difficult for them to conduct. All past perspectives displayed at least two components of the SOC. Of the 5 letters, 3 were found to display at least one component of the SOC. The letters were also found to be depicted more positively than the past stories. Meaningfulness appeared the most, followed by manageability and then comprehensibility. In their experiences of uncertainty, the world is perceived as less comprehensible and the future as difficult to predict, making meaningfulness more important. The meaning refugees give to the SOC in future perspectives and their ability to imagine a desired future appears to depend on the extent to which they have accepted their past. The qualitative and narrative approach captured the importance of the components of the SOC in remembering past situations of experienced resilience, and also for imagining a desired future. This approach appears to be promising to give individuals the chance to express and possibly enhance their sense of coherence. Therefore, future research should focus on finding ways to strengthen the SOC of refugees, in order to enhance their coping and wellbeing.

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## **Introduction**

### **The situation of refugees in Germany**

In western, late modern society, which has experienced diverse and complex social changes in the last decades, there is an increasing speed with which the world is changing, increasing freedom to shape identities and possibly a loss of adequate frames of meaning and practical guidelines (Sools & Mooren, 2012). Future consciousness psychologist Lombardo (2006, p.37) states that in our society, “our minds are in a battle over what to believe and what to do”.

A growing part of Germany’s population that is subject to change and uncertainty in society are refugees. In the last few years, Germany has experienced a sharp increase in people, in particular, coming from war-ridden countries such as Syria (Ostrand, 2015). According to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (p.152), a refugee is somebody who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” The total number of refugees estimated to have arrived by 2015 was in the range of 1 million (Hebebrand et al., 2016). Upon arrival, refugees in Germany are covered with benefits related to essential basic needs (housing, food, clothing, and health care) which are provided at a minimum level (Bozorgmehr & Razum, 2015). Depending on their legal residence status, they are more or less restricted legally, for example regarding access to health care.

Due to past traumatic experiences and the uncertainty regarding their future, many refugees experience diverse stressors, including marginalization, socioeconomic disadvantage, acculturation difficulties, loss of social support, and “cultural bereavement”, which is the experience of living in the past after a loss of social structures, cultural values and self identity (Porter & Haslam, 2005). Acquired education, social status, familial, religious and sociocultural values shape their coping and help-seeking behavior after arriving in Germany (Hebebrand et al., 2016). Furthermore, after arrival in Germany, they often face problematic living conditions, unemployment, multiple moves, social exclusion, years of insecurity with uncertain status, and difficulties adapting to the cultural norms of the country (Hebebrand et al., 2016). People living in such precarious living conditions as refugees, influenced by economic, social and political circumstances, live in a state of continuous uncertainty. This state is also regardable as an ‘in-between’ state (Sools, Triliva, Fragkiadaki and Gkinopoulos, 2018; Rotter, 2016), and can be

conceptualized as one of ‘liminality’ (Bamber, Allen-Collinson & McCormack, 2017). Such a state may have both stressful and transitional potential for the refugee (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

It has been found that while refugees must endure a waiting period in the asylum determination process, living in a state of liminality, they are often active in the sense that they fill the time with a range of activities which are both present focused (giving meaning to everyday life) and future-focused (directed towards desired futures) (Rotter, 2016). Furthermore, during these periods they are found to have a heightened awareness of their fears, desires and future possibilities. This waiting can then either have a positive modality that is full of desire, as it is directed at something that is longed for; or a negative modality when he/she is oriented to something that is dreaded (Rotter, 2016). Furthermore, a desire for the realization of certain outcomes is important for active waiting, so that waiting can be experienced as meaningful and directed at the individuals’ needs and desires (Rotter, 2016). This indicates the relevance of future-directed waiting.

Therapists and researchers alike have made a call for new methodologies that meet the requirements of understanding the situation and needs of such vulnerable populations as refugees and have proclaimed this as a public health challenge (Wilson & Drozdek, 2004). The danger of pathologizing refugees and of ‘knowing what their illness is’ has even been identified as prevalent in the work with and treatment of refugees (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). Instead, a ‘not knowing’ approach is proposed as better, which requires that our understanding of the individual is not restricted by former experiences or theoretically formed preconceptions (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992, in Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). Instead, the client's unique truth, narrative, and experiences should be honored. For this, a diagnosis is not necessarily required. Instead, one can aim at exploring and strengthening their resilience and well-being (Davydov, Stewart, Ritchie & Chaudieu, 2010).

## **The Sense of Coherence**

**The Sense of Coherence as a measure of resilience.** Resilience has been defined in different ways (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011; Allen et al., 2011; Sools & Mooren, 2012; Levine et al., 2009; Almedom & Glandon, 2007). One concept seen as closely connected to resilience is the sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1987). The sense of coherence (SOC) deals with the ability to cope well with adversity; and between resilience and

sense of coherence, theoretical and empirical overlaps have been found, such as inner strength (Lundman et al., 2010). Other studies, e.g. by Eriksson & Landström (2006) also found that SOC correlates positively with health and well-being. The SOC has previously been utilized, also in different cultural contexts, to assess resilience in quantitative terms (Almedom, Tesfamichael, Mohammed, Mascie-Taylor, & Alemu, 2007).

Waysman, Schwarzwald, & Solomon (2001) concluded in their study on “hardiness” of war veterans in Israel that “those who view themselves as in charge of their fate (control), who are committed to meaningful goals and activities (commitment), and who view their stress as a surmountable challenge are more likely in the long run to integrate the trauma into their lives and to enjoy a satisfactory level of adjustment” (p. 545). This resonates well with the SOC and resilience propositions. Furthermore, this concept indicates a future-oriented nature of the SOC.

In the past, the SOC has been hypothesized to be a constant, stable disposition from about the age of 30 (Geyer, 1997). However, there are indications that the SOC is modifiable: Ways have been found to increase resilience, and it has been shown that doing this appears to reduce the severity of posttraumatic stress disorder in individuals (Streb, Häller, & Michael, 2014). Also in favor of using the SOC to explore the resilience of refugees is Almedom’s judgment (2005) that the SOC is the most influential construct as an operationalization of resilience, judging by its wide adoption and use in an ever-increasing number of studies, including cross-cultural and international applications.

Nevertheless, there have been counter-indications. Singer & Brähler (2007), for example, caution that the cultural equivalence of all translations of the SOC-scale cannot be assumed. Therefore, before using the SOC as a measure of resilience in new cultural contexts, the validity of the scale being used should be checked for cross-cultural equivalence. Taking this into consideration, the SOC may be regarded as an operationalization of resilience, and a strong SOC as an indicator of a high level of resilience.

**Definition of the sense of coherence.** Antonovsky (1979), a strong defendant of focusing on health instead of disease, developed the concept of sense of coherence based on his salutogenic approach. This approach means that health is considered as a position on a health ease/dis-ease continuum and focus is put on the movement in the direction towards the health end (Eriksson &

Lindström, 2006). Antonovsky's special interest was in health fostering factors and well-being among Holocaust survivors, and he did a lot of research on trauma.

According to Antonovsky's model, people have general resilience resources (GRRs) which can help them conceptualize the world as organized, understandable and meaningful. Antonovsky explained human adaptation and response to extreme psychosocial stressors in terms of mobilization of these GRRs. Furthermore, he found that possibly, the capacity to deal with uncertainty and therefore resilience is greater among individuals who have had to deal with great uncertainty and vulnerability, because these individuals have had to learn that great uncertainty does not have to lead to a loss of sense of coherence (SOC). This implies that people experiencing great uncertainty need to have confidence in themselves and the future to be resilient during such times. In short, Antonovsky's central question was 'how do people manage stress and stay well?' – and his analyses led him to answer, 'by the strength of their sense of coherence' (1984).

The SOC is defined as a resource that enables people to withstand tension, to reflect on their personal resources, to identify and activate them, to achieve coping by finding solutions, and to resolve tension in a healthy manner (Eriksson & Landström, 2006). The SOC "refers to a global orientation to one's inner and outer environments which is hypothesized to be a significant determinant of location and movement on the health ease/dis-ease continuum." More in detail, the SOC is defined as follows: "a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement." (as cited in Antonovsky, 1993, p.725). These three components, in short, are (1) comprehensibility, (2) manageability, and (3) meaningfulness. Comprehensibility, the cognitive component, refers to whether internal and external stimuli make sense to us in terms of being ordered, structured and clear. Manageability, the behavioral or instrumental component, refers to the extent to which we feel we can rely on resources to help meet the demands of external stimuli we are exposed to. Meaningfulness, the motivational component, refers to whether we can perceive life's difficulties as challenges that are worthy of an investment of energy and engagement rather than a burden we would prefer to avoid. Antonovsky further states that the individual components are insufficient. Rather, the SOC should be viewed as holistic, and all components are thereby relevant (Antonovsky, 1987).

**The SOC as a culturally sensitive concept.** Although the SOC has been applied successfully in different cultural contexts (Almedom et al., 2005), it remains important to judge whether it applies to the context of refugees, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. It should be considered that the SOC has its origins as a western concept (Braun-Lewensohn, 2011). Furthermore, different cultural pathways have been found in how essentially identical levels of an SOC are developed (Bowman 1997), and levels of SOC differ depending on the cultural group and how they explain stress reactions differently (Braun-Lewensohn, 2011). Despite these cultural differences, Antonovsky (1993) viewed culture as an integral aspect of the salutogenic model of health (Benz, Bull, Mittelmark & Vaandrager, 2014).

