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Existential Analytical Aspects of Mental Health

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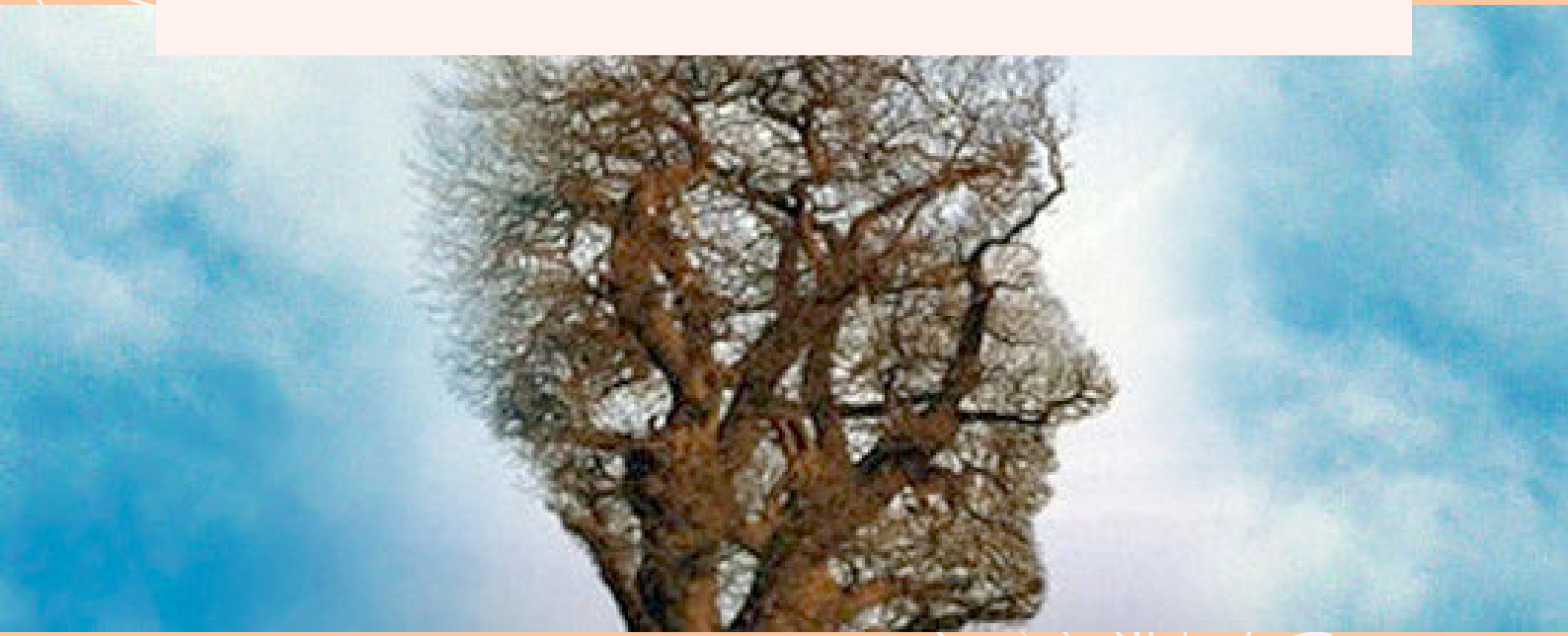

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Abstract

The recently developed 'Existence Scale' (ES) comprises four dimensions: self-distance, self-transcendence, freedom, and responsibility and intends to measure the individual capacity to utilize noetic resources and to address and fulfill meaning in life in the sense of Frankl. This investigation deals with the relationship between these measurements and those of other personality dimensions, particularly mental health, as assessed by the Trier Personality Inventory (TPI) and whether this relationship is stable considering age and gender.

