

MEASUREMENT OF EXISTENTIAL MENTAL HEALTH: FURTHER EXPLORATION

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Theodore Kotchen (2) introduced a 27-item self-report, questionnaire-type rating scale designed to measure mental health as defined by existential principles, typified by such writers as Sartre, Paul Tillich, Rollo May, and Viktor Frankl. The essential underlying principle is that of "meaning." The concept may be illustrated by Nietzsche's statement to the effect that whoever has the "why" to live can manage any "how." The point is that "a mind is healthy when it has achieved a sufficient store of 'meaning' to enable it to master suffering and to direct daily action" (2, p. 174).

The instrument consists of the following 7 subscales: uniqueness, responsibility, self-affirmation, courage, transcendence, faith-commitment, and world view. These subscales, while thought to be individually significant, are considered to be less important than the total test score. In Kotchen's original study, total scores discriminated successfully between 5 groups of 30 males each, operationally defined as differing progressively in mental health: locked-ward mental patients, parole mental patients, chronic physical patients, men-in-the-street, and college undergraduates attending a summer session at Harvard University.

The present study attempted to explore whether this instrument would discriminate between various groups of undergraduate students, specifically, males and females, and freshmen and seniors.

METHOD

Subjects. The Ss were 120 undergraduate students at a Southern university, 60 freshmen and 60 seniors, both groups evenly divided as to sex. None of the Ss had attended a college outside the southeastern United States; the Ss were randomly selected from almost every division of the university. Participation was voluntary; anonymity was ensured by administering the questionnaire in large groups and by requesting nameless papers.

Instrument. Since a pilot study revealed that many items elicited ambiguous responses, a self-scoring system was devised which eliminated this difficulty. A slight alteration was also made in the order of the questions; the first item ("Do you think a white person should work for a Negro boss?") was placed later in the series, because of its particular significance for a portion of this population.

Procedure. Ss were given blank paper and asked to state only their sex and exact class standing. The questions were read aloud twice by the examiner, the

second author. *Ss* were requested to answer each question as honestly and as briefly as possible.

After completing the 27 items, *Ss* were asked to score their papers according to criteria read to them. To ensure honesty, *Ss* were told that there were no right or wrong answers. After the scoring, the study was explained and it was pointed out that the scoring did contain some evaluative meaning, but only within a particular theoretical framework. None of the *Ss* objected to the content of the test or the method of administration.

As a check on scoring, each paper was reviewed later by the examiner and problematic scorings were reviewed by both authors. The scores were compiled by the examiner, and statistically treated by the university computer center.

RESULTS

The results in terms of mean scores and standard deviations for each of the four groups of undergraduates are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. MEAN EXISTENTIAL MENTAL HEALTH SCORES AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF FOUR GROUPS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS (N = 30 EACH)

	Freshmen		Seniors		Total	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Males	21.20	2.21	22.70	2.02	21.95	2.25
Females	22.57	2.19	23.67	1.92	23.12	2.13
Total	21.88	2.30	23.18	2.03		

Four comparisons of groups were made and their differences subjected to a *t* test, with the following findings:

- freshmen women 1.37 pts. higher than freshmen men, significant at .05 level;
- senior women .97 pts. higher than senior men, not significant;
- all women 1.17 pts. higher than all men, significant at .01 level;
- all seniors 1.30 pts. higher than all freshmen, significant at .01 level.

It should also be noted that the seniors of both sexes were less variable than the freshmen.

DISCUSSION

Regarding the higher mental health scores of women, several past studies arrived at similar findings. On the Allport-Vernon scale (4), women scored higher than men on the social, aesthetic, and religious dimensions. This proclivity of women is consistent with the existential literature (3, p. 322). Elsewhere it was also found that many more women than men students professed a need for religious faith (5).

The reduction of differences between women and men at the senior level parallels findings reported by Jacob (1) of greater homo-

generality and consistency of values among students by the end of their four years of college than at the beginning. Perhaps this reflects the diminution of earlier sex differences in maturation.

The superiority of seniors over freshmen in mental health scores is consistent with the finding reported by Jacob (1) that during their years in college, students generally become less rigid, dogmatic, and prejudiced, and more self-confident, self-reliant, and tolerant. The decreased variability of the seniors is again a confirmation of Jacob's finding of the greater homogeneity of values at the end of college.

Our total male group scored 2.75 lower than Kotchen's male undergraduates (21.95 versus 24.7). While this difference is a great deal larger than any found among the present group, unaccounted variables are too many to permit an interpretation.

SUMMARY

This study applied an Existential Mental Health Questionnaire developed by Kotchen (2) to a relatively homogeneous student population in a Southern university, consisting of 30 each, men and women freshmen, and men and women seniors, 120 Ss in all. The procedure differed from Kotchen's in the use of a self-scoring modification. The findings were: The women as a whole, and the freshmen women separately, scored significantly higher than the men as a whole and the freshmen men, respectively. Furthermore, the seniors scored significantly higher than the freshmen. These findings are discussed in the light of similar observations by others.

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