Furthermore, research has been found to support Antonovsky's prediction (1993) that people from various cultures may attain a similar level of SOC despite great socioeconomic differences (Bowman, 1996) and that the SOC is a universally significant protective factor when facing a stressful situation (Braun-Lewensohn, 2011). Based on this existing research, taking the aspect of culture into account, it can cautiously be concluded that the SOC is a culturally sensitive and therefore relevant concept to explore the resilience of refugees.

**A qualitative approach to the sense of coherence.** So far, the majority of research on the SOC has been of quantitative nature, and also focused only on past or present perspectives of individuals on their lives (Antonovsky & Sagy, 1986; Flannery, Perry, Penk & Flannery, 1994; Almedom et al., 2007; Braun-Lewensohn & Sagy, 2011). Although the SOC appears to be future-oriented (Waysman et al., 2001), the only existing study examining the SOC that advocates a qualitative approach which is future-oriented is a master thesis written by Borgmann (2016). She explored the SOC in imagined ideal futures of social workers and found that indeed, the SOC plays an important role in the imagination of ideal futures. While she explored the SOC among professionals, the population to be examined here consists of refugees in Germany who live in a state of liminality. Due to the lack of qualitative research on the SOC in such a culturally diverse population, and to gain knowledge about the resilience of refugees, exploring how refugees give meaning to the SOC in a qualitative approach is deemed appropriate.



## Research Question

In sum, refugees are an increasing minority in German society that is living under conditions marked by a state of liminality. The arising question is how their resilience can be explored in past, present and future perspectives. The SOC is found to be a culturally sensitive and thereby appropriate construct. Although the SOC has been investigated concerning a variety of theories and concepts, so far little qualitative research on the SOC has taken a future-oriented approach and none in the context of refugees.

The aim of this qualitative study is, therefore, to explore the individual occurrence of components of the SOC in both past, present and future perspectives of refugees. The assumption here is that the SOC will become apparent in the refugees' perspectives. This will be the focus of analysis. A similar approach to Borgmann (2016) is taken, with an added temporal aspect, as she only explored the SOC in future perspectives. The analysis is based on the items of the SOC-scale developed by Antonovsky (1979).

Based on the findings that exploring the role of the SOC in refugees' perspectives is a suitable method in their context, the objective of this study is to contribute to finding out how resilience and well-being of refugees can be explored and possibly enhanced. Therefore, to explore the abovementioned ideas and assumptions, the following research question is posed:

How does the sense of coherence give meaning to the past, present and future perspectives of refugees?

## Methods

To explore the occurrence of components of the SOC in past and present perspectives and perspectives of desired futures, adult refugees were first interviewed on past life situations in which they felt resilient in the face of adversity and then asked to imagine a desired future. A prospective reflective instrument was used, called *Letters from the Future* (Sools et al., 2015), where the participant imagines traveling to a desired future and then writes a letter to the present. The application of this tool in the context of refugees is new, yet it may provide a powerful way to explore their imagined futures and constructing hopeful and meaningful responses to their situations. The research has been approved by the ethics committee of the faculty of behavioral sciences (nr. 190552).

## **Participants and recruitment**

Five persons were recruited with the help of two social workers working with refugees. The inclusion criteria were fluent English or German skills, having come to Germany to seek asylum, and being at least 18 years of age. The term refugee was used irrespective of current formal residence status (e.g. citizenship, refugee, asylum seeker). No special writing skills were necessary. Nevertheless, some self-exclusion took place as several individuals denied participating, stating that they did not feel confident in writing a letter.

Two participants were female, and three were male. Their places of origin were Lebanon, Afghanistan, Guinea, Mongolia, and Syria. The participants were between 18 and 37 years old, with an average age of 27 years old. Two participants had an accepted refugee status. One participant had had her asylum application denied but was allowed to stay as long as she was acquiring education or working. Two had had their asylum applications denied but were in appeal.

## **Procedure**

The data collection was carried out in March and April 2019 and conducted at participants' homes or the offices of the social workers who helped with the recruitment. The interviews and letters were conducted in English or German, depending on the language the participant preferred. The procedure took between 60 and 80 minutes. First, the purpose of the study and the general procedure was explained. The anonymity of the interview and the letter were emphasized. Then, they were asked to sign an informed consent (see Appendix A), and to provide biographical information regarding their gender, age, place of origin, level of education and/or profession, residence status and previous or present mental illness.

Next, the participants were interviewed individually. They were asked to describe two stories in the past in which they felt resilient. The definition of resilience was explained to all participants to ensure the same understanding: "By [feeling resilient] I mean situations in which you felt strong, empowered, and that you can cope well in dealing with adversity". They were also beforehand told that they do not have to tell any details or talk about anything they prefer not to, also when asked questions later. While the participants told their stories, the interviewer was silent and only took notes on what may be relevant to explore their SOC. When they were finished telling their stories, probes were used flexibly to get more details and in-depth descriptions. The interview phase took about 45 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

After the interview, which was focused on the past and present of the participants, the participants were asked to write a Letter from the Future (LF). The instructions were given in accordance with the original *Letters from the Future* instrument (Sools & Mooren, 2012). The task of imagining a desired future was realized with the help of such a letter that was written by the participant right after a short introductory mindfulness practice given by the instructor. They thereby imagined being ‘transported into some point in the future of their choice’, which can either be very close or in the distant future. The imagined future from which the participants wrote was supposed to be a desired future where a certain dream or wish has come true, or some life goal has been achieved. The participant was able to address the letter towards the self or any other person.

Third, the participants were given as much time as they needed to write an LF, which was approximately 20 minutes. From the point in the future they decided on during the meditation, they were supposed to tell their story and describe whatever helped them so that a dream or wish became true or where they had learned to cope with a difficult situation (Sools et al., 2018).

After the letters were written, the participants had the opportunity to ask questions. They were given the option to contact the researcher if any questions or concerns should come up after the session had ended.

## Materials

**Interviews.** The interviews were adopted from the BNIM interview that asks for narratives, and probes were used based on this interviewing technique (Wengraf, 2011). The BNIM method is described as a useful interpretive method for exploring the lived experience and subjective culture of a given individual, that tends towards the historic and holistic. Furthermore, it is said to evoke ‘self-biographizing’ narratives by procedures that involve the ‘situated telling of a whole story, by an equally-situated subjectivity’ (Wengraf, 2011). The “biographic narrative expression” that the BNIM method evokes is revealing “both of conscious concerns and also of unconscious cultural, societal and individual assumptions and beliefs and processes”. BNIM is thereby said to support research into the complexities of the lived experience of individuals. It is said to be interpretive because people are constantly interpreting themselves and the situation they are in (Wengraf, 2011). Because of this nature of the BNIM, this method of interviewing was chosen as well-suited to explore in detail how the participants experienced situations in which they felt resilient and how they thereby give meaning to the SOC in their past and present perspectives. The

BNIM method was only used as a guiding tool during the interviews to probe in order to get more in-depth descriptions of the remembered situations.

**Letters from the Future.** *Letters from the future* (LF) (Sools et al., 2015) have been proposed as a health promotion instrument coming from an interpretive approach that enables futuring (imagining of future selves) (Sools, Tromp & Mooren, 2015). Borgmann (2016) in her qualitative study also used this tool to explore how the SOC is depicted in desired futures. Adopting her research method to explore the SOC in future perspectives of refugees, this prospective reflective tool was deemed as an appropriate instrument to enable refugees to imagine a desirable future. However, while she analyzed letters that had already been written, in this study the letters were written after being guided by me according to the original letter from the future instructions (Sools & Mooren, 2012).

## **Data Analysis**

### Steps of analysis

- 1) First, a descriptive summary of all 5 participants was created.
- 2) A cross-case analysis was conducted in which the interviews and letters were coded deductively and analyzed based on the characteristics of the components of the SOC.
- 3) Based on the analysis of interviews and letters, a detailed analysis of two selected participants was done, and a holistic-content approach was adopted (Lieblich, Tuval-Maschiach & Zilber, 1998). First, the stories told by these two participants were analyzed based on the SOC, and then the letters.

First, the content of the interviews and letters of all participants was read and summarized descriptively. The interviews were transcribed, and these and the letters were coded in Atlas.ti. These past and future perspectives were thematically and qualitatively analyzed according to the three components of the SOC, based on Borgmann's (2016) method of data analysis. The main difference to Borgmann's study regarding the data analysis was the added dimension of temporality, applying the items of the SOC to the past/present perspectives (the interviews) as well as to the future perspectives (the letters). One unit of analysis varied from a single sentence to several, depending on how long an utterance was a manifestation of one component of the SOC.

The interviews and letters were coded in terms of meaning units, as coding was conducted in a qualitative, deductive manner based on the SOC.

