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The Existence Scale

A new approach to assess the ability to find personal meaning in life and to reach existential fulfilment

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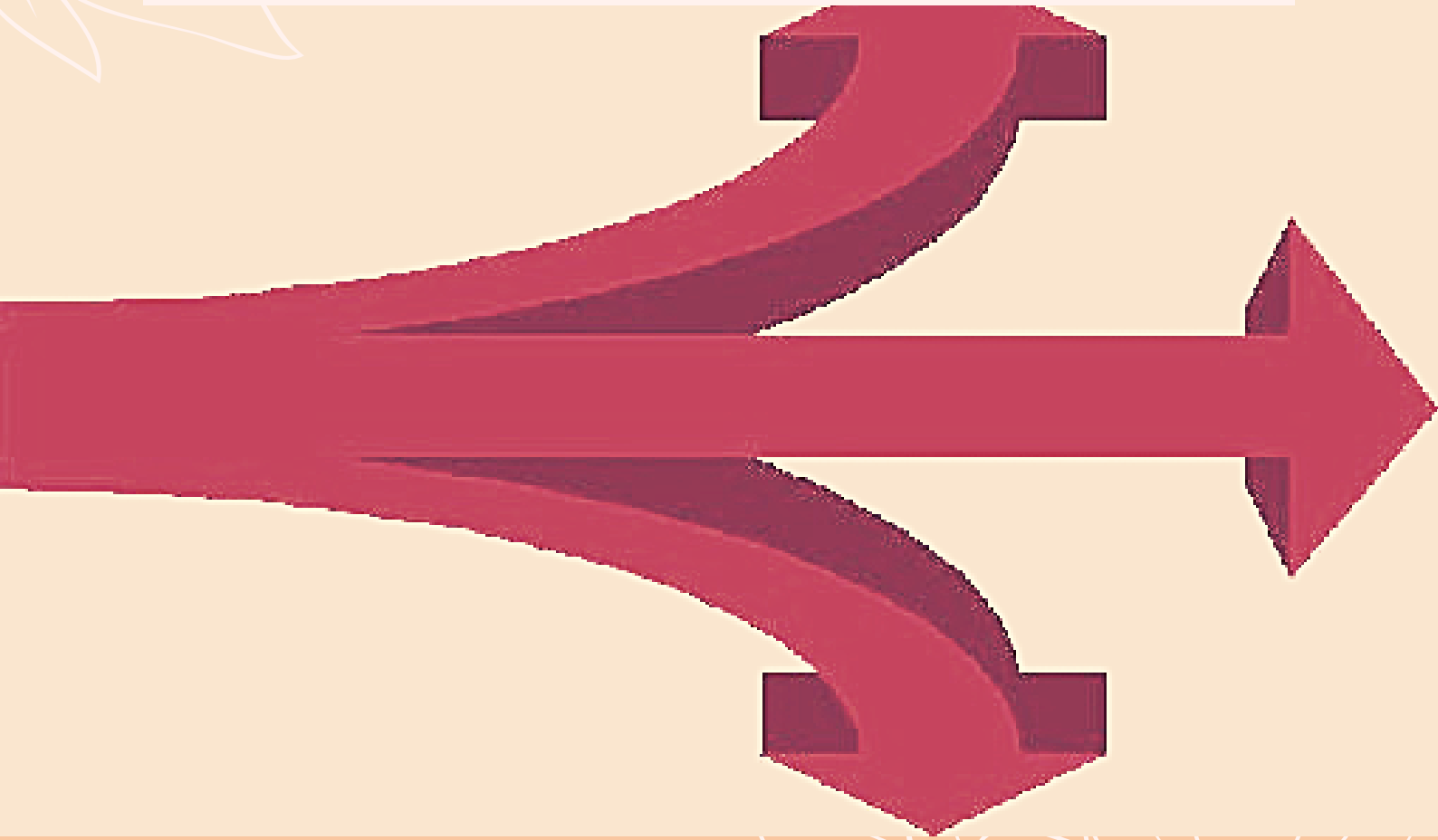

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ABSTRACT

The Existence Scale (ES) is a new self-rating test assessing the degree of personal fulfilment in one's existence. The test is based on FRANKL'S anthropological theory and on a four-level process model of a person's search for meaning in life (LÄNGLE). The test consists of 46 items and determines the degree of existential fulfilment on four scales – 'realistic perception', 'free emotionality', 'decision-making ability' and 'responsibility'. The test has been applied in a number of validity studies investigating more than 1000 persons. External validity was assessed by the application of two self-rating scales and three tests, the Purpose-in-life-Test (PIL), a Depression-Scale (ZERSSEN) and the EPI (EYSENCK).

