

Investigation of the Relationship between Identity Styles, Identity Commitment and Existential Thinking among Students

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ABSTRACT: The present study aimed to examine the relationship between student's identity styles and existential thinking. The population included all the students majoring in Shahid Chamran University in the academic year 91-92. The sample participants comprised of 370 students chosen through random selection. The questionnaire of self-existential thinking (SET) and Bezoronsky's identity style questionnaire (1989) were utilized to gather the data. The methodology undertaken is correlation. In order to do data analyses, Pearson correlation coefficient and multiple Regression analyses (stepwise method) were employed. The results of analyzing the data indicated a positive and significant relationship between students' existential thinking and informational-identity style; while a negative and significant relationship was found between existential thinking and avoidant/ confused-identity style. Furthermore, there was found a positive and significant relationship between identity commitment and existential thinking. The multiple regression analyses (stepwise method) indicated that informational/ normative-identity styles and identity commitment are a total of 21 percent indicator of existential thinking variance. Other findings also demonstrated no significant difference among female and male, single and married, technical and human science students' existential thinking. In conclusion, the findings point out the importance of identity styles in the prediction of existential thinking and in considering fundamental existential questions.

Keywords: Identity styles, Identity Commitment, Existential Thinking, Student

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INTRODUCTION

Concerning about fundamental existential questions such as the meaning of life and what would happen after death is a human and universal experience. Most people hold various ideas regarding existential themes. In addition, the ability of people in their attention given to meaning and creating that meaning in ultimate subjects in every culture and realm especially in philosophy, art, theoretical science and religion have always been substantial and respectable (Gardner, 1999).

Some scientists regarded the benefits of taking into account the existential themes in psychotherapy (Fran I, 1963, Spinelli, 2005, Yalom, 1980). Nevertheless, individuals are significantly different in how they observe and encounter with deep-rooted subjects.

The idea that individuals possess diverse abilities in exploring and perceiving existential subjects is raised from researches conducted in the area of multiple forms of intelligence. Gardner (1999), the presenter of eight-fold intelligence, has introduced a new type of intelligence in his book called existential intelligence which is candidate of the ninth intelligence (Gardner, 2004) Existential thinking is taken into consideration by spotting personal existence-related subjects. Gardner (1999) has referred to them as ultimate or transcendental subjects. These ultimate

concerns encompass a person's essence and comprise of the nature of reality and indispensable parts of human status such as the meaning of life and the certainty of death (Yalom, 1980).

As mentioned before, Gardner admits existential thinking involve heeding existential subjects. This emphasis indicates that existential thinking is a process by which individuals establish relationships with existential concepts.

This condition requires creating meaning or meanings beyond existential subjects. As Spinelli (2005) had put it that all people draw new meaning out of their life experiences and then react to the stimuli in the outside world. Thinking involves considering ultimate concerns of human conditions and creating meaning in self-concepts. As an example, people are willing to declare a high degree of appreciation when they react to their death (Frias et al., 2011). Frias et al. points out when people face attenuation and inevitability of death, they take life as a valuable limited source through which they appreciate life to a greater extent. Like manner, people create meaning by regarding existential subjects as death and put it into action. Yet, due to their relational and structural nature, meanings cannot be eternal and ultimate (Spinelli, 2005).

Psychology researchers made an attempt to study and understand existential thinking. Nevertheless, some scientists take existential thinking as a

part of spiritual intelligence which has been presented by Gardner as well (2000). Emmons (2000) believes that spiritual intelligence is the ability to attain sublimity, higher level of consciousness and purification of everyday experiences, using spiritual sources and involvement in honorable behavior. Wolman (2001) defines spiritual intelligence as the human's capability to ask ultimate questions about the meaning of life and simultaneously experiencing a unique relationship between every single of us and the world we live in. Vaughan (2002) takes it as the capability to deep understanding of existential questions and an insight to multiple levels of consciousness.

King and DeCicco (2009) define existential intelligence as a collection of mental capacities incorporated with knowledge, integration and adaptive applications of spiritual and transcendental aspects of existence. These definitions involve aspects of existential thinking such as questioning ultimate concepts as well as deep understanding of existential subjects. However, Gardner (2000) rejects the spiritual intelligence as a multiple one according to its emphasis on gaining an effective status, phenomenology and its possible function that the spiritual facts are accurate. To this end, spiritual intelligence and existential thinking seem to be distinct but overlapping structures (Halama and Strizence, 2004).

