

## Existential Crisis, Life Expectancy and Identity amongst Iranian Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study intended to examine the relationship between existential crisis, life expectancy and identity amongst students of Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran, Iran, using a descriptive-correlative research method. Study participants were classified into two groups of male and female undergraduate students. There were 200 subjects, 80 males and 120 females, selected by random-assignment sampling. We used the following questionnaires to identify the correlation between variables: Domain Specific Hope Scale, Identity Style Inventory Revised for a Sixth-Grade Reading Level (ISI-6G) and Existential Crisis Scale. For data analysis, we used the Pearson correlation test, independent t-test and multiple regression analysis for the total group and according to gender. Pearson correlation test results showed significant correlation between existential crisis and life expectancy as well as between identity styles (committal and informative) and life expectancy. There was no correlation between existential crisis and identity styles (informative and hesitant). Multiple regression results showed that existential crisis predicted the following variances: life expectancy (0.33), informative identity (0.11), commitment identity (0.58) and diffusion identity (0.3). Study limitations included the inclusion of only undergraduate students; therefore the results could not be generalized to all university students. By taking into consideration that the existential crisis prevalence among youth is unclear, we recommend additional research in this field.

**KEYWORDS:** Existential crisis, Identity style, Life expectancy

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### INTRODUCTION

Where do we come from? Who are we? What should we do? What is our future? Since ancient times mankind has posed questions about several dimensions of life, including mental and spiritual, as well as those that relate to human identity. The question: "Who am I?" is especially pertinent during adolescence. The combination of physical, psychological and social changes that occur gradually make the adolescent face important decisions in the choices of an occupation and a life partner (Offer, 1969). There are numerous definitions that define identity. According to one definition, identity is characterized by a series of factors, effects and signs that distinguish one person from another (Erikson, 1986). Marcia (1966) has stated that adolescence is a period of crisis in which important life choices need to be made. Based on his clinical work, Marcia indicated that the two poles proposed by Erikson (identity achievement vs. identity confusion) could be incorporated into a larger model. Marcia (1966) has based his model on the dimensions of exploration and commitment. Exploration refers to the active questioning and weighing of various identity alternatives that occur prior to reaching a decision about the values, beliefs, and goals that one will pursue. Commitment involves making a relatively firm choice about a dominant identity and engaging in significant activities geared toward the implementation of that choice. Dividing exploration and commitment into "presence" or "absence" and crossing these dimensions yields four identity status. In a specific dominant identity after a period of active exploration in the foreclosure status, young people make a commitment with little or no prior exploration in the moratorium status. Adolescents actively explore various alternatives, yet remain noncommittal? In the diffusion status, adolescents do not engage in the proactive process of exploring different alternatives, nor do they make a commitment (J. E. Marcia, 1966). The Marcia identity formation model is derived from existential philosophy terminology in which the similarity between self-identity and the existential approach has been tested (J E Marcia, 1966). Identity has also been used in existential concepts by Heidegger (2008) and Sartre (2012). Existential questions are fundamentally related to one's identity and the reflections derived from their identity formation. This supports research by Hartman (1986) who has defined the existential crisis question as: (a) one that refers to questions about the fundamental conditions of human life and existence at a large scale and (b) expressions of the individual needs to process their own experience which relates to the environment (social and existential (Hartman, 1986). In this sense, the underling motivation is similar to what Bourne (1978) has listed as one of the seven distinct stages of the Eriksson ego identity to find "the existential significance" of one's life. "Life expectancy" is another significant issue associated with existential crisis and identity. It is defined as the

expected or statistical number of years of life that remains at a given age. Hope, as a powerful resource for life and restoration for being, is of utmost importance to individuals.

Hope has been described as anticipation, accompanied by the desire and expectation of a positive and possible future. It is a dynamic process featuring uncertainty and unpredictability that can be changed in response to life situations (Berman, Weems, & Stickle, 2006). In addition, hope is also defined as the capacity of perception that seeks to find ways to achieve desired goals and motivates people to make changes by using this perception. Hope is also considered to be a vital component of life, particularly health and has been defined as a caring component and inner impetus in life (Snyder, Feldman, Taylor, Schroeder, & Adams, 2000). Hope is also described as a cognitive set based on the successful sense derived from a variety of sources (goal-directed energy) and ways (planning to achieve goals) (Snyder, et al., 1991).

