



# The Existential Anxiety and Identity Distress Relation

Bryan C. Crook, Francisco I. Surace, Tracey A. Garcia, B.A., and Lindsay S. Ham, Ph.D

Florida International University, Miami



## Introduction

\*Existential Anxiety (EA) concerns the apprehension about the meaning of life and death (Berman et al., 2006).

\*Berman et al. (2006) studied the relationship between identity statuses and EA, and found that participants in the *moratorium* identity status were found to have higher rates of EA.

\*The individuals who were in a moratorium status remained in active exploration in the relevant absence of commitment (Schwartz, 2001) and demonstrated the highest percentage of identity disordered participants within a university sample (Berman et al., 2006).

\*"The most frequently used measures of identity development do not measure the distress that can sometimes be associated with the process" (Berman, 2004, p. 2).

\*Berman (2004) brought to light a questionnaire (Identity Distress Survey; IDS; Berman, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2004) intended to measure the current distress one is under due to common identity issues (i.e., career choice, long term goals, and sexual orientation) and allows us to identify those individuals who are in identity distress.

\*To date, no published research was found that focuses on identity distress and the relation to EA. The relationship between life anxiety (EA) and distress caused by the development of identity (or lack thereof) is underdeveloped and may be crucial in the use of future identity interventions. The anxiety about area of life and death (i.e., guilt, fate, meaninglessness) may have a direct relationship with the distress one is having in the developmental areas in their adolescent years (*identity distress*).

\*Thus, the major aim of the current set of studies is to examine the association between EA with identity distress and identity disorder status

\*As there is a paucity of research examining how EA might be related to IDS, there were no specific hypotheses made on all aims, thus these studies are exploratory in nature.

\*A secondary aim of the set of studies was to assess the internal consistency of the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ; Weems, Costa, Dehon & Berman, 2004) with a Likert scale format rather than the established dichotomous format.

\*This aspect extends previous work examining the EAQ's internal consistency in the original dichotomous format in an ethnically diverse university sample (predominantly Hispanics) as previous psychometrics (e.g., reliability, validity, test-retest, and internal consistency) have been conducted in White European American college student populations (Berman et al., 2004).

## Study 1

\*Study 1 was conducted to determine if extending the EAQ from a dichotomous measure (see Table 2 for summary demographics of participants) into a 5-Likert scale format (1- Never, 2- A Little, 3- Sometimes, 4- A Lot, & 5- Always) would be internally consistent (see Table 1 for summary demographics for participants)

(\*note: \*as a lower score on the EAQ indicates more EA than the correlation between fate and death and the domains of the IDS was negative)

\*Individuals during emerging adulthood might have some anxiety over issues of life and death, but are also contemplating issues of identity and then intimacy (according to Eriksonian theory)

\*Thus, extending the EA from a dichotomous version to a Likert version was considered because the Likert format may allow for more sensitivity for intra-individual differences versus the original true" or "false" responses.

\*The EAQ internal consistency utilizing the 5-Likert scale format was found to be very poor (Fate and Death  $\alpha = .33$ ; Emptiness and Meaninglessness  $\alpha = .33$ ; Guilt and Condemnation  $\alpha = .23$ ).  
\*The EAQ internal consistency utilizing the dichotomous format was found to be fair for the dichotomous format in a predominantly Hispanic sample, (Fate and Death  $\alpha = .66$ ; Emptiness and Meaninglessness  $\alpha = .72$ ; Guilt and Condemnation  $\alpha = .73$ ).  
\*Total score alpha for the EAQ in the 5 Likert scale format was  $\alpha = .57$  dichotomous format  $\alpha = .64$

\*Thus, for Study 2 analyses were conducted using the EAQ in the dichotomous format.

## Methods

**Table 1.**  
Summary of Sample Demographic and Study Variables of Study One (N = 138)

Gender	
Male	31 (23%)
Female	107 (77%)
Ethnicity	
White Hispanic/Latino	104 (75%)
Black Hispanic/Latino	5 (4%)
Caucasian	11 (8%)
African-American	7 (5%)
Asian American	0 (0%)
Black Islander	5 (4%)
Middle Eastern	1 (1%)
Other	5 (4%)
Age	
18	29 (21%)
19	35 (25%)
20	24 (17%)
21	18 (13%)
22	8 (6%)
23	5 (4%)
24	3 (2%)
25	6 (4%)
26 +	6 (6%)

\*353 student volunteers (78% female and 74.5% Hispanic/Latino) completed a series of questionnaires and demographic items which were available online (computer-based).

\*Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ; Weems, Costa, Dehon, & Berman, 2004) The EAQ is a 13-item questionnaire utilizing in this study both the 5-point Likert scale format and the true or false dichotomous format in order to assess the internal consistency of both formats. This measure assesses three domains of existential anxiety (EA) as defined by Paul Tillich (1952).  
\*Tillich defines EA around three domains of apprehension: (1) fate and death, (2) emptiness and meaninglessness and (3) guilt and condemnation.