211 persons from 18 to 70 years old (mean age 38±7 years) participated in the study (92 male, 119 female; 144 below and 67 above age 40). Participants answered the ES and the TPI comprising the following sub-scales: Behavior control, mental health, meaningfulness (vs. depression), self-obliviousness (vs. self-centeredness), freedom from distress (vs. nervousness), expansiveness, autonomy, self-esteem, and capacity to love. Relationship between the four ES sub-scales and the 9 TPI sub-scales was assessed by canonical correlations.

Results indicate two independent correlation structures between ES and TPI. While all strata showed this two-factor solution, the details of the relationship varied across groups. The first canonical root, accounting for approx. 60% of common variance, shows a relationship between the existential abilities, 'freedom' and 'responsibility', and self-transcendence on one side and 'mental health' on the other (together with additional factors that varied across age and gender groups). The second root, reflecting a common variance of about 15 to 17%, relates 'self-distance' and in most cases also 'self-transcendence', i.e. personal resources, to low values of 'behavior control'.

These results can be seen as an indication that besides the interpretation of the magnitude of the scores reached in the sub-scales of the ES, special consideration should be given to an imbalance between existential and personal factors.

Key words: personality measurement, mental health, behavior control

1. Introduction

The view of PETERS (1984) that mental health should be defined as a specific form of person-environment fit, focusing on the social and cultural aspects of the environment, is opposed by concepts which emphasize the personal-existential aspects (BECKER, 1992). Mental health, in this view, should not be reduced to the ability to cope with demands from the environment. It should be considered that human beings aim at goals, which they themselves define. Living in harmony with oneself, might be as or even more important as adaptation to the (social) environment.

From an existential-analytical viewpoint mental health is defined as the ability of a person to act in such a way that the behavior – during the act and retrospectively – is sensed as proper and right by her-/himself (LÄNGLE, 1992). Human beings unfold their self most significantly not by adaptation but by taking a standpoint in relation to themselves (LÄNGLE, 1988). Only if a person's appraisal includes the recognition of values in a spontaneous and responsible way, can existential fulfillment be reached (ORGLER, 1991). While, according to FRANKL (1983), to some degree even neurotics are able to make their life meaningful, existential fulfillment relies on noetic resources.

A recently developed questionnaire (LÄNGLE & ORGLER, 1991; LÄNGLE, ORGLER & KUNDI, 2000) focuses, from an existential–analytical viewpoint, on the ability to take a standpoint towards one's own behavior. This 'Existence Scale' (ES) comprises four dimensions: Self-distance, self-transcendence, freedom, and responsibility.

The present investigation deals with the relationship between the personal and existential resources as measured by the Existence Scale and personality dimensions, especially mental health, covered by the Trier Personality Inventory (TPI). Furthermore, it addresses the question whether this relationship depends on age or sex.

2. Materials and Methods

211 persons from 18 to 70 years old (mean age 38±7 years) participated in the study (92 male, 119 female). In the sample persons with higher education (64%) were overrepresented, and, consequently, lower occupational categories were underrepresented.

In addition to questions covering sociographic characteristics, the Existence Scale and the Trier Personality Inventory (BECKER, 1989) were answered by the subjects.

The TPI has 9 sub-scales: Behavior control, mental health, meaningfulness (vs. depression), self-obliviousness (vs. self-centeredness), freedom from distress (vs. nervousness), expansiveness, autonomy, self-esteem, and capacity to love.

The 9 sub-scales of the TPI and the 4 sub-scales of the ES were transformed to T-values and subjected to a canonical correlation analysis for the total sample and stratified for age and sex. Only canonical roots that reach the level of significance, set to 5%, were considered.

3. Results

Fig. 1 shows the results of the canonical correlation analysis for the total sample. The first two roots were statistically significant. The first root is mainly characterized by the relation between responsibility, freedom, and self-transcendence at one side and mental health and – to a lesser degree – meaningfulness, expansiveness, freedom from distress, and autonomy on the other side. Independent from this most prominent relationship, a second structure was extracted, showing a relation between self-distance and self-transcendence together with low values for freedom and responsibility on the one side and low values of behavior control and high values for capacity to love on the other side.