1. Introduction

Viktor Frankl founded logotherapy ("logos" Greek: originally 'word' later 'rational principle', 'meaning') in the thirties in response to the, in his view, incompleteness of psychoanalysis. By doing so he created a counterbalance to the impulse-oriented concept of humanity prevailing in psychoanalytical schools of that time. Frankl stressed the free and responsible (i.e. "spiritual" or "noetic") dimension of human beings, which makes them "persons". A "person" is, according to his view, essentially more than a mere „psychic apparatus" (Freud). As "persons" human beings are able to supersede the psychological level thanks to the capability of what Frankl calls "self-transcendence". As a consequence persons are receptive not only to instinctual cues, but are also sensitive to values in the world and to potential meanings underlying their decisions and actions. As such people do not primarily pursue lust (Freud) or power (Adler), but according to FRANKL (1982, 1984, 1985, 1987) the deepest human motivation is the *search for meaning*. If people do not act along the lines of their noetic (spiritual) sensitivity but follow primarily their drives (lust, search of power) they become existentially frustrated. This leads to the symptoms of the *existential vacuum* (FRANKL 1985c): lack of motivation and

a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. The existential vacuum has a general impact on the development of all neuroses. Inasmuch as human beings are "persons", they are mainly concerned with "noetic" endeavours like the search for meaning in life, justice, freedom, responsibility, values or truth (FRANKL 1985a, 1985b).
Frankl called the existential fundamentals of logotherapy "Existential Analysis", whereas those concerning meaning he called "Logotheory" (FRANKL 1985, 37).
Frankl published his most important articles and books only after the Second World War following his liberation from the "Nazi" concentration camps. Quite a number of his publications were translated into English (FRANKL 1963, 1977, 1978, 1985a-c, 1986, 1988). The relevance of Frankl's concept for psychotherapy has been empirically investigated after World War II in many studies (for an overview see ASCHER ET AL. 1985a,b; BECKER 1985, 1986; CRUMBAUGH 1968; CRUMBAUGH & MAHOLICK 1972; FRANKL 1983, pp.15f.; KOCOUREK ET AL. 1959; LÄNGLE ET AL. 2000; LUKAS 1971; WURST ET AL. 1996.

2. Objective

The Existence Scale (ES) is a questionnaire based on Frankl`s theory and on a specific method derived from it. As an instrument specifically designed to evaluate noetic dimensions it is based on an exploration of the personal and existential realities of human beings. This of course is an infinite area but has to be operationalized by a finite number of items, which is accomplished by resorting to four basic elements of existence: Perception, recognition of values, competence for decision-making (freedom), and responsibility. The ES measures these personal abilities, which can be called "personal competencies for existence", by a standardized self-rating procedure. It is a test assessing the competence of an individual to cope in a meaningful way with oneself and one's world.
The questionnaire, which closely resembles typical personality tests, is designed for scientific use and for assistance in therapeutic practice. There is a wide field of application in scientific investigations within psychology, sociology, psychotherapy, management or pedagogy. Application in these instances is guided by the interest in the role of the mentioned central human coping-competencies, which in most investigations is merely part of the error variance. The ES can also be used to further explore existential-analytical theory (especially its concept of humanity, its theory of existence and nosology). Furthermore, it can be utilized in studies comparing different therapeutic methods.
Another field of application of the ES is screening in sociological and group-psychological research, prophylactic work (particularly in pedagogy and psychology) and existential-analytical diagnosis for psychotherapeutic practice. The ES can be employed to evaluate whether the individual has realized the personal-existential dimension and to what extent it has been incorporated into his or her personality development.
In particular there are three important issues:

- Is the ES suitable to differentiate between psychically ill and healthy people, and between different types of psychic disturbances? From a theoretical point of view blocked personal-existential competencies favour the development of psychic illnesses and disturbances. On the other hand, it has to be noted that physical illnesses and handicaps do not preclude the development of personal-existential abilities.
- Are there specific differences between different psychic disturbances in the profile of the subtests? If so, do they describe the type or the degree of these psychic disturbances?
- Do the results give guidance to the therapeutic process in the sense that they indicate 'causes' of the disturbances? (Or do the results refer to an unspecific, generally personal level with no direct link to the specific psychic [mental] disturbance?)