Since existential thinking is related to spiritual intelligence, it might be in correlation with religion as well. Recently studies of La Cour and Hvidt (2010) suggested that spirituality, religion, and non-spiritual areas are separate, but they overlap with one another in creating meaning; examples can be Yalom (1980) in the realm of ultimate concerns, and Frankl (1963) in the domain of meaning creation. Spirituality is seeking for a better understanding of answer related to existence and life (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Spirituality is a universal issue that resembling to excitement has different levels and aspects; it may be conscious or unconscious, developed or undeveloped, sound or pathological, simple or complex, useful or dangerous (Vaughan, 2002). Amram (2005) holds the view that spiritual intelligence includes the sense of meaning, having a mission in life, sense of sacredness in life, and balanced understanding of material value and believes in the better world. Spiritual intelligence is the applied and adaptive implementation of the abovementioned instances in special occasions and daily life. It seems that spiritual intelligence moves beyond the individual's physical and cognitive relationships with their environment entering the intuitive and sublimated domain of one's opinion upon their life (Nasel, 2004). In fact, the spiritual intelligence is related to the inner life of the mind and spirit and the world. It also includes a deep

understanding of existential questions and an insight toward multi-dimensional levels of consciousness (Vaughan, 2003). Some of the individual characteristics which are useful in utilization of spiritual intelligence include: wisdom, completeness, and sympathy (McMullen, 2003), holding a holistic view, accuracy, owning an open and flexible mind (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). These characteristics present various ways to cognize and attain deeper levels of meaning through non-verbal and irrational ways such as dream, intuition and mystical experience (Nasel, 2004).

These ideas are a part of existential psychology which attempts to place human being in concerning position of ultimate subjects. This position can be the indicator that existential thinking is basically related to materialist thinking. However, since existential thinking is the process of considering existential concepts and involvement with meaning creation, it can be mirrored in religion, spirituality and non-spiritual realms. Furthermore, existential thinking may happen within religions which are a framework to meaning creation and they yield global opinions, general, meaningful and situational objectives as well as continuity of ideas in ultimate concepts (Simpson, 2002; Wortmann & Park, 2009). Meanwhile, religion may provide a framework for existential thinking through which the meaning resulted from existential thinking are provided by religion. Nevertheless, existential thinking cannot solely be associated with religion; rather it is the intrinsic religion referring to meaning creation (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1988). For example, meaning creation plays as a mediator between being religious and psychological welfare (Spinelli, 2005). Therefore, it is expected that existential thinking be separated from being religious as well as overlapping with it. If existential thinking includes the process of creating meaning, then how the individuals create, explore and maintain the sense of meaning to their lives may be a vital part of understanding.

Conceptually, existential thinking resembles to seeking for meaning which indicates individuals' willingness to create meaning and perceiving their objectives in life (Frankl, 1963, Steger et al., 2006). Generally, while seeking for meaning people may refer back to existential concepts. Meanwhile, existential thinking, in addition to seeking for meaning, is said to be a process by which meaning is conceptualized and created. Some of these meanings may be inferred as the goals of life or experimental feelings in the meaning of life. For instance, awareness of death can enhance perception and appreciation as well as meaning of life (Frias et al., 2011). Therefore, existential thinking associated with existence of meaning in life might be related to psychological welfare. Many existentialist psychologists suggested

that existential concerns are bases for welfare, especially due to their ability to create some of the meanings of life (Frankl, 1963, Koehn, 1986, Spinelli, 2005, Yalom 1980). However, there is no literature review on the relationship between existential thinking and psychological welfare (La Cour & Hvidt, 2001). Instead researchers have considered the relationship between meaning of life and welfare variables such as self-esteem, life satisfaction and lack of depression (Steger et al., 2006). Moreover, Gardner believes that existential thinking is related to the meaning of life. In line with Gardner, Steger et al. (2006) has also referred to the relationship between meaning of life and psychological welfare. To Steger et al. (2006), meaning of life is a mediator and connector between being religious and life satisfaction. La Cour and Hvidt (2010) also apperceived that existential thinking comprised of the process of meaning creation.

The studies of Blake and Shearer (2012) demonstrated no significant difference between the two genders in their existential thinking scores. Other findings also indicated that existential thinking does not significantly correlate with age, income and education, but Indian respondents reported a significant difference with their European, and American counterparts (including Canada and America) that is the scores of Indian in existential thinking was significantly higher than others.