The construction of hope as proposed by Snyder (1994) is a model of goal-directed thinking that consists of two components, pathway thoughts (the perceived capacity to plan for meeting goals) and agency thoughts (perceived goal-directed determination). Pathway thinking is the perception by which one can create plans for reaching important goals, whereas agency thinking is the sense of determination to put these plans into action. Hopeful people have strong pathway thoughts, meaning that they are able to successfully generate effective plans for reaching their goals. They also have strong agency thinking, in that they have a sense of motivation to initiate and continue using these plans.

The meaning of life for an individual can neither be given nor created, it has to be found or discovered (Kalantarkousheh, Hassan, Kadir, & Talib, 2011; Su, Chen, Chen, Yang, & Hung, 2006). An existential crisis is a moment where an individual question becomes the foundation of one's life, and whether that life has any meaning, purpose or value (Kalantarkousheh & Hassan, 2010). Issues that pertain to the meaning and purpose of existence are the topics of the philosophical school of existentialism (James, Gilliland, & James, 2008). People are in a stage of crisis when they perceive "an event or situation as an intolerable difficulty that exceeds their recourse and coping mechanisms" (Gilliland & James, 1997; Kalantarkousheh, et al., 2011). Existential hopelessness is created when hope for reaching meanings is not provided. Fundamental questions in life, such as whether one's life has meaning, purpose, or value is a vital subject in existential that is currently studied. The meaning of life can be considered a basic human drive whose repression creates existential crisis (Van Ranst & Marcoen, 1997). Issues considered to be integral to purpose and meaning in life are as follows: having a sense of clear aims in life; a sense of achieving life goals; a belief that one's daily activities are worthwhile and meaningful; a sense that one's life has coherence and meaning; enthusiasm and excitement about life. Having a purpose and meaning in life helps with determining a clear sense of our goals and believing they are achievable. Research has shown a relationship between existential anxiety, life expectancy and identity. Research results have indicated that existential anxiety concerns have a theoretically consistent factor structure common among adolescents that is associated with psychological symptoms and identity issues. The results are discussed with regard to the importance of existential concerns in the lives of youth and the need for additional research (Berman, et al., 2006). Another research has shown that less sophisticated meaning is particularly associated with less advanced diffusion and foreclosure status; more sophisticated meaning is associated with an overall identity maturity index. Meaning has also been positively associated with generativeness and optimism at the age of 23 years, with stories that focused on mortality experiences and a redemptive story sequence. Meaning is negatively associated with achievement stories (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Another study has found that late adolescents rated existential questions in the following order of importance: questions about the future, the general meaning of life, death and finally, questions about one's own identity (Adamson & Lyxell, 1999). Results of another study have shown that (a) balancing and controlling one's own needs and wishes in relation to others was a central issue, (b) existential questions mainly concerned the personal future, (c) adult contacts outside the family were scarce and (d) all respondents expressed a need for adult contacts as sources of knowledge and experience. In relation to hope, a research on university students has indicated that existential meaning plays a vital role in the prevention of depression symptoms (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). Results of structural equation modeling (SEM) indicated that both meaning in life and optimism were significantly associated with both multidimensional satisfaction of life and the multidimensional structure of psychosocial problems among adolescents. Optimism also served as a partial mediator in the relationships between meaning in life and both positive and negative aspects of well-being (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung). The identity formation process has a significant difference during the adolescence period. There are different identity formations in males and females. Female identity formation for personal dependence also takes into consideration the association, partnership and caring of others, whereas male identity formation consists of independence, individuality and competition (Gilligan, 1982). Some research has indicated that personal view and identity styles have a major impact on personality, particularly in terms of religion (Duriez & Soenens, 2006). Results showed a significant relationship between meaning in life and the informative and normative identity style, but no significant relationship existed with the diffusive and avoidance identity styles. According to data analysis, there was a significant difference between meaning in life and the informative and normative identity styles in males and females (Bahadoori, khosrovshahi, & Mahmood aliloo, 1389). Other studies have shown a significant relationship between the meaning of life and hope, at a range of 72% to 92% (Behroozi & Mohammadi, 1386). On the other hand, an existential crisis may occur in a cancer patient with the realization that death may be imminent. We have explored the ways in which patients deal with this crisis, when the meaning of life itself is at stake. In

dealing with an existential crisis, it is important to have the courage to confront the loss of meaning and security. Then, a new sense of meaning may emerge which is essentially a receptive experience of connectedness with an ego-transcending reality, such as nature or God. This reduces existential fear and despair, and leads to acceptance of "life-as-it-is"(Yang, Staps, & Hijmans, 2010). Thus, the present study focuses on examining the relationship between existential crisis and life expectancy and identity styles in undergraduate students of Allame Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran.