Results concerning the first question are available, sufficient research concerning the remaining two questions are still lacking.

3. The Construction of the Questionnaire

From the vast amount of possible statements about the view one person may have on existential aspects of his or her life, items were drawn by a theory guided rather than mere psychometric procedure. In this theory, the structure of the human being is described by a three-dimensional concept according to the traditional distinction of mind/spirit (Geist), psyche (Seele) and body. But the decisive difference of Frankl's theory to these older concepts is the notion of a dynamic interaction of the three dimensions. According to this, the spiritual dimension is taking position towards the psyche and the body. This makes human beings free to decide over themselves and to deal with their world.

In this concept human beings are fundamentally seen as a confluence of the somatic, psychic and noetic (spiritual) dimension, each of which differs in nature, regularity and function from each other. None of the dimensions is reducible to the others. The dimensions describe different modes of being despite their inseparable unity: The somatic dimension represents human life in the physical reality; the psychic dimension comprises the impulse-oriented, reactive mode of being; and the noetic (spiritual) or rather "personal-existential" dimension describes the spiritual world of meaning, freedom and responsibility. This third dimension enables a creative exchange with the physical reality (Umwelt), with the social world (Mitwelt) and also with the world within ourselves (Innenwelt). A person acts freely, authentically and responsibly when he/she is in accordance with his/her own sense impressions, emotion and thinking. It is the noetic dimension, which enables us to look at ourselves as an object of evaluation (abstract from our somatic and psychic conditions, so to speak) and to reach beyond ourselves, to devote ourselves to tasks worth living for and essential to life. FRANKL (1984, 148f.) calls these distinctively human abilities "self-distance" and "self-transcendence".

The practical application of this existential-analytical concept of humanity led to questions about the preconditions allowing this existential competencies to be realized and come into existence. How do human beings reach an authentic fulfilment of their lives? LÄNGLE (1988, 42ff.) proposed a *system of four consecutive steps,* that lead to the realization of the existential potentiality which is subjectively felt as a "meaningful life". Being of pure formal nature, they have no specific contents like interests, sexuality, believe, love, ambition etc.

The **first step** in the search of meaning consists of the *perception* of the world's objects as they are (not in 'essence' but in a communicable sense). For this initial interaction with the world it is important to gather relevant information and to get acquainted with the conditions and circumstances of the situation. A meaningful life always deals with the facts and realistic chances (possibilities) beyond the margins of unchangeable truths. Distortion of reality or the inability to accept it could be an obstruction to reach the other steps.
In the **second step** the subject gets to understand the qualitative relationship between the objects and between the objects and him/herself. A hierarchy of the more valuable goals (contents, possibilities) is developed. This is based on the recognition of one's emotional and evaluative reaction to perceived and imagined objects.
The decision between different options occurs in the **third step.** The individual has to eliminate some possibilities in favour of others. He/she has to be aware of the choice and the consequences. There might be circumstances when the individual is forced to some action or the other, but he/she can still be aware of his/her own choice.
But still the decision is not enough, the subject has to act, to commit him/herself to the chosen option. In an essential decision this may mean the devotion of one's life to the chosen goal.
Hence the **fourth step** consists of carrying out the plans and decisions, which completes the existential act.
The construction of the ES is based on these steps: The ability to perform the first one is termed, according to Frankl's analytical system, 'self-distance', for the second step the term 'self-transcendence' is used, because in an essential meaning of evaluation, it ultimately reaches beyond the self, the third step is termed 'freedom', and the fourth 'responsibility'.

The first two steps are very close to the "ego". They depend mainly on the development of the personality and are combined to form the **P-factor**. The decision for something and its realization represent the classical existential field, hence the last two steps are combined in the **E-factor**.

We are not aware of any test that intends to measures human personal-existential dynamics. The ES is meant to investigate the person's competence for existence (the degree of "existential" self-realization) and the latent construct of basic attitudes to life.

Construction of the ES started from a systematic compilation of statements related to the four steps of the theory sketched out above. In this process 159 statements describing the common way individuals deal with themselves and their world were formulated. The separation of dimensions and the primary selection of items was not based on factor-analysis because basically the dimensions are viewed as interrelated. Instead the selection was aimed at optimising internal consistency of the scales. Furthermore, the difficulty and variability of items was introduced as a selection criterion. Finally 46 items were obtained that had sufficient item-total correlation, acceptable difficulty and variability.