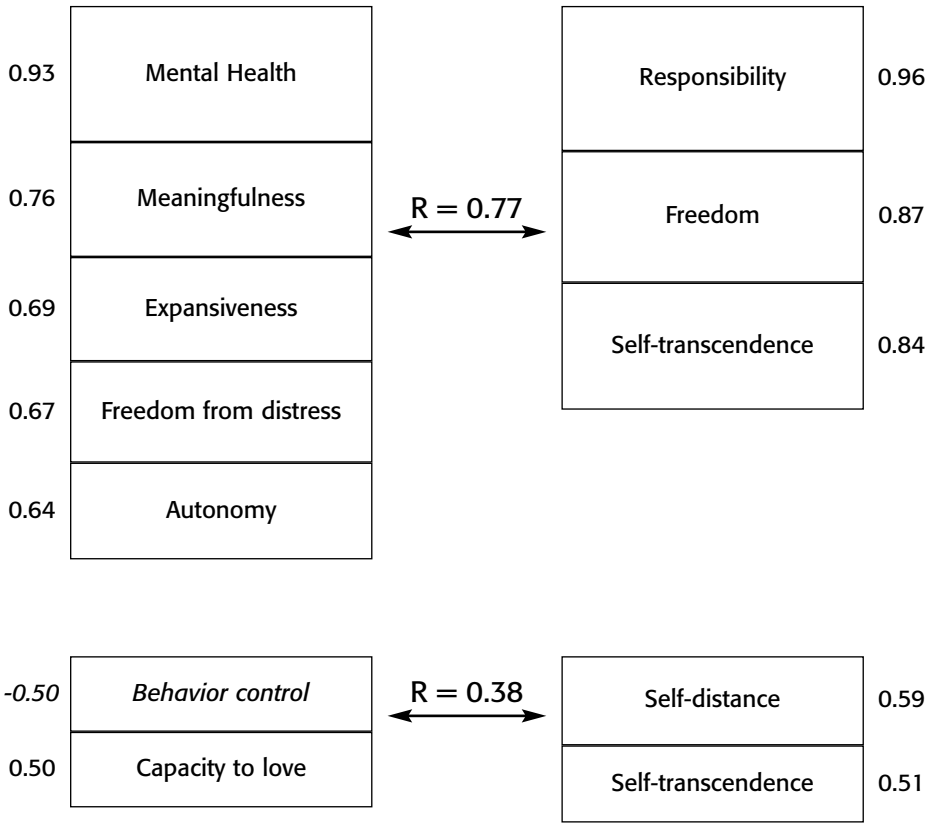

Fig. 1: Results of canonical correlation analysis for the total sample. Size of the cells is proportional to the magnitude of the canonical coefficients (shown to the right or left of the variables). Variables with negative coefficients are shown in italics.

Whether or not the relationship extracted is stable across sociographic strata, is analyzed by separate canonical correlations for sex- and age-groups (below and above 40 years).