**PATIENTS AND METHODS**

**Research hypothesis**

This was a descriptive-correlative research designed to test the following hypotheses:

1. There is a significant difference between males and females in existential crisis.
2. There is a significant difference between males and females in life expectancy.
3. There is a significant difference between males and females in identity information.
4. There is a significant relationship between existential crisis and life expectancy.
5. There is a significant relationship between existential crisis and identity style.
6. Existential crisis can predict life expectancy.
7. Existential crisis can predict identity information.

The participants of this study comprised two groups of male (80) and female (120) undergraduate students at Allame Tabataba'i University, selected by random-assignment sampling. For data analysis of the total group and according to gender, we used the Pearson correlation test, two independent groups t-test and multiple regression analysis.

**Questionnaires**

**Domain Specific Hope Scale**

The Domain Specific Hope Scale is based on research by Snyder (2000) regarding hopefulness. This scale assesses areas such as educational life, family life, employment and leisure activities, and occupation. The alpha coefficient of this test is 0.95, with a validity of 0.37.

**Ahmadi and Dastgheyb Existential Crisis Scale**

This test, created by Ahmadi and Dastgheyb (1373) has a cutoff point of approximately 19. Those who achieve a higher score are considered to have existential crisis. The reliability coefficient of this scale is 0.89.

**Identity Style Inventory Revised for a Sixth-Grade Reading Level (ISI-6G)**

The Identity Style Inventory Revised for a Sixth-Grade Reading Level (ISI-6G) is a questionnaire created by Berzonsky, Nurmi, Kinney and Tammi (1999). This inventory is comprised of a scale of 40 questions in the following categories: informative scale (11 questions), normative scale, diffusion identity (10 questions), and commitment style (10 questions). Participant responses are scored according to a Likert-type rating where agree=1 and disagree=5. Berzonsky (1999) has reported an alpha coefficient for the ISI-6G scales as follows: informative=0.62, normative=0.62 and diffusion=0.73. According to Pooralifard (1383), the alpha coefficient for this questionnaire was 0.068 among Iranians. The alpha coefficient has also been reported as follows: informative=0.073, normative=0.66, and diffusive=0.67 (Feizabadi and Sharari, 2008).

**RESULTS**

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation according to gender and alpha coefficient for each variable.

**Table 1. Descriptive analysis for data by gender**

Variable	Alpha Coefficient	M+-SD	Gender
Existential Crisis	0.86	82+6.60	Male
	0.86	1.48+7.59	Female
	0.86	9.91+7.21	All
Life expectancy	0.76	227.23+40.83	Male
	0.79	248.2+4704	Female
	0.78	280.09+44.52	All
Informative Identity	0.60	36.72+5.75	Male
	0.36	31.38+9.11	Female
	0.43	38.16+7.84	All
Normative Identity	0.46	1.08+3.97	Male
	0.35	.31.87+4.53	Female
	0.41	31.51+4.29	All
Commitment Identity	0.62	85.42+3.84	Male
	0.58	85.97+3.08	Female
	0.59	88.71+3.45	All
Diffusion Identity	0.32	31.38+4.37	Male
	0.66	28.09+6.87	Female
	0.62	29.81+6.12	All

\*Sig.p5<.

The results according to kurtosis and skewness are as follows: existential crisis (0.59, 0.90), life expectancy (0.84, 0.87), informative identity (7.62, 1.82), normative identity (0.41, -0.51), diffusion\_identity (0.30, 0.31) and commitment identity (0.254, 0.50)

**Table 2. Independent group t-test results according to gender**

Variable	Sig(1-tailed)	T	M(+)-SD	Group	Effect size
Existential crisis	0.83	-1.98	8.82+6.60	Male	
			1.84+7.59	Female	
Life Expectancy	0.69	-1.07	.77.23+40.83	Male	
			84.02+47.04	Female	
Informative identity	0.15	-2.14	36.72+5.75	Male	
			31.38+9.11	Female	
Normative Identity	0.32	-1.30	31.08+3.97	Male	
			31.87+4.53	Female	
Commitment identity	0.18	-1.10	85.42+3.84	Male	
			85.97+3.08	Female	
Diffusion Identity	0.002	4.50	31.83+4.37	Male	
			28.09+6.87	Female	

According to Table 2, we have rejected our first and second hypotheses which stated there are significant differences between life expectancy and existential crisis in males and females. However we have observed a significant difference between males and females in identity style, which confirmed the third hypothesis.