The concept of identity has been the subject of studies in different disciplines (psychology, sociology and political science etc.). It can be stated that identity is an interdisciplinary concept and a connection an individual makes between his mental world and reality (Firhi, 2004, Nocheh Fahal, 2004). From psychological point of view, identity formation commences by asking fundamental questions about the meaning of life, the goal of life in teens. Today's teenagers and youth are encountering problems including lack of goal or a meaning for life, decision making problems, depression and anxiety which all have turned to a serious crisis for custodians of public affairs. Those with normative-identity style face processing identity questions and decision-making positions by conformance and guidance of important people in their lives (Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000). Berzonsky (1989), as one of the theorists in the process of identity formation, has considered three styles for identity by incorporating it with various aspects of identity such as process, dimension, and content. In normative-identity style, people accept the values of authorities and parents. People holding this type of style are inflexible and they have instructional and career goals controlled externally. In confused/avoidant-identity style, the person usually reacts to the situational demands. These groups of people are recognized by their hesitation and long pauses in

making decision about personal and identity issues. This style is significantly and positively correlated with values such as hedonism and power which are related to individual's interests.

In informative-identity style, the person is seeker of information. He is doubtful about his concepts and high-minded to his consciousness and before making decision he analyzes and evaluates information. Various studies such as Berzonsky and Kuk (2000) Berzonsky (1995, 1989) indicated that students holding informational-identity style presents a high degree of educational independence; they have clear understanding of instructional goals and high instructional skills with having tendency to high level of educational performance. Berzonsky shares the view that commitment is the main element in the identity structure and it is through commitment that a framework for evaluating and setting behavior is provided and the behavior is directed and targeted. In the Erikson's point of view, identity is a psychological-social structure which includes the way of thinking, person's ideas, and how to contact people (Schwartz, 2001).

Various Studies regarding identity clarified a positive relationship between avoidant or confused-identity orientation and social resistance, self-debilitation, directing by others, and non-adaptive decision strategies while it demonstrated a negative correlation with self-reflection, awareness and cognitive resistance (Berzonsky, 1989). In this study it was revealed that American students with confused or avoidant-identity style eschew to a great extent and seek support in social situations lesser than students owning informational or normative-identity style. Their studies have also demonstrated that developed social relations correlate with high scores in informational-identity style and low scores in confused/avoidant-identity style to a great extent. Students having high scores in both informational and normative-identity style have reached to good educational and career goals. This group of students showed an oriented feeling and reported precise plans for accomplishing future goals. Although a person having informational orientation differs from a person with normative orientation, the former possesses the ability to tolerate others and emotional and academic self-regulation. In the study of Boyd et al. (1996) in Berlin University, the identity style of 2200 freshmen has been examined. In line with Berzonsky's findings, students with avoidant/ confused-identity style showed that they had no clear educational goals and expected to experience the educational problems while having problem in managing and planning their time.

On the whole, studies have shown that those with avoidant, confused-identity style experience

social problems as well as having problem in the establishment and preservation of social protection system. Such people are at a high risk of many problems and behavioral issues such as low self-esteem, high level of depression, mental suffering and business problems (White & Jones, 1996). Existential questions and regarding them are undoubtedly an essential and considerable part of one's life. Regarding the importance of existential intelligence and identity styles in life, this study is to examine the relationship between student's identity styles and existential thinking. In order to meet the objective of this study, the following hypotheses are formulated: 1- There is a simple multiple correlation between student's identity styles and existential thinking. 2- There is a significant difference between male and female student's existential thinking. 3- There is a significant difference between single and married student's existential thinking 4- There is a significant difference between existential thinking of students majoring in technical and human disciplines.

Methodology

This study is of correlation type. The population included all the students enrolling in Shahid Chamran University in the academic year 91-92. The samples were chosen through random selection. In the present study the sample size comprised of 370 students out of which 243 were female and the rest formed the male participants. Moreover, 281 of the total sample included single students and the rest married ones.