**The coding scheme based on the SOC scale.** Concerning the definitions of the three components of the SOC, all utterances that were in line with the definitions of these were coded in the same manner. The coded statements varied in length and were coded as one utterance if all sentences referred to the same utterance of either a (+) or (-) component. Interviews and letters were coded when the items from the SOC-scale (see Appendix B) came up in the stories or when the spoken words displayed characteristics of the definitions of the components. To make the abstract character of Antonovsky's definitions specific and the manner of coding replicable, the themes and the manner of coding are explained in more detail, as done by Borgmann (2016).

**Comprehensibility (+)** was coded when a statement or piece of advice was found that expressed an ordered, structured, explicable, consistent perception of the internal or external world. For example, this may be feeling understood by other persons or knowing persons well. It may also be regarding the world, feelings or ideas as being consistent or clear. Comprehensibility also refers to the perception of situations as explicable and where the participant knows what to do. Also, this can refer to being in a difficult situation and knowing the situation or the answer to it.

When the expression pointed in the direction of consistency, comprehensibility was coded with a (+). When confusion, mixed feelings or the feeling of being misunderstood by other individuals was expressed, this was coded with a (-).

**Manageability (+)** was coded when the individual expressed perceiving that enough resources are available to meet the demands of life. Manageability includes the confidence to satisfy the requirements of everyday life together with other individuals. Therefore, it reflects how trustworthy and loyal the participant perceives the persons around him as, whom he works together with and relies on. Further aspects of manageability are accepting unpleasant or even painful events as a part of life, and feeling confident concerning problem-solving aspects. Feeling treated fairly by the surrounding world and trusting in a good world and one's abilities when facing difficulties and keeping control were also coded as parts of manageability.

Manageability was coded with a (+) when the individual trusted in the means he receives from the world to cope appropriately with the demands of life, when he trusted in a good world,

and when he felt he was treated fairly by the surrounding. Manageability was coded with a (-) when there was mistrust or disappointment towards or experienced from other people, when the individual felt punished by the world, or when he had a generally negative outlook on his luck and the ability to face difficulties effectively.

**Meaningfulness (+)** was coded when the individual felt and believed that life emotionally makes sense and that problems and demands were seen as worth the energy to be invested to maintain life. Meaningfulness includes the sense-making of the individual self, its life with activities and the world. Further aspects of meaningfulness are a feeling of interest in and caring about what is going on around the individual, in life generally and in what is going on in the world. Furthermore, aspects are that the individual seems to have clear goals and that a feeling of purpose and affirmation was present when the individual thought of their existence and place in the world. Further features of meaningfulness are perceiving the world as fascinating, finding pleasure in daily activities and regarding these activities as meaningful.

Meaningfulness was coded with a (+) when the statement or advice pointed to meaningfulness rather than meaningless regarding activities, the surrounding world, and one's existence. Meaningfulness was coded with a (-) when life was considered as completely routine, activities seemed boring, even painful or when there was a lack of interest in the surrounding or when the own existence was questioned.

Based on these themes, three main codes and six sub codes were identified, which were used to code both the interviews and the letters. The frequencies of the themes were then calculated per participant.

**Holistic Portraits.** After analyzing the frequencies of the SOC components for all participants, a holistic-content picture of the past and future selves of two of the participants was created (Lieblich et al., 1998). Two were chosen that addressed themes that were also depicted in the other stories, who were male and female, and from different countries. Furthermore, components of the SOC occurred in different ways in these stories, which means a variety and a spread of the results are displayed. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were given.

A holistic-content approach is a narrative approach for understanding the meaning of an individual's stories (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Furthermore, a holistic-content analysis

maintains the temporal dimension of each individual's story so that the parts within the story are interpreted in relation to other parts of the story and the outcome of the story (Beal, 2013). Each story is thereby viewed as a whole and the parts within it are then related to other parts of the story. This is deemed a suitable approach to explore the SOC in the past, present and future perspectives of the refugees.

As Lieblich et al. (1998) instruct, the global impression of the stories as well as unusual features were explored. Lieblich et al.'s (1998) approach to the holistic content analysis was adapted in so far as it was broken down into two steps. First, a global impression of the participants was given. Secondly, a thematic analysis was conducted. This was conducted inductively, as according to Lieblich et al. (1998), as it was analyzed how they presented themselves as resilient both in past and future perspectives. Then, the analysis was conducted deductively, based on how the components of the SOC were depicted.

## **Results**

The length of the interviews varied between 19 and 62 minutes, with an average length of 34 minutes. While comparing the interviews and letters, it must be taken into account that the letters contained much less content than the interviews, meaning there was less data in the letters to interpret. The letters were also written very simply, and it was found that a majority of the participants found it difficult to write, due to language difficulties. Although during the interviews participants also sometimes needed time to find words to express themselves, this was done more elaborately. Furthermore, the instructions for writing the letter from the future were found to be more difficult to understand than the instructions to describe two situations in which they felt resilient. Not all sentences in interviews and letters were coded, instead only those sentences that were identified as meaning units that reflected characteristics of the components of the SOC were coded. A salient finding was that the letters of all participants were found to be written more positively than the interviews.

### **A descriptive summary of the participants**

The first interviewee was a young man from Lebanon, who had been in Germany for 4 years after fleeing through Turkey and Greece. He felt he had been treated unfairly as his asylum process had been denied. This young man spoke about the experience of fleeing from Lebanon

through Greece to Germany, and his fears and tiredness during this time. Furthermore, he described the friendliness and hospitality of German people and feeling safer in Germany. Finally, he spoke a lot about being treated unfairly by a colleague during his internship with a construction company. His story was marked by a sense of not understanding the world and what was happening to him and feeling that he cannot control what happens. He was unable to write a letter describing a desired future but instead wrote about past events in his life.

The second interviewee was a 37-year-old man from Afghanistan, who worked as an army inspector officer in his home country, for which he was persecuted for uncovering criminal activities in the military. He had a wife and children who resided in a different part of Germany while their asylum process proceeded. He spoke about his experience in Afghanistan before leaving, and of being in a refugee camp in Greece for several months. Throughout his story, there seemed to be a focus on finding purpose in his activities. In his letter, he described a generative vision of the future marked by contributing to a better society through an invention.

The third interviewee was a 34-year-old woman from Mongolia who came to Germany together with her husband who suffered from a chronic illness that needed treatment. Her focus was on the struggles she encountered after arriving in Germany, of being grateful that she was allowed to work and of learning German. Her story was focused on gratefulness for the present situation and on her two children, who remained in Mongolia. Her letter was about a future focused on her family, in which her children are with her, her husband is healthy, and she has a job that she finds meaningful because she can help others through it. While she spoke and wrote the letter, she cooked lunch for her husband and me and served me a variety of foods and drinks without asking me.

The fourth interviewee was an 18-year-old man from Guinea. He appeared to be nervous about the interview and spoke carefully at the beginning. In the course of the interview, he appeared to open up and speak in more detail. He spoke about having to leave Guinea and fighting for his life, picturing it as a great struggle. His focus was then on having to leave a safe place he lived in for minors, and as a fresh 18-year-old struggling and failing to find an apartment for himself to live in. This he also described as a fight and struggle. His letter was a very general and vague description of goals he wanted to achieve in the future, “*goals that are important to me*”, such as having a secure job and a family.



The fifth interviewee was a 21-year-old woman from Syria, who lived with her 4-year-old son in a house for women seeking refuge while hiding from others (often from their partners). She was currently looking for an apartment while she learned German before she started. She told her life story from the age of 14 when the war broke out in Syria. Her focus was on how she grew into an independent young woman and how she managed to leave her husband and cope while he had her son abducted. She stated that it was God, a lot of help from others and also strength from within herself that helped her. Her letter was family-focused, as she described in detail a situation in which her family is reunited.

A generally salient finding was how the future was depicted in the interviews. Although the focus of the interviews was to be on memories of feeling resilient, the participants repeatedly referred to how they felt when thinking about the future. The participant who did not write about the future in his letter hardly referred to the future in his interviews; only that he left Lebanon because he wanted a different life. The man from Afghanistan referred to the future when speaking of his struggles to get asylum. He stated that although he struggles, *“Part of my life is to help others [...] Nobody knows about the future. But we struggle for the future. [...] To do our best in the presence, for a brighter and better future”* (2). He explained his motivation for volunteering in the refugee camp and feeling resilient by explaining his view of the future. Later, he again stated, when explaining the danger he encountered in his job in Afghanistan *“I don’t care about the future”*, thereby referring to his personal future. The Mongolian woman referred to the future as *“then, my children can hopefully come.”* (3). She also referred to thinking about the future when she was still in her home country and her husband was very unhappy because of his health, and *“many hours [she] thought, what can be done”* (3). Furthermore, she was currently learning German in school before starting to work and stated: *“first I was scared, but it is good for me.”* (3). The young man from Guinea described that he left Guinea because *“[he] always wanted a better future, [he] just wanted a different life.”* (4). When speaking about having to move back into a refugee accommodation, he revealed that he was hopeful about the future as he *“had planned many things, also because of [his] school degree.”* (4) When wanting to give up after arriving in Germany, he described finding the strength to continue by thinking *“Luckily I continued fighting and thought okay, it doesn’t matter, what happens.”* (4). Both he, the young man from Guinea, and the Afghani man described deciding not to care too much about their future when it is very uncertain. The young Syrian mother referred to what she thought about the future when her ex-

husband decided to go to Germany as “*in the first moment I just thought, now my future will be better.*” (5). She also referred to being scared of the future in terms of being judged if she leaves her husband “*I was always scared that the Arabic people that know me say, oh, she is a bad woman.*” (5). Furthermore, thinking positively about the future appeared to have helped her cope, as she stated “*I always said, no, I can do this. Better times will come to me.*” (5). When she spoke about deciding to do something for herself so that she can have a good life in the future, by educating herself, she referred to her mother, who was educated as a teacher and a role model for her, and also she referred to the encouragement of her parents to trust in the future as they told her “*You must think of yourself. A. [her son] will come back.*” (5). She then described deciding to invest in her education and German to achieve her goal of someday being able to look for her son. At the same time, she also described not knowing how to manage, “*[she] didn’t know she would be able to manage such a situation.*” (5) which indicated that she also struggled to imagine a positive future.