**Table 2.**  
Summary of Sample Demographic and Study Variables of Study Two (N = 215)

Gender	
Male	46 (21%)
Female	169 (79%)
Ethnicity	
White Hispanic/Latino	143 (67%)
Black Hispanic/Latino	11 (5%)
Caucasian	26 (12%)
African-American	9 (4%)
Asian American	5 (2%)
Black Islander	12 (6%)
Middle Eastern	2 (1%)
Other	6 (3%)
Age	
18	50 (23%)
19	65 (30%)
20	20 (9%)
21	26 (12%)
22	12 (6%)
23	2 (1%)
24	6 (3%)
25	4 (2%)
26 +	14 (7%)

## Study 2

\*The purpose of Study 2 was to conduct exploratory analyses between the 3 domains of EA and EA total (as assessed by the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire; Weems, Costa, Dehon, & Berman, 2004) with the factors of identity distress and the 3 specific questions assessing "Overall level of discomfort and distress that might have upset you," "Level of uncertainty that has interfered with your life as a whole" and "How long you have been distressed as a whole" (as assessed by the Identity Distress Survey; Berman, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2004).

\*Also, to assess the anxiety related to meaning in life and death and the differences among those with "classified" identity disorder ( $n = 16$ ) and those not classified with an identity disorder ( $n = 199$ ).

\*215 student volunteers complete a series of questionnaires available online (computer-based) as well as demographic items (see Table 2).

\*Identity Distress Survey (IDS; Berman, Montgomery, & Kurtines, 2004) was used to effectively measure those who are having exceptional difficulties in the process of identity development and to assess the current identity style. The IDS assesses the level of distress in identity maturation in nine specific domains of identity. The IDS includes 10 self-report questions with a range from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very severely*). Three specific questions assess "Overall level of discomfort and distress that might have upset you," "Level of uncertainty that has interfered with your life as a whole" and "How long you have been distressed as a whole"

\*To be considered as meeting "Identity Disorder" diagnosis, participants needed to rate distress in at least 3 of the 7 listed areas (7-factors of identity) at a level of "severe" or "very severe," with overall distress ("Overall level of discomfort and distress that might have upset you") or interference ratings ("Level of uncertainty that has interfered with your life as a whole") "moderate" or higher, and duration ("How long you have been distressed as a whole") being greater than 3 months.

\*Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ; Weems, Costa, Dehon, & Berman, 2004) The EAQ is a 13-item dichotomous format questionnaire. This measure assesses three domains of existential anxiety (EA) as defined by Paul Tillich (1952). Tillich defines EA around three domains of apprehension: (1) fate and death, (2) emptiness and meaninglessness and (3) guilt and condemnation.

\*Through Exploratory Analyses the 3 domains of EA (dichotomous version) were categorized by adding up a total score for each domain and dividing by the number of questions. The greatest average for the individual is the individual's assigned domain (see Table 3).

\*If individuals were equal on any domains the individual was excluded from analyses ( $n = 62$ ).

## Methods

\*A series of Pearson's correlations indicated that the IDS's 7 factors had a significant relationship with at least 1 domain of existential anxiety (see Table 4).

\*It was also found that all factors of the IDS was significantly correlated with the EA total (see Table 4).

\*The IDS questions specifically assessing "Overall level of discomfort and distress that might have upset you," (Question 8); "Level of uncertainty that has interfered with your life as a whole" (Question 9); and "How long you have been distressed as a whole" (Question 10) were significantly related with all 3 domains of EA (i.e., fate/death, emptiness/meaninglessness, and fate/condemnation)

\*These specific IDS questions (i.e., 8, 9, 10) also correlated significantly with the total EA as assessed by the EAQ (see Table 4).

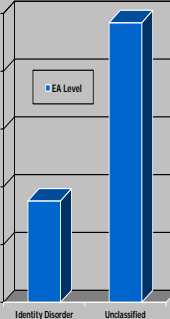
\*To assess the differences in EA among those classified with an identity disorder and those individuals who are not classified with an identity disorder a one-way ANOVA was conducted.

\*There was a significant relationship ( $F(1, 205) = 5.15, p = .026$ ) between those participants "classified" with Identity Disorder and those not classified by the IDS with EA.

\*Those who were classified with an identity disorder demonstrated more existential anxiety ( $M = 19.88, SD = 3.12$ ) than those who were not classified with an identity disorder ( $M = 21.42, SD = 2.63$ ) (see Table 5).

**Table 5.**

The means of those classified with identity disorder and those not across the EAQ total.



**Table 4.**  
Correlations of the Identity Distress Scale Factors with the Scores on each of the Three Domains of Existential Anxiety and Total Score.

