

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXISTENTIAL THINKING AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION AMONG SOFTWARE PROFESSIONALS

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores the relationship between Existential Thinking and Self-Actualization among software professionals in India. Participants were employees working in the Indian IT sector and software companies below the age of 36 years selected through researcher's professional contact across various software companies. They completed Scale for Existential Thinking, Brief Index of Self-Actualization and Meaning in Life Questionnaire.

## INTRODUCTION

Existential issues like meaning of life and death have been explored and value in every culture. These and many more fundamental questions of existence have been engaged and attended to diligently by mankind since time immemorial. Several scholars like Viktor Frankl and Irvin Yalom have explored the therapeutic benefits of facing existential issues. As people differ considerably in their engagement with existential issue, a measure of such engagement could be used to study its effects and correlates with other important psychological construct. Brandon Shearer and Allan Blake developed a measure called existential thinking. Existential thinking is derived from emotional intelligence which comes from multiple intelligence theory. Existential thinking was found to have significance in one's career. Existential thinking might get individuals closer to positive meaning of life, which might later translate to well-being. Existential thinking level were independent of age, gender, socio-economic status and education qualification and it is also found to be higher in India as compare to Western countries. In these studies, one central question that remained unanswered was about the gap between one's existential thinking inclinations and ability. Through it, existential thinking can be efficiently measured. According to Shearer (2006), it is usually assumed that an individual's interest is highly interrelated with ability and skills which may not be the case. Self-Actualization is another important and popular well-known concept from humanistic theories of counseling and organizational psychology, which talks about the optimal human functioning. Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers are well known for their works on self-actualization.

According to Carl Rogers as cited by (Frager and Fadiman, 2005) self-actualizing tendency is innate to humans and this urge is also evident in all other organic living things as a tendency to express itself fully. Self-Actualization is usually considered to a western phenomenon by default high degree of individualism is present in urban youth in India (Mohan and Sharma, 1985). Sharma and Sweta (2017) have done Psycho-Analytical Investigation of stress among students of Higher Technical Education in India. Self-actualization needs are found to be higher in urban sector because of increased facilities, awareness, infrastructure and income levels. It is also found that with modernization the needs have gradually changed from traditional to modern. Meaning in life has been researched extensively owing to its importance in modern society with the fall of traditional values and rise in existential thinking. Existentialist have long studied the issue and has become even more challenging as the traditional view on meaning of life is not being seen as very convincing enough. Victor Frankl, Maslow and Yalom are the theorists who have addressed the issue. All the three theoretical frameworks see meaning in life as a very significant construct with positive and negative aspects in terms of mental health. Presence of meaning in life correlated to positive constructs of mental health and life. According to Routledge and Juhl (2010), existential thinking relates to anxiety without a meaning in life. According to Winston et al (2013), existential thinking was found to be related to pathology, indicating that the greater the propensity to engage in existential thinking the greater the self-reported symptomatology.

Existentialism states that our lives have no inherent meaning or purpose but rather it is the purpose we create for our lives that gives us a sense of meaning. This meaning is only present in our consciousness however, the universe or God, does not care what one is doing. By accomplishing self-actualization, we are able to find meaning and purpose in our life so that we can say we truly lived. Characteristics of self-actualization are- continued freshness of appreciation, acceptance, authenticity, equanimity, purpose, efficient perception of reality, humanitarianism, peak experiences, good moral intuition and creative spirit. On the other side self-actualized people may have following qualities in general-live independently, have a sense for reality and truth, are comfortable with the unknown, have compassion, kindness and acceptance; have a good matured sense of humour; enjoy meaningful friendship; have a sense of spontaneity; are creative; enjoy peak experiences; focus on things bigger than themselves; have sense of appreciation for each positive or joyful moment; have a sense of justice and possess social feeling.