The sub-scale "self-distance" (SD) includes 8 items, the sub-scale "self-transcendence" (ST) 14 items. The sum of the scores of these sub-scales forms the P-factor. The third sub-scale "freedom" (F) includes 11 items, the forth "responsibility" (R) 13 items. Their sum is termed E-factor ("existentiality"). There is no alternate form, but the test can be repeated within a short time because there seems to be almost no learning effect. The test can be administered individually or in groups. The inventory is self-explanatory. It usually takes between seven and twelve minutes to complete, however, in some cases it has taken significantly longer. The items should be answered spontaneously, without too much reflection, to avoid thinking about social desirable answers. Response to the items is done in a six-point Likert-type scale, which enables a graded response between "true" and "not true" with respect to the statement of the item. If the analysis of the test is not computerized it can be scored using a transparent scoring aid and an analysis-form.

To investigate external validity several studies were conducted applying in addition to the ES one or more of the tests and questionnaires presented below.

Two logotherapeutic tests were employed in this comparison: The "Purpose-in-Life-Test" ("PIL") by Crumbaugh and Maholic (1969) which investigates the "existential vacuum" (Frankl 1983, 10f.), and the "Logo-Test" by Lukas (1986) which deals with the accomplishment of meaning and with existential frustration (Frankl 1983, 11, 49). Both tests measure the "status" of existential condition by self-assessment.
Two global self-assessments, specifically "satisfaction with living-circumstances and with fate" and "satisfaction with one's own effort to shape life", were used to validate the ES. In addition items of the *Schedule of Recent Experience* (SRE) served as external criteria. The SRE is an instrument of Life-Event-Research.
The well-known *EPI* developed by Eysenck & Eysenck (1964a,b; Eggert 1974) measuring two major dimensions of personality, neuroticism and extraversion, was used to investigate the theoretical independence of ES from the trait 'extraversion' and the expected relationship to neuroticism. The *Depression-Scale* by Zerssen (1976) form D-A was also included.

4. Test-theoretical Investigation and Standardization of the ES

The ES was tested in a sample of 1028 Austrian adults aged 18 to 69 years. Clinical contrast groups consisted of depressive in-patients from two psychiatric hospitals in Vienna and untreated (mainly depressive) psychiatric patients.

Table 1

		sample from general population (N=1028)
self-distance (SD)	(8 Items)	.70
self-transcendence (ST)	(14 Items)	.84
freedom (F)	(11 Items)	.82
responsibility /R)	(13 Items)	.83
P-Factor	(22 Items)	.87
E-Factor	(24 Items)	.90
Total score	(46 Items)	.93

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the subscales and for the total score as well as for the P- and E-factor in the sample from the general population

Internal consistency (Cronbach Alpha coefficient) is satisfactory for the different sub-scales and the total score (Table 1).

Comparison of the scores reached in the general population and the two contrast groups revealed distinct differences. A relatively high score of self-distance (SD) in the untreated group is consistent with the assumption that in order to manage the mental stress without treatment the maintenance of some ability of self-distance is necessary. The low freedom (F) score in the in-patients group may reflect the relatively high degree of restriction due to the disease and to hospitalisation (see Table 2).

Table 2

	sample from general population N = 840	untreated depressive persons N = 188	clinical group (in-patients) N = 60
Total score	222,23	178,25	173,09
E-factor	112,11	87,71	85,03
P-factor	110,11	90,53	87,77
SD	36,48	30,07	27,80
ST	73,62	60,45	60,06
F	52,74	40,89	38,41
R	59,39	46,82	45,40

Table 2: Mean-values of total-test scores, E-factor and P-factor values, as well as of the sub-scales SD, ST, F and R for the sample from the general population (N=840), for the untreated depressive group (N=188), and for the clinical (mainly depressive) in-patients group (N=60)

The results of the ES are independent of gender. This is an interesting result. It means that personal-existential abilities as assessed by the ES have no gender-preference. A slight age-dependence was found: Subjects under 20 years and above 50 years show slightly lower test-results than middle-aged individuals. Dependence on educational level is most distinct, the test results increase with educational level.

Based on the sample from the general population a standardization with respect to age and education was performed. Percentiles and T-values were tabulated that can be used to assess a person's position with respect to the reference population.