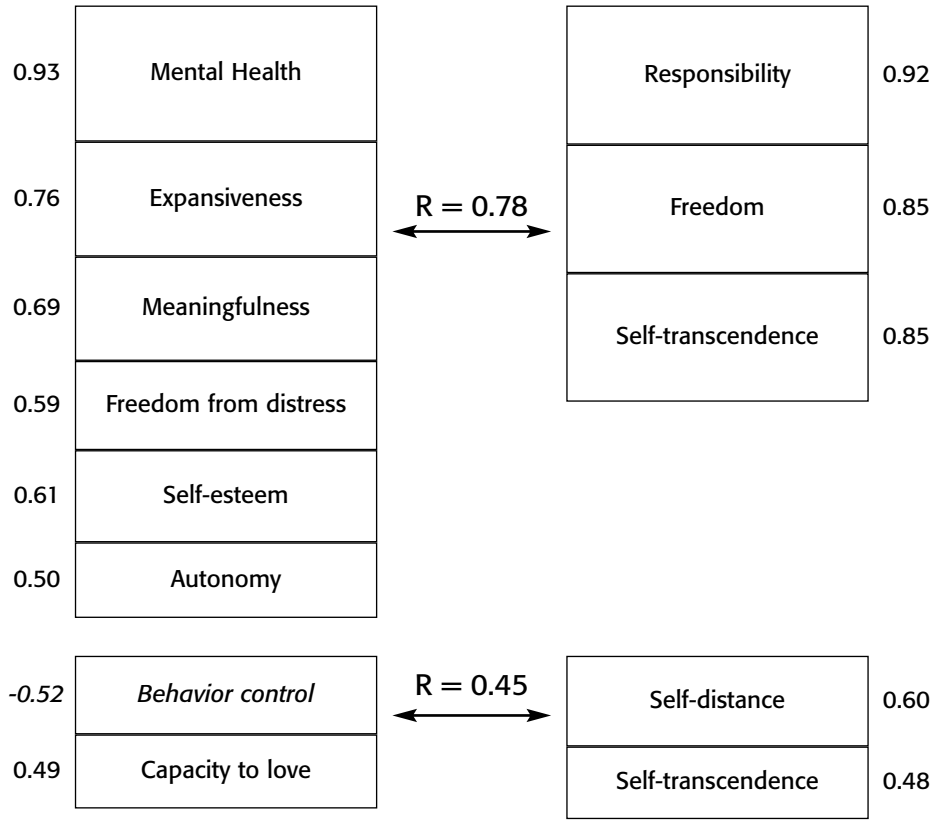

Fig. 2: Results of canonical correlation analysis for male subjects. Size of the cells is proportional to the magnitude of the canonical coefficients (shown to the right or left of the variables). Variables with negative coefficients are shown in italics.