Instrumentation

Berzonsky's identity style questionnaire: It was first developed by Berzonsky (1989) and is comprised of 40 questions. This questionnaire examines every identity style and individual's commitment. It includes four-point scale as absolutely agree, almost agree, almost disagree, and absolutely disagree. The scoring is reversely 9, 11, 14 and 20 that is absolutely agree (1), almost agree (2), almost disagree (3) absolutely disagree (4). In the informational-identity style section, the questionnaire consists of 11 questions (items 2, 5, 6, 16, 18, 25, 26, 30, 33, 35 and 37) and normative-identity style comprises 9 questions (items 4, 10, 19, 21, 23, 28, 32, 34, and 40). There were 10 questions in avoidant or confused-identity style section (items: 3, 8, 13, 17, 24, 27, 29, 31, 36, 38) and commitment style section (items 1, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 20, 22, 39) which were answered according to a 5-level likert type. White and his colleagues amended this test in 1998. The present study gets benefit of the revised version of the test i.e. ISI-66. Berzonsky (2000) reported Cronbach's Alpha correlation of informational style as %71, normative

style %65, avoidant or confused style %75, and commitment scale %78. Moreover, the test-retest with a 2-month gap in time reported a reliability coefficient of 0.71 to 0.75. By examining the standardization of the foresaid questionnaire, Aghagani (2001) reported Cronbach Alpha correlation as 0.74, informational style as 0.67, normative style as 0.53, confused style as 0.54, and commitment scale as 0.57.

Scale of existential thinking (SET): It was developed by Branton Shearer. It includes 11-item Likert scale (no, never, sometimes, often, almost always, always, I don't know). The studies of Alan's and shearer's (2012) on 11-item scale of existential thinking (SET) showed factor structure of this scale shares the same factor and the validity is correlated with variables such as life meaning, personality, existential and welfare.

They also found that life meaning plays a mediatory role in the relationship hold between existential thinking and welfare. Cronbach's Alpha indicated a high internal consistency (0.93). Furthermore, the mean score of existential thinking was computed 33.96 and standard deviation was 10.95. In the present study the validity using Cronbach's Alpha was 0.726. The reliability of test-retest was calculated $r=0.91$ which was significant at 0.001. Likewise, the validity of the content was computed 0.95 by 10 experts. On the whole, the findings indicated that the scale of existential thinking (SET) is a valid instrument to conduct field research since its reliability and validity are satisfactory.

Procedure and Data Analyses

At the initial stage of conducting the research, the questionnaires (identity styles) were distributed among the students. After selection of the participants through class method (various classes such as field of study, marital status and gender) and to regard ethical considerations of the research, participants were initially provided with some oral briefings on the questionnaires. They were informed that filling out the questionnaire is merely for research purposes and the results would not influence them and they were also assured for the confidentiality of their responses. To do the data analyses, descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation and stepwise multiple regression analyses associated with ANOVA by using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) were undertaken.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive information of the mean, standard deviation, and the minimum and maximum of students' identity style and existential thinking.

Data Analysis (Analysis of Regression of identity style variables)

Regarding the types and the number of predictor variables as identity styles (quantitative), stepwise regression analyses was employed to examine the research hypotheses. Detailed description of statistical analyses is presented below:

- First hypothesis: There is a simple correlation between identity styles (normative, informational, commitment and confused) and existential thinking.

As Table 2 exhibits there is a positive and significant relationship among students' existential thinking and normative/ informational-identity styles and commitment. This relationship was higher for commitment among all the participants. In addition, a negative and significant relationship was found between avoidant or confused-identity style and existential thinking.

Table 3 shows the results of multiple regression analyses of identity styles with existential thinking through stepwise multiple regressions. According to

the results derived from stepwise multiple regressions and after eliminating commitment style variable, the multivariable coefficient correlation for linear combination among participants was 0.464 and determination coefficient was estimated 0.021 which was significant at $p=0.001$. Regarding the value of determination coefficient, it was inferred that 21 percent of the variance showed by existential thinking is determinable by the predictor variable i.e. identity styles (informational, confused and normative). To this end, the hypothesis of the presence of a multiple relationship between identity styles and existential thinking is confirmed.

Table 4 demonstrates descriptive information (number, mean, standard deviation) of students' existential thinking according to gender, marital status and major. In order to compare female and male groups in the major of human and technical sciences, single and married, ANOVA has been undertaken as the statistical test.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of existential thinking and identity style variables

Statistical variable	Number	Standard deviation	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Informational	370	6.44	34.90	11	54
Normative	370	7.32	40.38	13	42
Confused	370	5.92	27.58	8	50
commitment	370	8.21	36.30	10	49
Existential thinking	370	6.50	40.81	14	58

Table 2. Simple correlation coefficient among student's existential thinking and identity styles

Statistical indicators	Informational	Normative	Avoidance	Commitment
Correlation coefficient (r)	0.344**	0.307**	-0.294*	0.265**
Significance level (p)	0.000	0.001	0.002	0.005

** significant at 0.01; * significant at 0.05

Table 3. Stepwise Multiple Regression for predicting existential thinking according to identity styles and identity commitment