	Existential Anxiety Questionnaire Domains			EAQ Total (N = 215)
	Fate / Death (n = 47)	Emptiness / Meaninglessness (n = 57)	Guilt / Condemnation (n = 41)	
Long term goals	-.18**	-.20***	-.19***	-.28***
Career goals	.18**	-.11	-.01	-.16*
Friendships	-.15*	-.10	-.25***	-.24***
Sexual Orientation	-.21***	-.27***	-.10	-.28***
Religion	-.18*	-.25***	-.11	-.25**
Values or beliefs	-.21***	-.20***	-.19**	-.29***
Group Loyalties	-.11	-.13	-.18**	-.20**
"Overall level of discomfort and distress that might have upset you"	-.32***	-.37***	-.30***	-.46***
"Level of uncertainty that has interfered with your life as a whole"	-.32***	-.46***	-.30***	-.52***
"How long you have been distressed as a whole"	-.21***	-.30***	-.20***	-.32***

Note. \*p<.05. \*\*p<.01. \*\*\*p<.001.

## Discussion

\*The major aim of the current set of studies is to examine the association between EA with identity distress and identity disorder status but first the internal consistency using both a 5-Likert scale and dichotomous format of the EAQ (in a predominantly Hispanic sample).

\*The result indicated that fair to good internal consistency was found in the dichotomous format ( $\alpha = .64$ ), yet the 5-Likert scale format was found to be less than fair ( $\alpha = .57$ ) for internal consistency.

\*This may be due to the orientation of some questions (i.e., "I am not anxious about fate because I am resigned to it") and the relationship with the answer choices (i.e., never). Where "never" can both represent never being anxious about fate, and never being resigned to it. The Likert scale format should not be abandoned, but should be further examined with a new range of possible choices (e.g., completely agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, completely disagree).

\*As internal consistency of the Likert scale of the EAQ was not supported, it is recommended that all further analyses of the EAQ were conducted utilizing the dichotomous format.

\*Through correlational analyses of the 3 Domains of EA it was found that distress in long term goals, sexual orientation, and values/beliefs had a strong negative correlation with the domain of fate and death. As identity distress rose in these areas, anxiety regarding the domain of fate and death also increased (\*note: \*as a lower score on the EAQ indicates more EA than the correlation between fate and death and the domains of the IDS was negative).

\*The IDS domains of long term goals, sexual orientation, religion, and values/beliefs had a negative correlation with the EA domain of emptiness and meaninglessness showing that higher distress was correlated with lower scores on the EAQ.

\*Interestingly, when examining the different means of the EAQ it was found that the highest scored domain of EA was emptiness and meaninglessness in the university sample. This may indicate that individuals in college may be searching for relatedness with life goals (e.g., major/career) and possibly other people. This is especially important to examine as college students may try to fill their empty feelings with other maladaptive things, such as alcohol use.

\*This should be examined as drinking to cope with negative affect has been shown to be associated with heavy drinking (Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000)

\*The third EA domain, guilt and condemnation, was negatively correlated with the IDS domains of long term goals, friendships, values/beliefs, and group loyalties; thus showing a correlation between higher identity distress in these areas and more EA.

\*This domain specifically assesses perceived threats to one's moral and ethical identity, thus this university sample may be experiencing novel situations with new people who may impact their previously held notions of goals, friendships, values/beliefs, and group loyalties. Thus, these students may be moving through a time of uncertainty and doubt (anxiety) surrounding their personal, moral, and ethical beliefs.

\*The questions assessing "Overall level of discomfort and distress that might have upset you" and "Level of uncertainty that has interfered with your life as a whole" showed negative correlations with all 3 domains of EA.

\*A university student who is experiencing overall distress, with a high level of interference within their lives due to distress, and has experienced distress over six months appears to possibly question all areas of his or her life. This may indicate that this individual is overcome with anxiety and thus stagnant in his or her development in identity.

\*This may be especially problematic as individuals with no sense of self may try to conform to others, which may lead to maladaptive behaviors.

\*Though, the EAQ did show some promising relationship using the domain categorizing, further studies should re-examine the utility of examining individuals within the domains.

\*It could be that classifying individuals, especially college students, using the means may not make theoretical sense as it could be possible that individuals might score high among different domains, yet would only be classified in one domain using means.

\*Those classified with an identity disorder (akin to previous research, see Berman et al., 2004) showed a significant difference across EA total score in comparison to those not classified with and identity disorder.

\*This is important to examine as it seems that individuals who would have been classified with an identity disorder according to the DSM-III-R are having trouble establishing meaning in life, which may possibly affect their overall well-being. As college is a stressful time in general, not having an overall sense of well-being may compound the stresses associated with college.

\*Current limitations for this study include a potentially biased sample (78% women, 70% White- Hispanic), a small cell size for identity disordered participants, and internal consistency for the EAQ versions were not analyzed on the same sample.

\*The relationship between anxiety surrounding meaning in life and death and identity distress has only begun to emerge; further research should examine the construct of meaning or emptiness in a university sample, specifically with it's relation to identity. Examining the classification of the IDS in other ways in comparison to anxiety surrounding meaning in life and death should also be researched further. Further studies could also assess the presence and search of meaning in life and its relation to identity development (i.e., identity style, identity status, identity commitment).