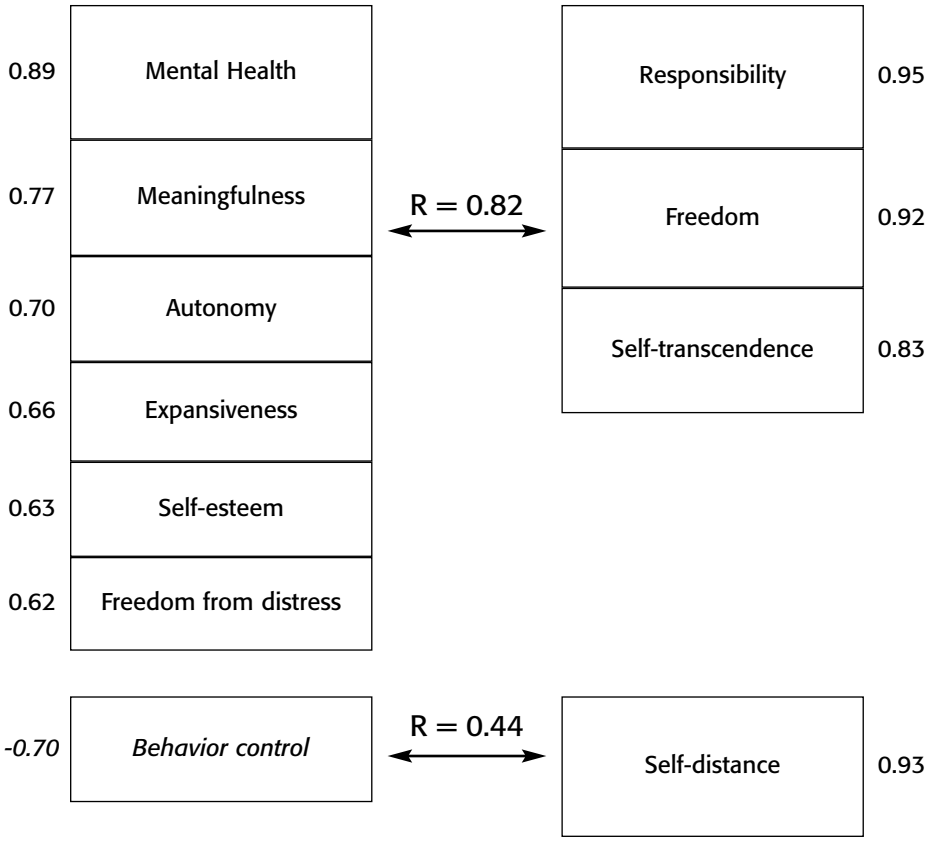

Fig. 3: Results of canonical correlation analysis for female subjects. Size of the cells is proportional to the magnitude of the canonical coefficients (shown to the right or left of the variables). Variables with negative coefficients are shown in italics.

Fig. 2 and 3 show the results for male and female subjects respectively. For both groups two canonical roots were statistically significant. Although the fundamental properties of the relationship shown above were also found in the sex-groups, several differences should be noted: The first canonical root for females is almost identical to that shown above, only 'autonomy' had a distinctly higher weight as was the case for 'self-esteem', in males 'expansiveness' and 'meaningfulness' changed places, with 'expansiveness' showing a higher weight. For the second root the canonical weights in males are almost identical to those shown for the overall sample, while in females the second root is characterized by a relationship between 'self-distance' and low values of 'behavior control'.

The analyses within age groups are summarized in fig. 4 and 5. For the lower age group the TPI sub-scales that are related to the ES sub-scales 'responsibility', 'freedom' and 'self-transcendence' are, in decreasing order of magnitude of their weight: 'Mental health', 'meaningfulness', 'expansiveness', 'freedom from distress', 'autonomy', and 'self esteem'. In the older age group 'autonomy' and 'self esteem' have relatively higher and 'expansiveness' and 'freedom from distress' relatively lower weights (note that, while the canonical correlation remains almost constant, the older age group shows less differences between the canonical weights for the different sub-scales). The second root is almost identical in both age groups, except for 'self-transcendence' showing a canonical weight below 0.4 in the older age group and a lower weight for 'behavior control' in the younger age group.