The final version of the ES was checked for homogeneity in the sense of Rasch, by application of model tests with respect to several meaningful stratification criteria. It was shown that item parameters were invariant with respect to these stratification criteria. Hence it was concluded that the items form unidimensional scales and that the sum of item scores can be seen as a sufficient statistic for the person parameter.
Furthermore, the final version was subjected to oblique factor-analysis. It was shown that, except for two items, the original four-scale structure was maintained in this analysis.

5. Results of the Validity-studies

External validity was analysed by correlational studies with respect to the scales and tests mentioned above.
Subjects were asked to specify their satisfaction with living-circumstances and fate (V1), as well as their satisfaction with the shaping of their lives (V2). Correlations between these scores and the P-factor, E-factor and total score of the ES were moderate but significant at the .01 level. This implies that people who are satisfied with their living-circumstances or with themselves to a high degree also show higher scores in the ES.

Table 3

	P-factor	E-factor	total score
V1	.35	.37	.39
V2	.32	.45	.42

Table 3: Pearson correlation coefficients between P- and E-factor and the total score of the ES and satisfaction with living-conditions (V1) and with one's ability to shape life (V2)

After elimination of participants (less than 1%) who had an increased lie-score in the EPI (correlations of $r = -.03$ to $r = .16$ were found between the lie-score and the sub-tests of the ES), correlations were calculated between the test results.

Table 4

	P-factor	E-factor	ES-total	Depr.	PIL	Neurot.	Extrav.
P-factor	1.00	0.56	0.75	-0.41	0.46	-0.34	0.06
E-factor	0.56	1.00	0.83	-0.43	0.45	-0.43	0.08
ES-total score	0.75	0.83	1.00	-0.46	0.49	-0.42	0.08
Depression	-0.41	-0.43	-0.46	1.00	-0.41	0.49	-0.14
PIL	0.46	0.45	0.49	-0.41	1.00	-0.32	0.14
Neuroticism	-0.34	-0.43	-0.42	0.49	-0.32	1.00	-0.02
Extraversion	0.06	0.08	0.08	-0.14	-0.14	-0.02	1.00

Table 4: Pearson correlation between P-, and E-factor and ES total score, Zerssen depression scale, Purpose-in-Life-Test (PIL), and the two factors from EPI (neuroticism, extraversion)

As can be seen in table 4, the scores of the ES show moderate negative correlation to the depression-scale and the neuroticism score, and the PIL score did show a common variance of about 25% with the ES total score. Extraversion did not correlate with any other score.

A factor analysis of the ES scores together with the other test results shown in Table 4 was done to assess the ES in the greater context of these psychometric procedures. The varimax rotated factor matrix is shown in Table 5.
The sub-scales of the ES have high factor loadings mainly on the first factor, self-transcendence loads also highly on the second factor that is characterized by the PIL and depression scores. Neuroticism and especially extraversion form the last two factors respectively.

Table 5

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
PIL	.38847	.79625	-.14279	.11812
Depression	-.23396	-.79387	.39530	-.07578
Extraversion	.02879	.10395	-.01657	.99014
Neuroticism	-.24894	-.26035	.88822	-.00581
SD	.82184	.27458	-.09219	-.05435
ST	.68119	.61571	-.07419	.05566
F	.75679	.34676	-.34921	.14575
R	.74137	.18915	-.48586	.04390

Table 5: Rotated factor matrix of the principal component analysis including the sub-scales SD, ST, F, and R of the ES, Zerssen's depression scale, Purpose-in-Life-Test (PIL), and neuroticism and extraversion scores from EPI

6. Interpretation of the Results

Overall ratings of satisfaction with their fate and external living-circumstances show only moderate correlations with the P- or E-factor scores of subjects. Although living-conditions are material for the shaping of life, they do not guarantee existential fulfilment nor need a subject have high noetic abilities to be lucky enough to live in comfortable conditions. On the other hand, subjects who achieved high scores in the ES, tended to be more satisfied with their own efforts to shape life and more so than with the external living-circumstances. However, the differences in these relationships were small and also for satisfaction with one's own achievements can be viewed as rather loosely related to noetic abilities.

A moderately high negative correlation of the ES with depression ($r = -.46$) and neuroticism ($r = -.42$) could be interpreted as an indication of the importance of the personal-existential dimension with respect to psychic health. A similar but slightly looser relationship was found concerning the development of an existential vacuum, which is measured by the PIL: PIL-depression: $r = -.41$, PIL-neuroticism: $r = -.32$.