The relationship between existential thinking as meaning making process and self-actualization needs to be explored. It is a fact that existential skills and abilities are not known, and self-actualization is the closest construct to optimal human functioning. It is of immense importance in understanding of the process of self-actualization and its connection with existential thinking. Empirical research shows existential thinking relation to meaning in life (Shearer & Allan, 2012) and meaning in life relation to self-actualization (Beaumont, 2009; Ebersole & Humphries, 1991). Given the above two relations it is anticipated that existential thinking is related to self-actualization through meaning in life. The problem statement is to research how existential thinking correlates with self-actualization. The research would explore relationship between existential thinking and self-actualization among IT professionals in Indian metro cities. Working IT professionals also are assumed to have higher self-actualization needs based on studies done in urban context (Sinha & Sweta, 2011). It is assumed that working IT professionals are stressed as they are right in the midst of the force of globalization. The significance of this research is that this study can explore the process that Maslow saw as lifelong. This in turn can have positive implications to consider and develop strategies to deliver well-being programs and therapeutic interventions to the segment of Indian population which continues to grow and drive the Indian economy in a big way.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is aimed to understand the relationship between existential thinking and self-actualization among software professionals with an aim to obtain some evidence of cause and effect as part of non-experimental design.

### Hypothesis

Following hypothesis were proposed in accordance with the studies done so far:

- Existential thinking is positively related to self-actualization.
- Meaning in life is positively related to self-actualization.
- Presence of meaning in life is positively related to self-actualization.
- Search of meaning in life is positively related to self-actualization.
- Self-actualization is positively affected by existential thinking.
- Existential thinking is related to self-actualization through meaning in life.
- Existential thinking is related to self-actualization through presence of MIL

### Variable

Independent or Predictor variable: Existential thinking

Dependent or Criterion variable: Self-actualization,

Mediating variable: Meaning in Life.

### Participants

Participants were chosen from amongst the employees of various software companies across major urban cities in India. The criterion of selection was based on researcher's professional contacts across various software companies. Requests were made for voluntary participation and respondent's base was selected based on their availability for filling up the questionnaires online. Sampling was planned and later requests for completion of questionnaires were made from the selected individuals. There was no remuneration provided for participation and the participants were informed that they could abort anytime they wish to. Online

instruments were made accessible to the respondents and filled data was collected as part of shared database file.

### **Sampling Technique**

Convenience sampling was used to select the software professionals from top Indian and MNC software companies in urban cities of India based on researcher's professional contact. The sample size was 30.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

- Employees working in the IT sector and software companies.
- Individuals aged below and equal to 36 years of age.
- Individuals born and brought up in India.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

- Employees not working in the IT sector and software companies.
- Individuals aged above 36 years of age.
- Individuals not born and brought up in India.

### **Procedure**

The participants were briefed online or in email about the study and were requested to give their consent for voluntary participation along with some basic personal and professional information. After random selection of a sample of participants from those who agreed to participate and also fit the selection criteria; online instruments were administered and data collected online. Participants were also requested to fill in the details as honestly as possible to minimize any possible motivational distortion or social desirability. They were also informed that data will be collected and analyzed anonymously. They were also provided online support in case of any difficulties in filling the instruments. Feedback was also taken from the subjects to determine whether they had any problems or issues with any of the items or questionnaires and whether they faced any difficulty in completing them.

### **Analysis**

The simple mediation analysis was conducted with Preacher and Hayes' (2008) SPSS Indirect Macro. It uses a bootstrap technique to test mediation and is a powerful method for testing statistical significance of indirect effects. It is a nonparametric approach and hence makes no assumptions about sampling distribution of the variables or of the indirect effects, and can be applied to small samples with more confidence. Bootstrap samples are taken directly from the original data and estimation is done for indirect effect in each re-sampled data set. The resampling involves replacement of the cases while constructing new samples. The process gets repeated thousands of times resulting in an estimated sampling distribution, which is then used to calculate confidence intervals for testing statistical significance of total and indirect effects. If confidence interval does not contain zero then effect is considered significant (Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

The preliminary analysis was done to examine the strength of correlations among the variables in SPSS.