To conclude, the participants described experienced situations of hardship before or while leaving their home country, and also of after having arrived in Germany. They describe having wanted a different, better life, of experiencing uncertainty, struggle, fear, and hope when thinking of the future. The letters differed in content, from being about the past, being vague descriptions, to being a generative future vision, family-focused and on finding a meaningful job.

### **General characteristics of the interviews**

In the interviews, four participants spoke about at least one situation which took place just before or during their journey from their home country to Germany. These were the situations causing them to leave their country, or challenges that they overcame during their journey, which were often the boat journey from Turkey to Greece, or in the refugee camps in Greece. Furthermore, four interviewees spoke of situations that were challenging to them after they arrived in Germany. These were described as being due to communication problems in different institutions, regarding their asylum-seeking process or family problems.

All of the analyzed interviews displayed at least 2 of the components of the SOC. Among the three components, manageability appeared the most, namely 25 times, of which positively 15 times, but 11 times in one interview alone, which was also the longest interview. Negatively, it occurred 10 times. Meaningfulness occurred 20 times altogether, 13 times positively and 7 times

negatively. Comprehensibility occurred 16 times altogether; 8 times positively and 8 times negatively. Comprehensibility was also the only component where the (+) utterances did not outweigh the (-). For an overview of the occurrences of the components, see table 1.

**Comprehensibility.** The (+) utterance of the component comprehensibility occurred in 3 of the interviews, whereas the (-) utterance was found in 4 interviews. Positive accounts of comprehensibility were often found in describing life in Germany as better, often in reference to feeling safe and feeling that solutions can be found and that people in Germany help them. Furthermore, it was generally found in participants describing having known what they have to do to improve their situation: *"I simply had to leave to save my life. Here I have the hope for a better future."* (4).

Negative accounts of comprehensibility were all about things not going as imagined in Germany, in which the world was perceived as inconsistent and unclear, and not understanding the situation clearly: *"Other refugees are allowed to stay and work, but I am not, only because I am from Lebanon."* (1). *"In the refugee house, I have to live with strangers in very little space. The day I moved in I cried, cried, cried. I didn't deserve this."* (4).

**Manageability.** The (+) utterance of the component manageability occurred in 2 of the interviews, whereas the (-) utterance occurred in 4 of the interviews. Positive accounts of manageability were often described as related to overcoming fear and finding the confidence to pursue a goal. Furthermore, people often described situations as having been manageable because they received help from others. One participant described *"[...] But still I continued fighting, and I will continue to fight. My social work supporter always gave me confidence, was always there for me, when I needed her."* (4) The Mongolian woman also described *"I asked the social worker if she can help me find work, please help me. I would like to volunteer. Then she found work for me in the clinic."* (3)

Negative accounts of manageability were mostly regarding either fearing death in their home country or on their journey to Germany; or feeling they could not manage the challenges after arriving in Germany, e.g. because of the language barrier or because of feeling powerless in the face of the asylum-seeking process. *"In my home country, on my way to work, I was always afraid, that somebody might shoot me."* (1).

**Meaningfulness.** The (+) utterance of the component meaningfulness occurred in 4 of the interviews, while the (-) utterance occurred in 3 of the interviews. Positive accounts of

meaningfulness were primarily about fighting or doing something for a better future, and also included talking about enjoying spending time with people in Germany *"For me, it is wonderful, because here I know many people and I love the people because they are very nice. Always helped me. And, nice people, I cannot say it differently."* (1). Negative accounts of meaningfulness primarily were about wanting to give up and feeling "tired" in the face of challenges and difficulties *"The first four months in Germany, I was tired of other people. Everybody was against each other."* (1). In one interview (5) it was found that positive and negative utterances of meaningfulness followed directly after each other.

One salient finding was that sometimes, more than one component was identified in the same utterance, so the components overlapped. It was found that these utterances suggest a global orientation to the SOC instead of just single components, and they appeared to put the components of the SOC into relation with each other. For example, the young man from Guinea (4) put meaningfulness and comprehensibility in relation to another in the following: *"I was strong to save my life. I always wanted [...] a different life. And so, I left Guinea. I had no chance to stay there. [...]. So I left, what I did to save my life."* Finding his life meaningful and worth putting in the effort to leave his country preconditioned that he knew what was necessary to do to save his life, so the precondition for comprehensibility, in this case, appears to be meaningfulness.

### **General characteristics of the letters**

The length of the letters varied between 41 and 148 words. The average length was 93 words. Three participants required the instructions to be repeated before they understood the task of writing a letter from the future. One participant, the man from Lebanon, was not capable of imagining a future, but instead wrote about the past, after first not wanting to write a letter and saying this is too difficult a task for him. Another participant, the young man from Guinea, formulated his desired future in "I would like to" sentences. In these two letters, no components of the SOC were found to be depicted. A salient finding here is that these were also the only two participants whose stories displayed more negative than positive utterances of components of the SOC. So, the only two participants where the negative utterances outweighed the positive in the stories, were also the only participants who were unable to write an LF in which an SOC was depicted.

The content and themes in the letters varied. They were about a future in which technology has changed and shaped the world, where one has found meaning in contributing scientifically, where one has completed one's education and found a nice job, and where one is united with one's family or has started an own family. Three of the five letters included at least one component of the SOC. Meaningfulness occurred the most, namely 5 times. Thereby it occurred positively 4 times, and once negatively. Manageability occurred once, and positively. Comprehensibility also occurred once, and positively. The occurrence of the components of the SOC in the letters confirmed that they were depicted more positively than the interviews.

**Comprehensibility.** The (+) utterance of the component comprehensibility occurred once in one of the letters. This utterance was about a family being reunited, in which the participants' parents look after her child and her child has "*grandparents like all the other children have.*" (5). The impression was created that the speaker can make sense of the stimuli around her again, that things are taking place as they can normally be predicted. There were no (-) utterances of comprehensibility in the letters.

**Manageability.** The (+) utterance of the component manageability occurred once in one of the letters. This was about people being friendly and interested in helping others, having been able to finish education and find a job, and working hard to earn enough money so that finally, the parents can also come to Germany. The utterance "*The people are more friendly to each other, and everyone is interested to help others.*" (2) is a positive example of manageability as it displays trust in a good world, in which the people around the individual are perceived as trustworthy. (-) utterances of manageability did not occur in the letters.

**Meaningfulness.** The (+) utterance of the component meaningfulness occurred 4 times in 3 of the letters, and therefore in all letters in which the SOC was depicted at all. Utterances of meaningfulness in the letters included having invented a machine to decrease the crime level in the world, it being worth waiting for the family to be able to come home, sitting together at one table with the whole family with everybody laughing, and "*enjoy[ing] doing [one's] job because in this job [one] always helps people.*" (3). The negative account of meaningfulness in one letter was the description of a world where people cannot enjoy themselves as much as they used to because of changes in living: "*The people are having a more machinery life and can't enjoy their lives as usual.*" (2).

Table 1

*Prevalence of the three SOC components in interviews and letters.*

		Comprehensibility	Manageability	Meaningful- ness	Total
		+/-	+/-	+/-	
1. "Here, I can speak to people without being asked about my religion"	Past/Present	2 / 1	0 / 4	2 / 1	4 / 6
	Future	0 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 0
2. "Life doesn't end with me"	Past/Present	2 / 0	0 / 0	4 / 0	6 / 0
	Future	0 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 1	2 / 1
3. "In Germany, I have always been giving thanks"	Past/Present	0 / 1	4 / 2	0 / 0	4 / 3
	Future	1 / 0	0 / 0	2 / 0	3 / 0
4. "I always kept on fighting"	Past/Present	0 / 4	0 / 2	3 / 4	3 / 10
	Future	0 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 0
5. "I am strong. I never thought of giving up."	Past/Present	4 / 2	11 / 2	4 / 2	19 / 6
	Future	0 / 0	0 / 0	1 / 0	1 / 0
Past/Present		8 / 8	15 / 10	13 / 7	36 / 25
Total Future		1 / 0	1 / 0	4 / 1	6 / 1
Total		9 / 8	16 / 10	17 / 8	42 / 26

### Holistic portraits

#### Anis: "Life doesn't end with me"

Anis was a 37-year-old man from Afghanistan, who was married and had children, who lived in another refugee center in Germany than the one he lived in. Before fleeing, he had worked as an army inspector officer. His asylum application was denied 1,5 years ago, and he was in the

process of repeal, so appealing to the court to reinvestigate his case. Before coming to Germany, he had spent 10,5 months in a refugee camp in Greece. He had been suffering from depression for several years and had also been hospitalized for it in Germany. He was still suffering from depression on the day of participation in the study.