Constant value	Regression coefficients (β)			F=relative p= possible	Determination Coefficient of RS	Multiple correlation MR	Statistical indicators		For prediction of existential thinking
	3	2	1				Predicted variables	Criterion variable	
35/62			β=0.344 t=3.47 p=0.001	F=12.06 P=0.001	0.0118	0.344	Informational		
44/96		β=-0.235 t=-2.385 p=0.019	β=0.297 t=3.022 p=0.003	F=9.19 P=0.000	0.171	0.414	Avoidance confusion	Existential thinking	STEPWISE
42/098	β=0.224 t=2.214 p=0.029	β=-0.246 t=-2.548 p=0.013	β=0.215 t=2.076 p=0.002	F=8.029 P=0.000	0.0215	0.464	Normative		

Table 4. Descriptive information of groups in the light of existential thinking

Existential thinking	Variable Index	Gender		Marriage		Major	
		Female	Male	Single	Married	Technical science	human science
	Numbers	243	127	281	89	--	195175
	Mean	40.96	41.36	42.20	45.42	43.13	45.36
	Standard deviation	6.40	7.01	5.05	6.62	7.11	7.14

Table 5. Test of ANOVA for significant difference of the mean scores of the two genders, marital status and major in the light of existential thinking

Total square		Degree of freedom	Mean square	F test	Significant level	
Married and single	Between Groups	0.049	1	0.049	0.001	0.0976
	Error	5093.277	368	55.361		
	Whole	5093.277	370			
Two genders	Between Groups	23.175	1	23.175	0.421	0.518
	Error	5070.102	369	55.110		
	Whole	5093.277	370			
Technical and human science	Between Groups	8.868	1	2.956	0.052	0.948
	Error	44288.364	369	2.958		
	Whole	5093.277	370			

Table 5 indicates the results of one-way variance analysis for considering the difference of the mean score among students. As it is evident there is not any significant relationship between males and females, students of human and technical fields and single and married with regard to existential thinking.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was aimed at enquiring the relationship between identity styles, identity commitment and existential thinking. The results indicated a positive and significant relationship between normative and informational-identity styles. Bernosky et al. (1999) represent that those with normative and informational-identity styles have achieved educational and career goals and they have oriented feelings in their lives and show precise plans for their future objectives which are an indicator of their being targeted. The results, on the other hand, have demonstrated a negative and significant relationship between avoidance or confused-identity style and existential thinking. In this regard, Boyd et al. (1997) reported that students with avoidant or confused-identity style do not hold clear and stable educational objectives. They have problem in managing time which indicates their less being targeted in life. On the whole Parker (1997), Steger et al. (2006) and their colleagues stated that there exists a significant relationship between life meaning and welfare variables such as self-esteem, lack of depression and life satisfaction.

In general, findings showed a positive and significant relationship between identity style and existential thinking. A person will attain identity commitment when he has made decisive decisions in different areas of his life such as job, marriage, adherence to political or conscience opinions and has considered specific strategies to gain personal objectives and determine path of life (Agha

Mohammadian & Hosseinin, 2005). Kuminski (2002) revealed that the identity commitment plays a determinant role in compatibility and can be effective in its decrease or increase. In fact, having commitment acts as a map which assists the person to concentrate his efforts and ability in a specific direction and avoid any scattering. Erikson admits that not achieving identity and not having commitment can cause disruption of the perception of time and results in negative identity (Marcia, 1993).

Other findings demonstrated that among students majoring in human and technical sciences, married and single is not any significant relationship regarding existential thinking. It is appeared that existential concepts such as death, loneliness, isolation and... were the people's main concerns and they are irrefutable issues for all human beings. Today asking about existential concepts and the end of human being are vital issues which were of famous contemporary mental-therapists' and physiologists' interests such Frankel (1963), Yalom (1980). On the whole, by reviewing the literature of the study and considering the relationship of various variables with existential thinking, it seems necessary to investigate this critical and necessary aspect of human being. Religion and culture can undoubtedly be a suitable headstock for basic human answers in the era of technology. Hence, it is appeared essential for future researches to investigate this important and deep domain in order to design a layout for existential thinking based on culture and religious. This study was solely conducted on students majoring in Shahid Chamran University; therefore the findings are merely generalizable to this sample. It is vital to study existential thinking and compare it among other social classes such as teenagers, old-aged people and elderly. Undoubtedly, studying the relationship between existential thinking, different personality variables, demographics, religion and culture etc can help clarify this new area of research.

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