**Table 3. Correlation between variables by gender**

All			Female			Male			Variable
Effect Size	P	R	Effect Size	P	R	Effect Size	p	R	
	0.00	-0.55**		0.00	-.55**		0.00	-.064**	Existential crisis and Life expectancy
	0.002	0.104-		0.11	-.154		0.42	0.84	Existential crisis and Informative identity
	0.32	-.0152*		0.01	-0.22*		0.049	-0.071	Existential crisis and Normative identity
	0.01	-0.241**		0.001	-0.37**		0.17	0.144	Existential crisis and Commitment identity
	0.41	0.058		0.42	0.136		0.66	0.046	Existential Crisis and Diffusion identity

As shown in Table 3, there was a significant relationship between males and females for existential crisis and life expectancy, which confirmed the fourth hypothesis ( $p < 0.1$ ). A significant relationship was also noted in the normative and committed identity styles between males and females ( $p < 0.5$ ), however no significant relationship between the informative and diffusion identity styles was observed. Therefore hypothesis five, which stated that a significant relationship exists between existential crisis and identity style was rejected.

**Table 4. Multiple regression analysis for the total group and by gender**

Variable	P	F	R <sup>2</sup>	Groups
Life expectancy	0.00	64.32	0.41	Male
	0.00	48.11	0.31	Female
	0.00	97.48	0.33	All
Normative identity	0.49	0.46	0.5	Male
	0.02	5.84	0.52	Female
	0.03	4.65	0.23	All
Commitment identity	0.17	1.90	0.21	Male
	0.00	16.41	0.14	Female
	0.001	12.33	0.58	All

According to Table 4, the results showed that existential crisis predicted the following variances: life expectancy (0.33), informative identity (0.11), commitment identity (0.58) and diffusion identity (0.3). These results confirm hypotheses six and seven which state that existential crisis is predictive of life expectancy and identity formation.

### CONCLUSION

In this study we examined the relationship between existential crisis and life expectancy with identity in undergraduate students of Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran. Primary results showed a negative relationship between existential crisis and identity formation. Existential crisis impacted identity formation and

predicted this process, which confirmed the results of other studies. Some researchers have shown a relationship between existential anxiety, life expectancy, and identity. For example research results have shown that existential anxiety concerns have a theoretically consistent factor structure. This is common among adolescents and associated with both psychological symptoms and identity issues. Results are discussed with regard to the importance of existential concerns among youth and the need for additional research (Berman, et al., 2006). Another research has found that late adolescents rated existential questions in the following order according to their importance: questions about the future, questions about the meaning of life in general, questions about death and finally, questions about one's own identity (Adamson & Lyxell, 1999).

The present study showed a significant difference between males and females in identity formation, which was similar to a study by Gilligan (1982).

In relation to hope, a research on university students has indicated that existential meaning played a vital role in the prevention of depression symptoms (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). Another study reported a significant relationship between life expectancy and existential crisis, which was similar to a study by Snyder (2000) where hope was described as a cognitive set based on the successful sense derived from a variety of sources (goal-directed energy) and ways (planning to achieve goals) (Snyder, et al., 1991).

It can be concluded that those who have high life expectancies have committed and informative identities. On the other hand, existential crisis causes a normative, diffusive identity. However, this study did not find a significant difference between males and females according to life expectancy. It can be concluded that existential crisis played an important role in identity formation and life expectancy of both males and females, which was not mentioned clearly and explicitly in earlier studies.

Study limitations included the inclusion of only undergraduate students therefore the results could not be generalized to all university students. We were unable to state with certainty that all participants completed the study questionnaires. An additional limitation was that the results were obtained only from questionnaires.

In lieu of the limitations of the current study we recommend that officials conduct effective workshops for students on self-discovery. In addition, life conditions should be provided in a way to reduce existential crisis, which would give more hope for life. Self-discovery and knowing one's abilities can assist with the attainment of a more structured, multiplied identity. Finally, by taking into consideration that the existential crisis prevalence among youth is unclear, we recommend additional research in this field.

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