Anis spoke in a calm, fairly monotonous way, without showing many emotions. He appeared to choose his words carefully and was clear about his stories and what he wanted to tell. He was mostly descriptive and spoke little about how he felt. Anis' stories were not specific, in-the-moment situations, but instead were both descriptions of a period in his life, in a certain time frame and location, which he told chronologically. What surprised me was the extent of the sense of purpose he described in both stories, considering his experienced hardship. This sense of purpose was found in both stories he told, and also in his letter. It is a theme that runs through what he chose to speak and write about.

The first situation he spoke about was before escaping Afghanistan when he had still worked for the military in Afghanistan, *"writ[ing] reports, not about the Taliban. About the officers, the criminal officers and some generals, who used to steal from the government"*. He described the corrupt system, and his motivation to work against the criminality in the system. Although believing in the importance of his work *"I have been threatened many times, [...] I used to tell myself it doesn't end here. Even if I get threatened by them, even if I get shot or get killed. I would say against them to the last drop of my blood. And, I don't care about the future"*, in the end, he described having to leave his country because of these threats by the officers and generals whose criminal activities he had uncovered. The second story he told about was that of traveling from Afghanistan, to Iran, to Turkey, and then by boat to Greece. He described his journey as follows: *"My family, with other people who have been crossing the border from Iran to Turkey, have been shot at by the police, by the border police of both sides. We have been scared. And somehow, we arrived in Turkey, and from Turkey to Greece via boat"* He also spoke of seeing many dead bodies on the way. Then, he described the difficult conditions in the refugee camp in Greece, where he had been separated from his family and didn't know of their whereabouts for several months. The main focus of his second story, however, was that of working as an English teacher and translator during his time in the camp: *"Because, most of them, about 80%, didn't know English or the language. As long as they don't know the language, they cannot communicate."*

*Someone asked, took the first step to promote English. I thought the best thing in this situation is to teach English.”*

Meaningfulness was the component of the SOC that was most prevalent and salient in Anis’ stories. As mentioned, he spoke repeatedly about the purpose he had found in his life: Although he had been threatened a lot in Afghanistan, he had believed his work was worth it, and he described the desire he had to continue working against the criminality despite the risks:

*“I used to think positively about myself. I used to tell myself it doesn't end here. Even if I get threatened by them, even if I get shot or get killed. I would say against them to the last drop of my blood. And, I don't care about the future.”*

His reference to the future is salient as it was repeated in other parts of his storytelling. While in the first story he emphasized that he did not care about the future, in the second story he emphasized that the future is unknown: “[...] *life doesn't end only with me. It means I must not only work for myself. Part of my life is to help others, it doesn't matter which nation, which religion, which country, what color of their skin. It doesn't matter what race, what sex, doesn't matter. What we are saying here, at this moment. Nobody knows about the future. But we struggle for the future. We forget the past and take a lesson from the past. To do our best in the presence, for a brighter and better future.*”

As you can see, in both situations he emphasized that he did not care about his future and that we cannot know about the future. It first appears that he wanted to express that the future is not relevant. However, he stated that by focusing on the present, a better future is possible. This way, he made sense of his uncertain life emotionally, where it was difficult to even imagine the future. By finding meaning in his work and later volunteering, he found purpose despite the uncertain present and future. This way of describing how he made sense of his situation displays a generative vision of his life, and that he actually, did care a lot about the future, despite it being very uncertain. Although his personal future may not have mattered to him, he cared a lot about the future of mankind. What also became salient was that here a more global orientation of the SOC occurred, as comprehensibility also manifested itself in the utterance of not knowing about the future but struggling for it. This way, he made sense of his internal and external world and then gave it meaning, as an explicable world that is worth investing energy in.

Meaningfulness also manifested itself in another way in Anis’ stories, namely in the way he made sense of the world and showed caring for others by emphasizing his feeling of



connectedness to others. He began by speaking about ‘I’ but quickly switched to speaking in the ‘we’ form, beginning with *‘And we had to catch them and make a report and give it to the minister’*. While he then spoke about being threatened by officers and generals, he also spoke in the ‘we’ form. This appeared to reveal that he did not feel alone in this situation, but rather in it together with others who were doing the same job as him. He said that although it was a corrupt system, there were also honest people, like him, who wanted to stand against the criminals and were ‘threatened, shot, or kidnapped’. This feeling of connectedness to others, and furthermore seeing his life as purposeful because he can serve society and God, was one way that meaningfulness manifested itself in his stories, and again emphasizes his generative vision of life. This he elaborated and displayed further in explaining that he found his work also meaningful on a larger scale than just for himself, namely also for society and God, and showed that his life was also meaningful to him on a spiritual dimension: *"I used to help them, and I used to translate what doctor and patients said. And, I did it for God. I did it for God. As for humanity. We are all humans. We have to serve the humans without any expectations. According to my own belief. Doesn't matter where they are from, what race, which sex. It doesn't matter."*

Finally, in the last two abovementioned quotes, he stated he must help people independent of what kind of people they are, so where they are from, which religion, sex, etc., and later on he stated: *"we are all humans."* This was a manifestation of meaningfulness as he not only felt connected to others, but furthermore displayed feelings of caring for others, and of believing in the equality of all humans. Here again, by stating we must serve humanity without expectations, he revealed a future-oriented approach towards the purpose of serving, that it was meaningful regardless of what the outcome may be.

Comprehensibility was the second component that was found in Anis’ stories and was found to be salient, although it appeared only once. This was the moment Anis described when he realized that he *“has no choice but to leave [Afghanistan].”* Comprehensibility was here also interwoven with the meaningfulness already described: He was clear about the purpose and meaning he had found in his job in Afghanistan, how he had been motivated to persevere despite difficulties, but then described realizing that to save his life, he must leave his job and his home country, together with his family. In describing this situation, he described how he made sense of his difficult situation and knew what he had to do.

One salient characteristic of Anis' story is his sense of purpose which is why (+) utterances of meaningfulness were most prevalent in his stories. There were descriptions in his stories in which he remained purely descriptive, without evaluating the situations or revealing how he felt during these experiences: *"everyone used to fight on that camp because of variety of the refugees who were from many different countries, with different cultures [...] And, somehow, they used to stab with a knife, and some children have been thrown into the sea, and the dead bodies have been captured by the police."* A similar utterance, but in which he revealed experiencing fear, was the following: *"I have seen many dead bodies, that had to be thrown into the water or that fell to the ground. My family, with other people who have been crossing the border from Iran to Turkey, have been shot at by the police, by the border police of both sides. We have been scared."* It may be cautiously concluded that the degree of uncertainty regarding the future, the fear he had experienced, the situation in the refugee camp after enduring this fear, and the described suffering he encountered were all experienced as threatening factors to Anis' sense of purpose. This may be the reason why he remained descriptive and revealed little emotion.

**Anis' letter.** Anis wrote a letter from the future about having been able to contribute to a better society through science, and that he lived in a future in which people were more friendly:

1. *"I'm in the year 2050.*
2. *The skyscrapers are even higher.*
3. *The people are having a more machinery life and can't enjoy their lives as usual. I have*
4. *got my doctorate degree on inventing and I have invented a video recording machine*
5. *which records the past and future which is very useful for police departments, and the*
6. *crime level has been decreased.*
7. *The people are more friendly to each other, and everyone is interested to help others. "*

As in the interview, occurrences of meaningfulness were also most prevalent in the letter from the future. Indeed, he began his letter with a (-) utterance of meaningfulness (line 3). This implies that in the future, he imagined that people do not find as much pleasure in daily activities anymore. In his life stories, there was no indication of a lack of meaningfulness. Meaningfulness then manifested itself in him describing a future in which he has obtained a doctorate in 'inventing', so in the area of science and engineering, and has invented a machine which records the past and future which is useful for police departments, which has led to a decrease of the general crime

level (line 4 and 5). In describing this goal that he would like to achieve in the future, he described a desire to have a feeling of purpose. It was at the same time an occurrence of manageability, as it was the desire to be able to, and to have the resources, to do something to make the world a better place by decreasing crime. This desire was comparable with how he described his work in Afghanistan, where his goal was to shed light on crimes in the military and where he felt a sense of purpose. Furthermore, it was a goal that is beneficial for society as a whole. Therefore, again, he was describing himself as caring for society, not only for himself, which was a manifestation of meaningfulness.

Manageability and Meaningfulness also manifested themselves in his desire for a world in which people are more friendly to each other (line 7). Here again, he showed that he desires a good, peaceful world, in which people treat each other fairly. Also, this showed a feeling of caring about others and about what is going on in the world. It appeared to be that in his desired future, more people behave as he does, namely focusing also on each other and helping each other as he described himself doing in his stories.

Generally, Anis' imagined future appeared to be very much in line with his past stories in terms of his SOC. While in the past situations he described himself as caring for others and thereby meaningfulness manifests itself, in his desired future this manifested itself in his desire for others to also be caring for each other.