Extraversion (Eysenck 1967) was independent from all other personality factors, not only those that have previously shown to be unrelated (neuroticism and depression) but also from fulfilment through meaning (measured by Crumbaugh & Maholick's PIL) and subjective fulfilment in one's own existence (measured by ES).
Regarding the ES, independence from extraversion shows that the realization of the noetic dimension does not depend on such characteristics as being comfortable in the company of others. Existential fulfilment does not require extraversion.

The basic concept that the ES measures a dimension independent of other factors is at least partially confirmed by the fact that factor analysis revealed one factor that is almost exclusively defined by the four sub-scales of the ES, and that these scales have only moderate or small coefficients on those factors that are determined by the other tests.

Also the PIL forms a more or less independent factor, that nonetheless includes depression (loading of .80). This factor can be interpreted as the realization of meaning, the main criterion for mental health (Becker 1985) and freedom from depression. It might be concluded that the depressive suffers from the feeling of meaninglessness, and those that have a feeling of meaninglessness tend to become depressive. It is interesting to note that the sub-scale ST (self-transcendence) of the ES has also comparably high loading of .62 on this factor. It seems that the development of depression is connected with a loss of free emotion and a reduction of the feeling of one's own value. These aspects, however, are substantial elements in fulfilling meaning according to the theory (Längle 1988). The ES is correlated with the PIL through the ability to utilize free emotion. As mentioned above, the existential fulfilment (ES) does not sim-

ply measure one's own feeling of meaning. The ES is related to the application of personal abilities in dealing with oneself and with the world (inner and outer behaviour). For that task not only the self-transcendence, but also self-distance (SD), which shows high loading only in the first factor, play an important role. Without self-distance self-transcendence is too closely connected with the dimension of depression, so that fulfilment through meaning is to be almost equated with freedom of depression. DYCK (1986) obtained similar results for the PIL. The PIL has only a weak correlation with the sub-scale self-distance. This can provide an explanation for Dyck's results as outlined above.

The sub-scale freedom contributes weakly, but more than the other scales, to the factor that is mainly determined by neuroticism. This supports FRANKL'S statement (1987, p.98) that people with neurotic symptoms lack freedom and responsibility. It seems that neuroticism affects more the ability to deal with the world and less the personal characteristics of self-distance and self-transcendence. The neurotic struggles more with the handling of "his/her world" than with him/herself.

We obtained a distinct answer to the initial question whether healthy and psychically ill people differ in utilizing their personal-existential competencies. Psychological health does not only depend on aspects like tension, mood, defence mechanisms, but is significantly influenced by personal-existential forces. The ES differentiates very well between healthy and ill, and it does it incremental to the discrimination provided by the neuroticism scale.

Future research should address the issue whether the pattern of the sub-scores provide characteristics useful for differential diagnoses. The ES measures the personal-existential dimension that represents the capacity of subjects to deal with oneself and one's world, i.e. also with the disturbances. The personal-existential dimension - where the performance takes place - is thus on another level as the psychic dimension which generates the symptoms. It is true that the ES does not directly refer to the state of health or suffering. From this it may be concluded that no specific profiles that characterize a psychic disorder can be expected from the ES. On the other hand, one can assume that syndromes like anxiety disorders, are persistent due to enduring personal deficits which are specific for a disorder. Therefore, the patient with anxiety could have developed this handicap as a result of deficits in the first level of the meaning finding process, i.e. in perception and self-distance. An investigation including sub-scales of psychic health supports this hypothesis (WURST & MASLO 1996).

It should be mentioned that there are some cases that obviously cannot be assessed by a standard testing procedure. Subjects with strong hysteric characteristics tend to have extremely high scores on all sub-scales. Such attempts of deception could possibly be singled out by lie-questions. Extreme test-results should be handled with caution and a verification through an inter-

view should be obtained. Generally it is recommended that the results of the ES be discussed with the participants at which time they are asked whether they can accept the score with its current interpretation. The test describes personal abilities that should not fall victim to a test-routine that would offend the dignity and individuality of people by putting a theoretical framework on them and their own experiences, attitudes and thoughts. It is to be hoped that the results of this test might supply solid material for a frank and personal dialogue and thus facilitate the commitment to life.

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Appendix: