



# State–trait anxiety and existential fear: an empirical analysis

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## Abstract

The Fear Checklist consists of 18 items (e.g. intimacy, loss of control, failure) a respondent checks to signify areas that have been or currently are personal sources of concern and/or apprehension. Total scores on the Fear Checklist, along with scores on each of its three subscales (Social, Control, Identity), were correlated with the state (A-State) and trait (A-Trait) anxiety scales of the State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). Both the A-State and A-Trait scales demonstrated significant association with the total Fear Checklist score ( $r_{\text{state}}=0.48$ ,  $r_{\text{trait}}=0.50$ ) and each of its three subscales in a group of 135 male federal prisoners. Despite substantial overlap between the A-State and A-Trait scales ( $r=0.76$ ), each achieved significant partial correlations with the total Fear Checklist score when the other scale was controlled (i.e. the A-Trait score was controlled in the state anxiety–fear relationship and the A-State score was controlled in the trait anxiety–fear relationship). These results lend preliminary support to the notion that existential fear, as measured by the Fear Checklist, is sensitive to both dispositionally (A-Trait) and situationally (A-State) based anxiety, although the majority of variance shared by the STAI and Fear Checklist was common to both STAI scales. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

*Keywords:* Fear; Anxiety; Empirical analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Lifestyle theory takes an interactive view of human psychology. As such, it postulates that the person×situation interaction is a more powerful predictor of behavior than either the dispositional or situational factors that make up the interaction. It is possible then that much of what has traditionally been ascribed to dispositional and situational influences may actually be a function of the ongoing person×situation interaction. Existential fear is a concept that may explain how the human organism interacts with a continually changing environment that threatens the

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organism's existence. Although allowances are made for individual differences in existential fear, these static dispositional and situational effects are overshadowed by the much larger effect that is attributed to the person  $\times$  situation interaction. According to lifestyle theory, existential fear is the natural consequence of a human organism's capacity to view itself as separate from the environment and cognitively cope with situations and events that threaten its existence (Walters, 1999a). Research demonstrates that perceiving oneself as separate from the environment is a developmental task attained by the time a child is 12–18 months old (Lewis & Brooks, 1978). Existential fear encompasses both the anxiety associated with an emerging awareness of human finitude (Tillich, 1952) and a sense of isolation from the world brought on by perceptions of separateness from the environment (Bugental & Bugental, 1984).

There are several ways humans cope with situations and events that threaten their existence. These coping interactions run the gamut from defensive strategies, like aggression, withdrawal, immobility, and appeasement (Marks, 1987), to constructive strategies, like affiliation, prediction, and status (Walters, 2000a). Whereas defensive strategies are designed to eliminate an existing threat to survival, constructive strategies are intended to prevent a threat to survival from surfacing. Affiliating or bonding with others advances survival by affording the organism protection against predation, starvation, and loneliness. Predictability and control support survival by assisting with the hunting and gathering of food and helping the organism plan for seasonal changes and endure environmental hardships. Status facilitates survival by furnishing the organism with a place or function in a larger social unit and instilling within the organism a sense of purpose. Affiliation, prediction, and status foster survival in different ways for different species; in humans, these themes fuel existential fear because of their ability to protect and advance human existence. A measure known as the Fear Checklist (Walters, 1998) was devised to assess existential fear and the three primary constructive strategies believed to shape this fear: affiliation (Social subscale of the Fear Checklist), prediction (Control subscale of the Fear Checklist), and status (Identity subscale of the Fear Checklist).

Existential fear is presumably a condition under which all humans suffer. Individual differences come into play, however, in determining the overall level of existential fear that is experienced and the form the fear takes in response to the three constructive strategies of affiliation, prediction, and status. Since existential fear is considered the product of an ongoing interaction between certain dispositional trends within the organism and various situational features of the environment, it would make sense that existential fear should correlate with measures of both state and trait anxiety. The State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, 1983) is an instrument that can be scored for both state (A-State) and trait (A-Trait) anxiety. Particularly important is the fact that studies conducted on such existentially relevant concepts as death anxiety and fear of death connote that both concepts correlate well with the A-Trait scale of the STAI (Abdel-Khalek, 1997; Loo, 1984). Fear of death may be particularly high in situations where specific childhood traumas are paired with elevated scores on the A-Trait scale (Daugherty, 1998). Higher scores on both the A-Trait and A-State scales of the STAI indicate hypersensitivity to threat (Tripp, Tan & Milne, 1995) and excessive use of escapist coping strategies in response to stress and environmental change (Prokopcakova, 1992).

If high scores on the STAI denote a tendency on the part of an individual to over-interpret environmental threat and adopt escapist strategies in dealing with these perceived threats, it only makes sense that such individuals would also be more likely to engage in various self-defeating

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