**Aisha: *"I am strong. I never thought of giving up."***

Aisha was a 21-year-old woman from Syria, who was divorced and had a four-year-old son. In Syria, where her parents still lived, she went to school till 10<sup>th</sup> grade in a higher-level school. Now in Germany, she was planning to start training to become a social assistant in summer, when she finished her German course. She had a residence permit for three years, which would then probably be extended. There was no history of mental illness in her life.

Aisha sat opposite me, wearing a headscarf, a big smile, and shiny eyes. She was a talkative woman who spoke with enthusiasm and was emotionally expressive. While speaking about hardships in her life, the focus of her narrative always remained on the positive outcomes of these. When she spoke about her child and her responsibility for him, she stated "*I have responsibility. I cannot be weak. I say I hope that A. will also be strong. [...] I cry, not because I am sad. It makes me so...it is very important to me.*"

Her focus was clearly on her family, particularly on her son and mother, but also she stated at one point “*I really have the feeling that I, that my God helps me.[...] But now I think, I see in my life I have many good people*”, emphasizing that she had felt helped and supported in her hardships.

Instead of speaking only about two situations in her life in which she felt resilient, she told chronologically how her life unfolded from when she was 14 years old and the war in Syria began, till the present moment. She described getting married at the age of 16 and moving to Dubai, having a child at the age of 17 and then going to Germany together with her husband and child. Then, she described leaving her husband, and the abduction of her son from her husband for 6 months, before she got her son back.

Although telling much of what happened in her life since she was 14, in her story she described two situations that appeared to be of particular significance, as in these she explained what happened and how she felt in the most detail and because they were situations in which she felt resilient. The first situation was the decision of her then still husband to go from Dubai to Germany to seek asylum. She described being desperate about her situation, because her marriage was unhappy, with a lot of fighting and physical abuse, and because she was not allowed to continue her education as she had wanted to. She described that when her then-husband decided to move, she had hope for a better future again. Furthermore, she was not afraid then, but rather “*in the first moment I thought, now my future is getting better. [...] it was also an adventure*”.

The second story that was salient was the period in her life, after having left her husband, during which her husband abducted her son and she had to cope alone in Germany. She described in detail how difficult this time was for her emotionally and cognitively, but that she did not want to be a victim of the situation but instead make the best out of it, and therefore started going to German classes and met people, who then became a support for her “*my life was difficult. But there was never such a time, I remember, that I never gave up, in my head*”.

What was most prevalent in Aisha’s story was the component manageability, which appeared a lot more than the other components, and also stood out compared to the other participants. This component became salient in several themes of her story. First, it became salient particularly when she spoke about the period of coping without her son, not knowing where he is, what will happen and whether she will ever see him again. She emphasized how difficult and painful this situation was, but that she decided to make the best of it: “*but I said, no, I will not give up. I went to a language course. There, I got to know many people. “Throughout this whole story of feeling*

confident that she can manage, she emphasizes “*And, yes, after all this I said, oh, I made it, and I really fought.*” Furthermore, she emphasized what she learned through this situation, and manageability appeared in how she described learning the necessary skills to cope and manage and become a stronger person. This component, therefore, appeared when she turned her story into an experience of learning, into something positive: “*I always said, I can do this. Better times shall come. And I do what I want. This is what I do now (laughs). I now also trust myself. I know, I also fought, and now I know myself. Now, I know what I can cope with and manage. I also know, in such difficult situations, what my reaction is. I also was surprised that with 20 years old I behave this way. I cried the whole time, but I didn't give up. And now in difficult situations, I know what I do. I think always I have a great responsibility because I have a child.*”

This utterance displayed her confidence in herself, which she recognized as coming from withstanding and being resilient throughout difficult times, and that she felt that her experiences had even increased her resilience. Not only manageability was displayed in this utterance, but also meaningfulness in her statement of having responsibility for her child because this referred to what her feeling of purpose was and what she cared about. Thereby, a more global orientation to the SOC appeared to be salient here.

Secondly, the component appeared in an utterance of her stating that she experiences life in Germany as better because one did not have to fear becoming homeless if one lost their job. This pointed to the social security in Germany as a resource for her to meet demands in life and to trust in a good world: “*Here, you are also not afraid. For example, if you don't work, you don't land on the street. There is always help.*”

Third, a global orientation manifested itself again as both comprehensibility and manageability manifested themselves. This appeared in how she spoke about her mother being a role model for her to learn patience in difficult times, and to focus on getting an education, which she described as one reason why she managed to successfully cope with her son being gone. She referred to her mother as a role model twice in the interview, later stating that her mother also encountered difficulties as she worked full-time and also did most of the house-work, stating “*It wasn't easy [for her]. That somehow helped me.*” Furthermore, she also explained that it was her parent's emotional support while she was alone in Germany and her brother visiting her that encouraged her to make the best of her situation and to pursue continuing her education.

Comprehensibility manifested itself in how she explained that she was able to cope and manage because she knew what to do and the world became clear to her in this difficult situation of hers. This display of comprehensibility thanks to her mother as a role model and her parents' support, she connected to why she had managed and displayed how she created a positive perspective on her life: *"Then I thought, no, I want to do something for myself. When I was a child, my mother always said, the woman must learn, must study. One day, she needs a report, so she can learn, acquire knowledge for a profession. That's what my mother always said. That I always had in my mind. That's why I said, no, I want this. And my parents always called me and said, you can do it, you will do it. Your son is okay, now you have to think about yourself a little bit. Your son will come back."*

Finally, in Aisha's story manageability manifested itself when she referred to God as support through difficult times. Not only this, but she also connected this to having many people help and support her: *"I feel that I have a good relationship with God. So, I really have the feeling that God helps me. And my life, really, that was a situation, but when I think now, I see in my life many good people."*

The (-) utterances of manageability referred both to in-between times, or bridges, which were then overcome by her. The first time was when she left Syria, a war-torn and insecure country, which was the main reason why she left Syria and got married so young. *"Leaving was also very difficult because there are soldiers who shoot if they see a movement in the street. And yes, at this moment we were really in danger. That was first a very difficult situation in my life."*

The second (-) utterance indicating a lack of manageability was that she described not knowing that she would be able to cope with such a difficult situation as being alone in Germany without her family and her son. *"I didn't know that I can cope with such a difficult situation. Or that I can live without my family. Or without my child. 6 months without my child I managed. This I didn't think."*

Meaningfulness first occurred as a (-) utterance, when she spoke of her life after giving birth to her son in Dubai at the age of 17. *"During this time, I was very tired. And I said, I not only made a mistake. I made a catastrophe. I destroyed my life. There is nothing I can do."* She spoke of feeling and thinking that she destroyed her life because she could not continue her education as planned, because of her early pregnancy and her marital situation. This (-) utterance was then followed by a (+) utterance of how meaningfulness came back into her life when her then-husband

decided to go to Germany. This meant a complete change in her situation and new hope for a better future. This hope, and looking forward to the future, as she described it, left no space for fear or sadness. For Aisha, the uncertainty of change was worth it because of the chance of a better life in Germany, which made her feel strong again. Also, this was one of the few (+) utterances in which she spoke of a specific moment instead of a situation or time in her life in general:

*“And then, in the first moment, I just thought, my future will now be better. Now I again have the opportunity to learn and to do something. [..]. It was an adventure. After all, I don’t know how, but in this moment, I was not sad or scared, no. I was so strong, I will arrive, and I will do again, what is really good.”*

(+) utterances of meaningfulness were found recurrently as she described having her son with her again, feeling happy and free and enjoying life. This she connected to the abovementioned utterances of manageability, that she found this joy and sense in life because she managed to and fought to overcome the difficulties, namely coping during the time her son was gone. She switched back and forth between utterances of meaningfulness and manageability repeatedly and thereby showed that they were interconnected in her story, and to some extent, both seemed to depend on each other. This switching back and forth was also found as she stated she fought for it all, and also that she felt that God was with her: *“I always felt that God is with me. [...] It was also a lot of fighting and stress. And, that was my life, what I experienced, which was really difficult. [...] But, through my experiences, I have learned a lot. [...]. I never thought, why did this happen to me. Why should I live this way.”*

Comprehensibility also manifested itself in Aisha’s story in other ways. Both (-) and (+) utterances appeared close together when she described her ambiguity about leaving her husband, being confused about what is the right thing to do and her fear of being judged by Arabic people in her social environment. She justified her decision to leave him by saying *“Then I thought, nobody is in my place. So, it doesn’t matter what they [the Arabic people] say.”*

Another salient finding was that again, an occurrence of comprehensibility was followed by an utterance of manageability. When she spoke about getting her son back from her ex-husband and his anger at her, she justified her doing the right thing. This she did by stating she no longer cared anymore about her husband and has made no mistakes. This was an utterance of comprehensibility, and by pointing towards all she managed to accomplish on her own, also an utterance of manageability. It appeared to be the case that being confident in having the resources

to manage her life on her own made it clearer to her what she wanted to do. Furthermore, after an utterance of comprehensibility and then manageability, these were immediately followed by an utterance of meaningfulness: *“I am now truly happy, and I am free, and now I truly like my life. I am content. We are happy. Most of the time together (she and her son). [...]”* and then again of manageability: *“And after all, I said, I really made it, and I really fought.”* These utterances underlined the interconnectedness of the components of the SOC in Aisha’s story and again pointed to a global orientation of the SOC.