Bootstrapping macro for mediation analysis was used to keep away from the assumption of sampling distribution being normal. It was used as our sample size was small compared to the target population size. Bootstrapping method for mediation analysis was found to be very effective for such conditions of mediation analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) and the analysis was done using the macro developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) for SPSS.

## RESULTS

Table displaying the correlation between various variables in this study.

|      | ET | MIL   | SMIL   | PMIL   | SA      |
|------|----|-------|--------|--------|---------|
| ET   | 1  | –     | –      | –      | 0.509** |
| MIL  | –  | 1     | –      | –      | –       |
| SMIL | –  | –     | 1      | –      | –       |
| PMIL | –  | –     | –      | 1      | –       |
| SA   | –  | 0.134 | 0.374* | -0.241 | 1       |

\*= significant at 95% confidence level

\*\*=significant 99% confidence level

Tabulation of value of Regression and other statistics of the regression model between Existential thinking with Self-Actualization.

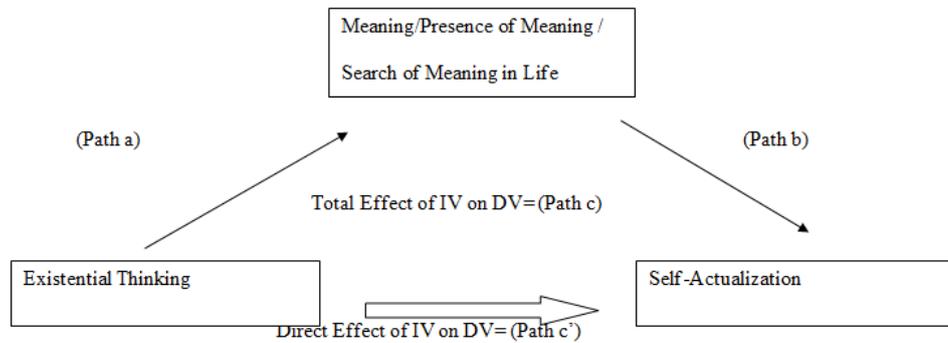
| Model | R                 | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1     | .509 <sup>a</sup> | .260     | .233              | 17.162                     |

| ANOVA <sup>a</sup> Model |            | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F     | Sig.              |
|--------------------------|------------|----------------|----|-------------|-------|-------------------|
| 1                        | Regression | 2890.354       | 1  | 2890.354    | 9.813 | .004 <sup>b</sup> |
|                          | Residual   | 8247.012       | 28 | 294.536     |       |                   |
|                          | Total      | 11137.367      | 29 |             |       |                   |

a. Dependent Variable: SA

b. Predictors: (Constant), ET

R (=0.509) is the absolute value of the Pearson correlation between the dependent variable or criterion as Existential thinking and independent variable or regressor as Self-Actualization. This following Cohen's classification is a 'large' effect and the variance in SA is well accounted for variance in ET.



\*Significant at 95% confidence level

According to Baron and Kenny (1986) there are three conditions which are required to be tested before simple mediation can be said to occur. One, the independent variable should significantly predict the dependent variable (path c). In this case, Existential Thinking does not significantly predict Self-Actualization ( $c = 0.8867$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) in all the above cases. Second condition, the independent variable must significantly predict the mediator (path a). In this case, Existential Thinking does not significantly predict either of Meaning in Life ( $p > 0.05$ ) or Presence of Meaning in Life ( $p > 0.05$ ) or Search of Meaning in Life ( $p > 0.05$ ) and Hypothesis 6, Hypothesis 7 and Hypothesis 8 that existential thinking is related to self-actualization through meaning in life, presence of meaning in life and search of meaning in life independently are not supported.