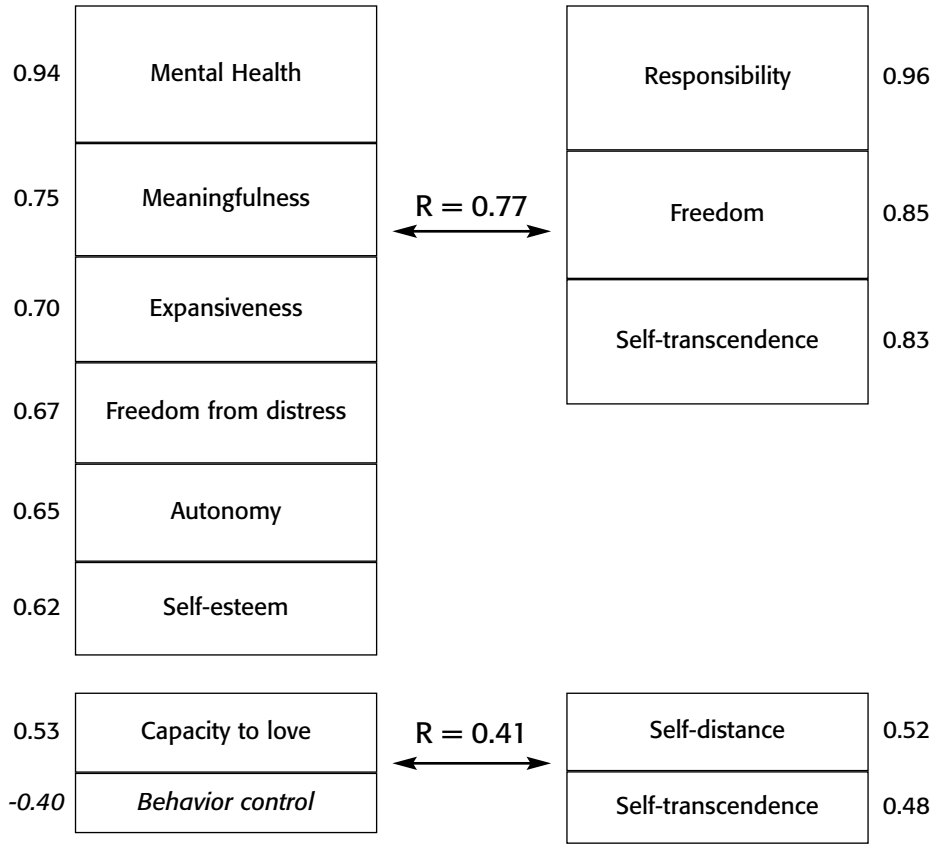

Fig. 4: Results of canonical correlation analysis for subjects below age 40. Size of the cells is proportional to the magnitude of the canonical coefficients (shown to the right or left of the variables). Variables with negative coefficients are shown in italics.

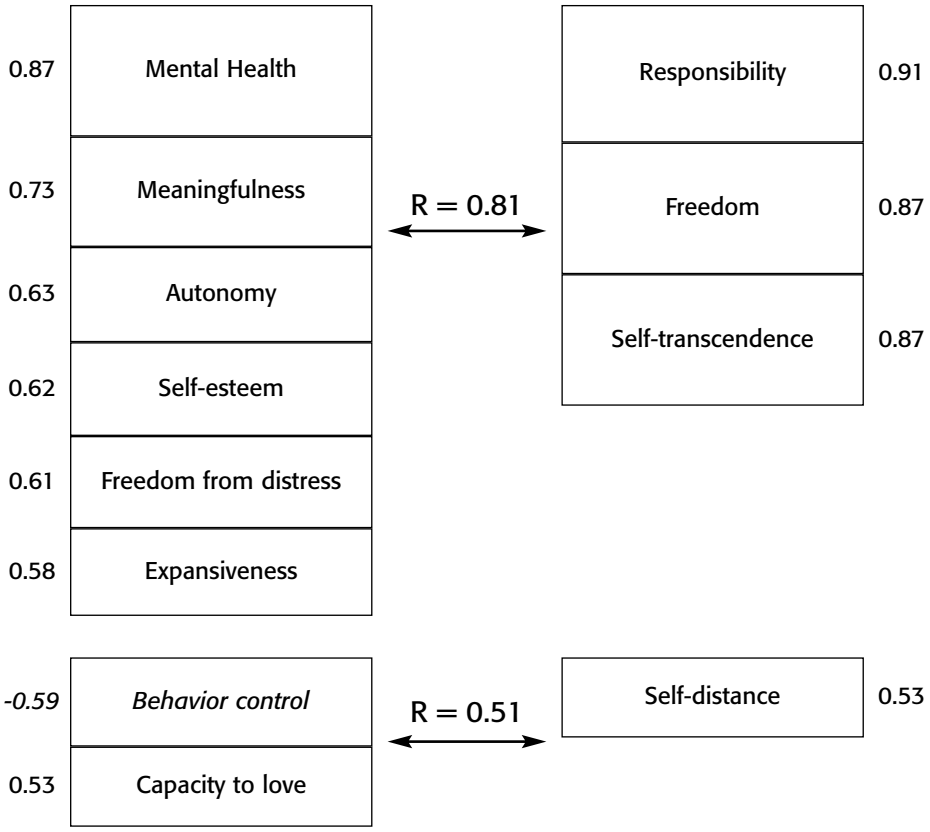

Fig. 5: Results of canonical correlation analysis for subjects above age 40. Size of the cells is proportional to the magnitude of the canonical coefficients (shown to the right or left of the variables). Variables with negative coefficients are shown in italics.