Comprehensibility repeatedly manifested itself in another way that showed how Aisha made sense of her life: When she spoke of learning to be patient thanks to her mother, and being positive while she was in the difficult situation of being without her son, she stated that *“I always say, this happened for a reason”*. In another point, after speaking about God being with her (an utterance of meaningfulness) comprehensibility again manifested itself when she said *“And sometimes I say, maybe this happened so that my life gets better, is improved. And, so that I can be truly free.”* Both utterances displayed how she made sense of her past and her life, and her perception of the world and things happening.

The (-) utterance of comprehensibility was when she stated *“I don’t know how I made it. I don’t know, where does this strength come from?”* This utterance came after an utterance of (+) manageability. It appeared that although she was aware of what she had accomplished so far and felt confident and positive regarding the future, and she consciously tried to find explanations for her difficulties and struggles, she was still not really sure about why she was resilient, and why she was strong and overcame her struggles the way she did. All in all, it was found that Aisha’s stories pointed towards the interconnectedness of the components of the SOC and a more global orientation of the SOC.

**Aisha’s letter.** Aisha’s letter was addressed to herself, in which she described a detailed situation after being reunited with her family in Germany. The details she described indicated that she was well able to imagine this situation vividly:



1. *“My family is now with me. My Mum cooks and in a moment, I should help her. My dad*
2. *is speaking to A. (her son) and is telling him a story. My brothers are watching Tv. Oh,*
3. *finally they are there. I have waited a long time for them. Finally, we helped them and*
4. *collected them from Syria. It wasn't easy. We worked a lot and saved a lot of money. Now*
5. *they have a residence permit, and they live with me. My parents look well after my son.*
6. *He is happy, that finally he has Grandma and Grandpa like all children have. I worked a*
7. *lot so that I can gain citizenship, then immediately I organized a visa for my parents and*
8. *for my brother. We haven't seen each other for 8 years. This took a lot from us, but it was*
9. *worth it. Ah, my mother is calling me. I must go 😊”*

In Aisha's letter from the future, no negative utterances of the SOC components could be found. The most clearly present component was meaningfulness, which manifested itself in Aisha referring to the energy invested in getting her parents to be able to come to Germany as worth it. She thereby described her struggle to achieve her desired future of being reunited with her parents again. Comprehensibility also appeared to manifest itself in this letter, as she expressed an ordered, structured perception of the world around her in this situation. Furthermore, she appeared to know what she should do in line 1, namely help her mother to cook.

It appeared to be, apart from the obvious fact that Aisha desired to be reunited with her family in Germany, that she desired a world that is ordered, in which she knows the persons around her well. Furthermore, manageability manifested itself throughout her desired future in her description of a world in which she was surrounded by trustworthy family members, with whom she works together, her cooking with her mother, and in which she trusts in a good world.

In terms of the SOC found underlying the specific situation she described in her desired future perspective, it seemed that in her past perspective, Aisha already believed that this could come true, as she often described positive utterances of the SOC components. Furthermore, it was found that while in the past perspective there were some (-) utterances of components of the SOC, in Aisha's desired future there were none, and it appeared that her life was 'perfectly coherent'.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In answer to the research question, it is concluded that the SOC gives meaning to the perspectives of the refugees in different ways, depending on their temporal perspective. In the past stories, manageability was the most prevalent component. In the letters, meaningfulness was most prevalent. Combining stories and letters, meaningfulness was also the most prevalent component.

Comprehensibility was the least prevalent component in both stories and letters. This appeared to be because the individuals perceived their life situations as extremely uncertain and their future as unpredictable. Negative utterances of manageability appeared to refer to in-between times or bridges in the lives of the participants, which were often overcome by a more global orientation towards the SOC. Generally, in the stories, there was a more global orientation to the SOC. This appeared to put the components of the SOC into relation with each other and showed their interconnectedness.

The letters were generally depicted more positively than the stories, and the refugees' future perspectives gave a more positive meaning to the SOC. In two letters, no characteristics of the SOC manifested themselves. These letters were either not about the future or only very general and vague descriptions of wishes for the future. No global orientation to the SOC was found. However, participants who gave utterances indicating a more global orientation towards the SOC in the stories then tended to write letters in which more components of the SOC were found.

In the past stories, which were rich with manifestations of components of the SOC, the individuals described encountering difficult and often extreme situations and how they dealt with them. This shows that indeed, the SOC deals with the way individuals respond to stressors (Sagy & Antonovsky, 1996). Furthermore, the finding that those who uttered many positive occurrences of the SOC appeared to cope well also indicates that as Braun-Lewensohn (2011) stated, the SOC is a universally significant protective factor when confronted with a stressful situation, independent of the cultural background of the individual.

In the stories, it became salient that the refugees generally did not perceive the world as comprehensible, while otherwise many positive occurrences of the SOC were found. Antonovsky (1987) stated that the individual components are insufficient for a high SOC and that rather, the SOC should be viewed as holistic, and that all components are thereby relevant. Consequently, so that refugees and others can cope well with stress and adversity, they need to be high on all components of the SOC. For this reason, when aiming at increasing resilience in refugees, a focus should be set on enhancing their perception of the world as comprehensible.

A salient finding was that for Anis it appeared to be important to use the waiting period in the refugee camp in Greece in a meaningful way, namely by functioning as a teacher. This is in line with Rotter's finding (2016) that waiting can be experienced as meaningful and directed at the individuals' needs and desires (Rotter, 2016). On the other hand, another participant (1) gave a

different meaning to the SOC while describing a period of waiting, as he described having only felt tired for three months. These two opposing experiences of a waiting period demonstrate the importance of experiencing meaningfulness during times of uncertainty. Antonovsky (1987) also hypothesized that meaningfulness is generally the most important component to deal with stress. He regarded it as a necessity for sustained comprehensibility and manageability, and also a precondition for enhancing the SOC (Antonovsky, 1987). Possibly, the perceived uncertainty led not only to lower comprehensibility but also to lower perceived manageability, making meaningfulness more important. However, other studies have given counterindications, that instead, other components are at least as if not more significant for a high SOC (Bergman, Malm, Ljungquist, Berterö, & Karlsson, 2012).

The finding that the SOC is depicted more positively in the letters is in line with findings by Gryzman and Hudson (2013) that future events are depicted more positively than past events, and that there is a linear increase in positivity from distant past to future. It was also found that if there was a more global orientation towards the SOC and more positive utterances of the components in the stories, then more components of the SOC were found in the letter. On the other hand, the only two participants where the negative utterances overweighed the positive in the stories, were also the only participants who were unable to write an LF in which an SOC was depicted. Sool and Moorens' (2012) hypothesis that a high SOC-score enables imagining an ideal future is in line with this finding. However, this explanation for the lack of a SOC in the letters is given cautiously, as particularly in this population, the mastery of the language must be taken into account for the ability to write a letter. While Aisha, for example, was well able to articulate herself in the interview and letter, and also many utterances of the SOC were found in her stories and letters, others were less so.

There was a very different finding in how Anis gave meaning to the SOC in his stories and letter. Anis was diagnosed with depression but was able to describe past situations in which the SOC was depicted, and then able to imagine a desired future in which he gave meaning to the SOC. This runs counter to other research finding depression to be associated with a lower SOC and the inability of imagining a positive future (Korn, Sharot, Walter, Heekeren, & Dolan, 2014; Skärsäter, Langius, Ågren, Häggström, & Dencker, 2005; Sools et al., 2015). The participants' ability to perform the practice *Letters from the Future* and imagine a desired future generally appears to provide information on the individual SOC, but Anis' case appears to indicate that it does not

necessarily provide information on depressive symptomatology. Possibly, the process of remembering and retelling stories of being resilient in the past enhanced his ability to imagine an ideal future. A tentative conclusion can be made that in some cases, even with depression, a desired future can be imagined. This is in favor of conducting this futuring practice with depressed individuals.

More insight concerning the exercise of imagining a desired future as a practice among individuals suffering from depression remains necessary. Furthermore, more research on the internal processes taking place while asking for past situations in which a person felt resilient and then *writing Letters from the Future* remains necessary. Generally, the relation between a high SOC in past stories and more positive future perspectives must be further tested.

There is also an alternative explanation for finding the two letters without any depiction of the SOC. According to Sools et al. (2015), there are six letter types, varying for example concerning temporality. In terms of temporality, they differentiate between letters in which a future situation is imagined, and generic letters, with no or limited imagination of a future situation. According to them, the letter of a person that is only about the past can be categorized as a type 4 letter: "Retrospective: Reminiscence and evaluation of the past", where the writer is pre-occupied with past events. The past story of this participant also showed that he has not yet accepted and integrated negative events and experiences in his life, which is also in line with the characteristics of this letter type (Sools et al., 2015). The second letter, containing only vague statements of desired achievements, in which no component of the SOC could be identified, can be categorized as a type 5 letter: "Prospective intentional orientation" (Sools et al., 2015). Rather than expressing an imagination of a realized desired future, his letter contains the expression of wishes, which is in line with this letter type.