Interestingly the third condition whereby, the mediator must significantly predict the dependent variable (path b) and a previously significant relation between IV and DV should no longer be significant when the mediator is controlled (path c'). In this case, Presence of Meaning in Life significantly predicts Self Actualization ( $b = -.9972$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and also Search of Meaning in Life significantly predicts Self Actualization ( $b = .8867$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Further, the direct effect of IV on DV (path c') has not been reduced significantly from the total effect of IV on DV (path c) which implies absence of any mediating effect. However, path c still remains significant which implies that there might be other variables or mediators which could be operating between the IV and DV (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

According to Preacher and Hayes (2004), the Baron and Kenny model does not provide any information on the degree of statistical difference that is required to be present between path c and path c' for mediation to have said to occur. As a result, they suggest using a macro which would test for whether path a-b or c-c' and check whether its value is zero. If zero is not obtained in the output, then it implies that the indirect effect is statistically significant. They also suggest that there are possibilities where the sampling distribution of an indirect effect is not normal or symmetrical which is unlike what is assumed when using the Sobel Test. When the current data was tested for normality, it was found that the distribution was not normally distributed and hence, the macro given by Preacher and Hayes (2004) which employs the method of bootstrapping (which does not require that the sample be normally distributed) was used instead. In the method of bootstrapping, the sample size (in this case 100) is taken each time with different values from the data set by using the method of sampling with replacement. In this case, 5000 resamples were used and the values of the indirect effect obtained each time fell in the range which included zero in between. This implies that since zero does fall in between the 95% confidence interval, the indirect effect is zero and hence it is not statistically significant in all the above three cases.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The present research has resulted in several interesting facts especially that SA is positively affected by ET and as in a previous research existential thinking was found to be related to pathology, indicating that the greater the propensity to engage in existential thinking, the greater the self-reported symptomatology, is not supported. This might not be the case because the themes of existential thinking could be a precursor to Self-Actualization, as Viktor Frankl and Irvin Yalom have also explored the therapeutic benefits of facing existential issues.

Another interesting find was that Presence of Meaning in Life significantly predicts Self Actualization negatively and Search of Meaning in Life significantly predicts Self Actualization positively.

## ALLAN & SHEARER THEORY:

### THE SCALE FOR EXISTENTIAL THINKING

The tendency to contemplate issues regarding one's existence has been termed 'existential thinking' by Allan and Shearer (2012), who formulated the Scale for Existential Thinking (SET) to measure the extent to which individuals engage in this mode of thinking.

The Scale for Existential Thinking. This study introduced the construct of existential thinking, which we defined as the tendency to explore the fundamental concerns of human existence and the capacity to engage in a meaning-making process that locates oneself in respect to these issues.

Existential thinking was measured using the Scale for Existential Thinking (SET), an 11-item self-report instrument assessing an individual's frequency of engagement with the deeper matters of human existence

### Limitations

1. There were limited sample of 30 participants and are not representative of the bigger population.
2. The sample size was small.

### Implications

As per previous researches done in this field, existential thinking is correlated to a lot of existential variables, wellbeing, meaning in life etc. It needs to be seen if it can be further explored with other variables and most importantly self-actualization. It is hoped that this study can explore the process that Maslow saw as a lifelong. This in turn can have positive implications to consider and develop strategies to deliver well-being programs and therapeutic interventions to the segment of Indian population that continues to grow and drive the Indian economy in a big way.

It is hoped that this study will further our understanding of the constructs. Broader and interconnected issues of mental well-being and this process in an age group, different from where Maslow explored, could benefit future research.

### Future prospects of present study:

The Maslow Hierarchy of Needs can have implications for adult education programs like psycho-education for increased well-being. Maslow's work recommended self-actualization as a significant goal for which adult education programs should account for. The focus on existential thinking as a factor for growth would help further our understanding of the process of self-actualization (Warren, unknown) Also very few studies on ET has been conducted in India per se and will add to the literature present in related fields.

It is hoped that this study will further our understanding of the constructs. Broader and interconnected issues of mental well-being and this process in an age group, different from where Maslow explored, could benefit future research. Further research is needed to assess what factors, beyond age, play a role in self-actualization. By saying this I conclude the research study and request professionals to further this research.

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