Chapter 1: Introduction

Many patients in psychiatric care struggle with existential questions about their lives, such as the inevitability of death, the meaning of life, and how to avoid regretting past life choices. Patients often have difficulty finding the right words to express them. Moreover, these concerns also reflect how patients might be relating to their illness as a destructive force that forms a threat to their personal existence, rather than as a collection of symptoms in response to challenging life situations and/or traumas. Based on this background, this thesis focuses on the anxiety that is provoked by the general challenges of human existence, which we labelled “existential anxiety” (EA).

Central to this thesis is the empirical evaluation of EA. The development of measurement instruments is necessary to obtain more insight into the interrelatedness of different aspects of EA, and their relationship to other aspects of anxiety and human functioning in general. However, the affiliation between theorists of EA and empirical research is highly complex. Important contributors have criticized the empirical approach to human experience, and EA instruments are scarce and have yet to be fully developed and tested. These objections notwithstanding, there may be good reasons to study EA with empirical methods. Given the treatment resistance of a substantial number of mental disorders, a research perspective that differs strongly from the mainstream might be helpful in finding new possibilities toward more positive mental health. It may be that patients with mental health complaints are suffering first and foremost from EA, and focusing on this aspect of anxiety might be helpful to improving existing treatment methods and/or developing new ones. The aim of our project also corresponds to recent appeals for a more person-centered approach in health care, which aims at paying attention to the personal values and goals that are important to people who ask for health care, next to alleviating the complaints that they are suffering from. We started our project with the following research questions:

1) Is it possible to study existential anxiety with self-reporting measures?
2) Can different aspects of existential anxiety be distinguished using a self-reporting measure, and if so, how do these aspects interrelate?
3) Does an existential perspective on anxiety add to existing treatment methods, such as cognitive behavioral therapy?
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These questions were addressed in different research projects that are described in this thesis. The first and second question were studied by performing a systematic research on EA instruments, and developing and testing a new instrument. For the third question we studied often used literature on cognitive behavioral therapy and made a comparison with literature from the tradition of existential psychotherapy. Next to these projects that are directly connected to our research questions, we also evaluated the factor structure of the World Assumption Scale, a questionnaire that is conceptually related to EA. These projects are worked out in the following chapters;

**Chapter 2.** The aim of this chapter is to discuss and develop the theoretical concepts that are operationalized in the next chapters and to delineate the area of our research. A description of existential theory and research on EA is provided, the EA aspect of psychopathology is described in philosophical terms, different conceptual questions are addressed, and our own conceptual model is presented.

**Chapter 3.** In this chapter, we explore the question as to whether there are instruments to measure EA. We determine which EA instruments could be used in this research project to learn more about the different aspects of EA and their interrelatedness, as well as how we might best validate a newly developed instrument. Based on the existential concerns formulated in Chapter 2, we determine the search terms needed to perform a systematic research in three relevant databases and then present our results.

**Chapter 4.** In Chapter 3, the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ) (Weems, Costa, Dehon, & Berman, 2004) was evaluated as being the best EA instrument. However, the EAQ has been developed for populations in the USA, and only English, Slovak, Polish and Chinese versions are available. In this chapter, we describe how we used a forward-backward procedure to translate the EAQ for the Dutch population and then pre-tested it using a cognitive interview procedure. Furthermore, we show how we extended the EAQ so that it might correspond to our own theoretical model. Due to the many changes that we discovered during the translation and adaptation process, the final version of the questionnaire was given a new name, namely Existential Concerns Questionnaire (ECQ).
Chapter 5. This chapter discusses how the ECQ was tested with two samples of respondents. First, it was administered to a large sample from the general population in order to learn more about its factor structure, consistency and stability, and its relationship to other instruments that measure related constructs. Second, after making necessary adaptations, the instrument was tested using a sample of outpatients with mental health complaints.

Chapter 6. Positive and negative assumptions about oneself and the world can be seen as a construct that is related to EA. These assumptions are systematized in the theory of Shattered Assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), which resulted in the well-known and frequently used World Assumption Scale (WAS). In this chapter we evaluate the factor structure of the WAS using a sample of trauma patients and a sample of mental health professionals.

Chapter 7. In this chapter we explore the implications that our research project has for clinical practice. In the Netherlands, cognitive behavioral therapy has become the dominant psychotherapeutic treatment method, as illustrated by its central place in the treatment guidelines that were developed by different professional organisations, such as the Dutch Association for Psychiatry and the Dutch Institute for Psychologists. In this chapter, the question is asked whether cognitive behavioral therapy grants the necessary attention to EA, and if so, what kind of advice is given to therapists who want to help people struggling with EA.

Chapter 8. In this final chapter, we reflect on the research project as a whole and return to its initial questions. We address the implications of our results for the concept of EA, future research and clinical developments. We also compare the results with regard to the ECQ with that of the WAS and evaluate the methods that we applied.

References