These two letters show that how individuals give meaning to the SOC in future perspectives may depend on how far they have accepted the past and are therefore oriented towards the future instead of the past. Future research should focus on why and when participants (knowingly or not) divert from the instruction to imagine a desired future (Sools et al., 2015), and how this is related to their SOC.

In the letters, no global orientation to the SOC was found. This may be due to a lack of data. Another possible explanation for this lack of a global orientation to the SOC in the letters may be provided by Grysman and Hudson (2013). They found that past events are generally higher

in phenomenological quality than imagined future events. Therefore, imagined futures may generally tend to be less elaborate in their descriptions of subjective experience. On the other hand, those two letters without any components of the SOC were also written by participants who were less confident in their German, stating that they find it difficult to find the words. Future research should examine the connection between SOC, the temporal orientation of the letter and the cultural background of the individual.

A final salient finding regarding both past and future perspectives was that in Anis' case, manageability and meaningfulness manifested themselves in his desire for a world in which people are more friendly and interested to help each other. His perspectives display a generative vision of life. According to Elfassi, Braun-Lewensohn, Krumer-Nevo, and Sagy, (2016), this can be also be regarded as a community sense of coherence, which includes perceptions of the "own community and its potential as a source for protective factors and assets". Anis appears to need community with others to imagine a desired future. As there is little research so far on the community sense of coherence, and this is the first research on it regarding both past and future perspectives, this should be further investigated.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

**Cultural Sensitivity.** In the cases of Anis and Aisha, but also in that of the other participants, positive utterances of the SOC and particularly the component manageability appeared to be relevant in connection with the concept of 'relational autonomy' (Christman, 2004; Gergen, 2011). A relationally autonomous person is generally defined as being autonomous yet motivated by interests related to interpersonal relations and reciprocal dependencies (Christman, 2004). The participants varied in their self-perception and to what extent they defined their interests as related to others, which is in line with Christman (2004) stating that there is evidence of cultural variations relating to this. Those participants who described a self-perception as being relationally autonomous also displayed many positive occurrences of components of the SOC. The findings of this study show that despite lacking autonomy in aspects such as German citizenship, many positive occurrences of the SOC could be found in their perspectives, and they could still perceive themselves as autonomous agents. An example was feeling autonomous in being able to care for a child, which was an utterance of manageability, as in the case of Aisha. In Aisha's story,

manageability in terms of relational autonomy also manifested itself when she explained her ability to cope as because she had many people to help and support her.

Relational autonomy was found to not only be relevant in connection with manageability, but also to meaningfulness, the most prevalent component in the stories and letters. Gergen (2011) views relational processes as the “wellspring of meaning”. Thereby, he traces moral action to relational processes, in a shift of the locus of meaning from within the person to between persons. This is found particularly in Anis’ case, as he seeks meaning and purpose in helping others, and does not only focus on his own life. Therefore, this study contributes to displaying relational autonomy as depending on the cultural context and its connection with the SOC.

This study has a cross-cultural dimension, as participants came from five different countries and two continents. Im, Page, Lin, Tsai, and Cheng (2004) identified five evaluation criteria for rigor in cross-cultural research which shall be taken into consideration: cultural relevance, contextuality, appropriateness, mutual respect, and flexibility. Cultural relevance is given, as this study served all cultural groups’ issues and interests in improving their lives.

Contextuality implies sensitivity to conditions that contribute to participants' responses and the interpretations of situations (Im et al., 2004). Adopting BNIM techniques in the interviews should serve to have achieved contextuality both during the interviews and in the process of interpreting them, as the participants were asked to describe past situations in their lives and probing was merely in terms of asking for more details. However, as Marquardt et al. (2015) cautioned, different meanings of trauma, health, and support in the cultural context may have been missed, and/or not understood from their cultural context. Indeed, as the different cultural backgrounds of the participants could not be researched in detail due to limited resources, a lack of information on this may have influenced the interpretation of their perspectives.

Appropriateness refers to whether appropriate communication styles and conceptualizations were used. Participants could choose what situations in the past they speak about in which they felt resilient, and could freely choose what kind of future is desirable for them in the letters. Resilience was conceptualized in the simplest way possible, to enable them to easily think of situations in which they felt resilient.

Mutual respect was created primarily during the interview. Participants were given space to describe their own experiences and were not interrupted. Furthermore, at the beginning of the interview and when probing, it was always emphasized that they do not have to answer if they do

not want to. In the end, it was emphasized that their contribution to the study is important. Finally, flexibility was not well demonstrated. The interview was not conducted in the participants' mother tongue, as resources for translators were lacking, and letters were also written either in German or English. In future studies with people from different linguistic backgrounds, it should be ensured with more rigor before the interview and/or letter writing that the participant has a sufficient level of the language. Alternatively, translators should be engaged in the data collection process, so that participants can speak and write in their mother tongue.

**Evaluation of the *Letters from the Future* instrument.** The qualitative and narrative approach of this study was, as Sools and Mooren (2012) describe, powerful because it captured signs of the SOC, while it gave the participants room to articulate and possibly create an SOC. An individual expression of the SOC in the different temporal perspectives could be displayed and analyzed thanks to the qualitative nature of the study and the chosen *Letters from the Future* instrument to explore the future perspectives. This narrative-based approach offers a way to explore the SOC components isolated as well as in relation to one another.

During the data collection, there was no discussion of the content of the letters, of how the participants perceived the reflective process of writing a letter from the future. In the future, it is recommendable to do this to gain knowledge regarding the reason why letters were written so shortly, why they referred to themselves or somebody else as the recipient, why a certain temporal perspective was chosen, and how they felt after writing the letter.

In future practices of the LF instrument in cross-cultural contexts and research in this area, instructions should be given in the mother tongue. Furthermore, the instructions of imagining traveling with a time-travel machine may be difficult to imagine for individuals from a cultural context that are less affine to technology. Therefore, this meditation should be adapted and possibly generalized to imagining a desired point in the future.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This was the first qualitative, explorative study of how refugees give meaning to the SOC in past, present and future perspectives. It also provided an exploration of the temporal aspect of the SOC. Meaningfulness was found to be of particular importance in past liminal situations such as waiting periods. In their future perspectives, meaningfulness was depicted in experiences of a

community sense of coherence. Both meaningfulness and manageability were found in how the participants perceived themselves as being relationally autonomous despite their hardships. It appears to be that in such cases of extreme uncertainty, refugees can maintain an SOC despite often not perceiving the world as comprehensible. Based on the knowledge on the SOC of refugees that this study contributes to, ways should be found to strengthen their SOC and to thereby enhance their coping. Future research should focus on whether this can be achieved through narrative interviews and futuring. More specifically, research should focus on uncovering the effect of imagining a desired future on enhancing the SOC.



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10. In the past ten years your life has been: Full of changes without your knowing what will happen next - Completely consistent and clear

12. Do you have the feeling that you are in an unfamiliar situation and don't know what to do? Very often - Very seldom or never

15. When you face a difficult problem, the choice of a solution is: Always confusing and hard to find - Always completely clear

17. Your life in the future will probably be: Full of changes without knowing what will happen next - Completely consistent and clear

19. Do you have very mixed-up feelings and ideas? Very often - Very seldom or never

21. Does it happen that you have feelings inside you would rather not feel? Very often - Very seldom or never

24. Does it happen that you have the feeling that you don't know exactly what's about to happen? Very often - Very seldom or never

26. When something happened, have you generally found that: You overestimated or underestimated its importance - You saw things in the right proportion

### **Manageability.**

2. In the past, when you had to do something, which depended upon cooperation with others, did you have the feeling that it: Surely wouldn't get done - Surely would get done

6. Has it happened that people whom you counted on disappointed you? Never happened - Always happened

9. Do you have the feeling that you're being treated unfairly? Very often - Very seldom or never

13. What best describes how you see life: One can always find a solution to painful things in life - There is no solution to painful things in life

18. When something unpleasant happened in the past your tendency was: "To eat yourself up" about - To say "ok that's that, I have to live with it" and go on

20. When you do something that gives you a good feeling: It's certain that you'll go on feeling good - It's certain that something will happen to spoil the feeling

23. Do you think that there will always be people whom you'll be able to count on in the future? You're certain there will be - You doubt there will be

25. Many people – even those with a strong character – sometimes feel like sad sacks (losers) in certain situations. How often have you felt this way in the past? Never - Very often

27. When you think of the difficulties you are likely to face in important aspects of your life, do you have the feeling that: You will always succeed in overcoming the difficulties - You won't succeed in overcoming the difficulties

29. How often do you have feelings that you're not sure you can keep under control? Very often - Very seldom or never

### **Meaningfulness.**

4. Do you have the feeling that you don't really care about what goes on around you? Very seldom - often or never

7. Life is: Full of interest - Completely routine

8. Until now your life has had: No clear goals or purpose at all - Very clear goals and purpose

11. Most of the things you do in the future will probably be: Completely fascinating - Deadly boring

14. When you think about your life, you very often: Feel how good it is to be alive - Ask yourself why you exist at all

16. Doing the things you do every day is: A source of deep pleasure and satisfaction - A source of pain and boredom

22. You anticipate that your personal life in the future will be: Totally without meaning or purpose - Full of meaning and purpose

28. How often do you have the feeling that there's little meaning in the things you do in your daily life? Very often - Very seldom or never