4. Discussion

WURST and MASLO (1996) reported on the correlation between mental health, measured by the TPI, and sub-scales of the ES. These results are complemented by the present investigation. The most prominent relation between these scales – accounting for about 60% of the common variance – is the one between self-transcendence, freedom and responsibility on the one side and mental health (together with TPI sub-scales varying in importance within different groups) on the other. Apparently, the capacity to utilize noetic resources has a strong relation to mental health as measured by the TPI. Within this relationship, existential capacities are

more important than personal ones, however, both aspects seem to be necessary to constitute mental health. Conversely, dispensation of personal and existential aspects letting oneself be driven by the forces of the factual world (FRANKL, 1959) might be the essential step in the development of neurotic disorders.

Independent from this relationship a second canonical root was found in all subgroups, responsible for about 15 to 17% of common variance. While differing in detail, one common feature of this second relationship was the opposite weight for personal factors (self-distance and self-transcendence) in their relation to 'behavior control' and the positive one to 'capacity to love'. Furthermore, low personal in the presence of high existential capacities are related to low capacity to love, low values in meaningfulness, but high self-esteem and self-centeredness. From an existence-analytical viewpoint this relationship might be interpreted as reflecting the sheer but free acceptance of responsibilities without personal involvement which is related to a loss of fulfillment of meaning (with respect to social aspects indicated by high self-centeredness). There is an apparent relationship to the burn-out syndrome, where deficits in the ability to take a critical standpoint towards oneself lead to an 'existential vacuum' and to a loss of meaning in life. On the other hand, high personal and at the same time low existential abilities are related to a loss of behavior control. This indicates that the inability to establish the recognized goals and to take over responsibility is accompanied by a general disability to adjust to demands, internal or external ones. The picture of a gentle person lacking ability and thirst for action arises. The second canonical root generally reflects the imbalance between personal and existential capacities.

The two relationships extracted are not mutually exclusive; rather they reflect two components simultaneously present within each person in varying degrees. A person might gain confidence and stability out of its controlled and reserved behavioral style. However, if habits and rules loose their sense, i.e. their existential meaning, a reasonable self-reflection should lead to a change in life style. If aims and purposes are determined by others or by circumstances the risk of burn-out increases. LÄNGLE (2002) points out that being occupied with obligations most of the time leads to an increased risk of burn-out. An equilibrium between a deliberately chosen functionality and the ability and readiness to react flexibly to the demands of life by taking a personal standpoint towards oneself seems to be a firm basis for mental health and well-being.

Although the basic properties of the relationship between TPI and ES are preserved across strata, some differences should be addressed. Males showed smaller correlations of 'meaningfulness' and 'autonomy' and higher correlation of 'expansiveness' to the ES sub-scales compared to females. Efficiency and dominance seem to be more important for existential fulfillment in males. The second canonical root reveals another less apparent difference: In males high existential and low personal capacity is related to fewer concerns about the future and high satisfaction in life. In females, however, the opposite is observed, great concerns about the future and poor satisfaction in life. Apparently the 'existential vacuum' characterized by taking over

responsibilities and choosing the necessary and determined steps without recognizing or even bothering about their meaning and without taking a critical standpoint towards oneself is a male feature indicating their greater dependence from external rewards and appreciation with respect to satisfaction in life.

The analysis revealed a common variance of TPI and ES of about 75%. Although both instruments share the same theoretical background they address personal and existential aspects from different angles. The ES focuses on the ability to utilize and recognize personal and existential factors in life, while the TPI is more concerned with the consequences and effects of these factors. The study of the relationship between these instruments may uncover fundamental properties of the relationship between noetic resources and mental health. While the most apparent and strongest relationship, and an almost trivial one as it is, was found between all ES sub-scales except self-distance and mental health, another independent relationship was found, that especially comes to bearing if an imbalance between personal and existential abilities occurs, that tends to be inhomogeneous across strata and that may further be investigated in subjects with different neurotic disorders.

5. References

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