

Applying the Semantic Differential to Compare the Experiences of Existential Fears

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Introduction. In the context of the hybrid war in society, the experience of existential fears becomes more intense: being manifested in a subconscious level, they raise the problem of the coexistence of personality and fear.

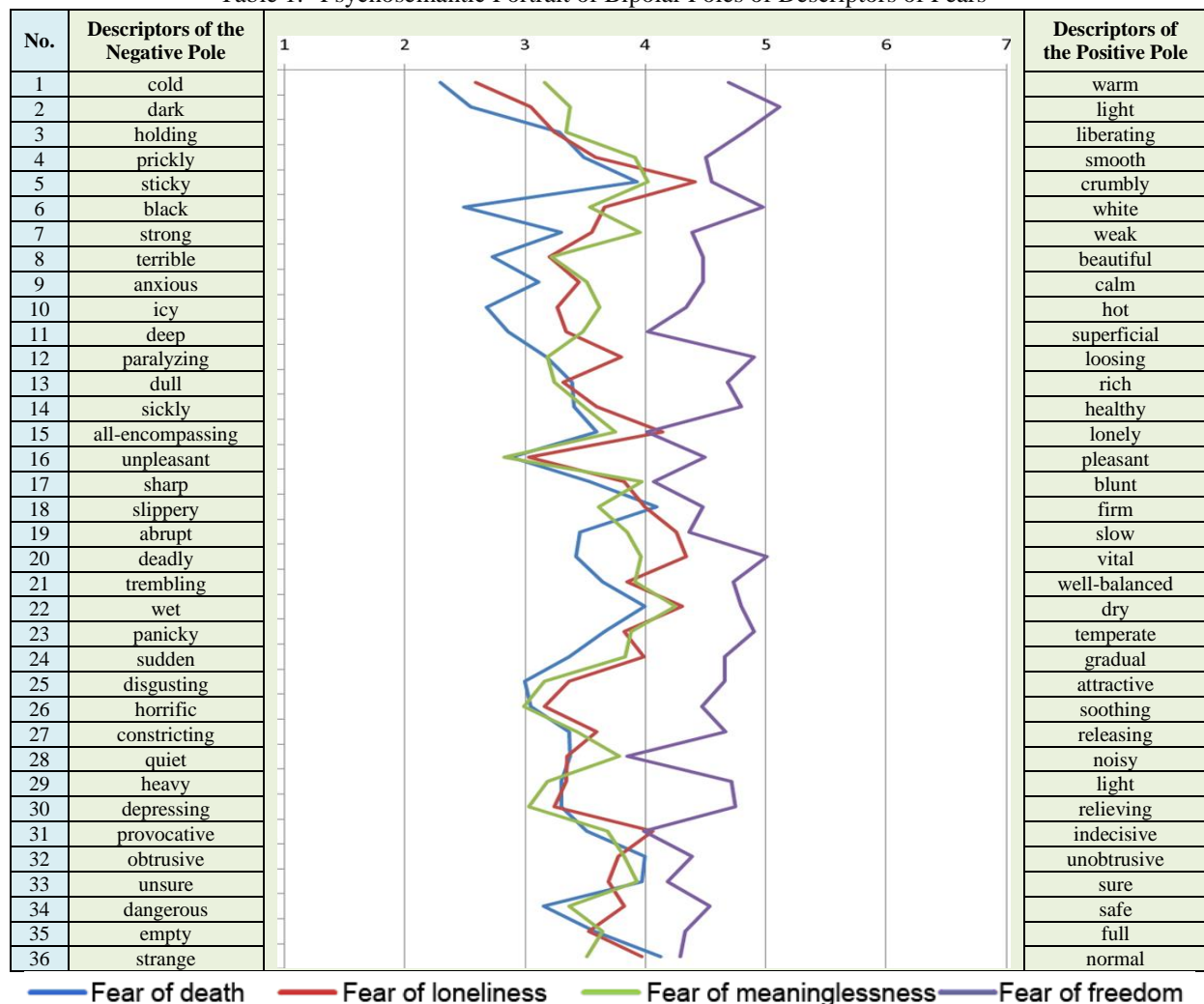
Purpose. Identifying patterns of how it is perceived and displayed will facilitate seeking the ways to cope with them.

Methodology. This study focuses on the comparison of the fears of death, loneliness, meaninglessness, and freedom in the structure of human consciousness. For this purpose, we turned to the semantic differential method, as it allows us to evaluate the subjective aspect of meanings associated with the personal sense, social attitudes, stereotypes, and other emotionally rich, weakly structured, and barely consciously perceived forms of generalization [3].

The procedure for constructing semantic differential occurred in two basic sequential stages: 1) identifying bipolar descriptors (125 individuals); 2) rating the descriptors (90 individuals). The questionnaire contained an open question that allowed a respondent to answer in their own words. The question was about understanding the phenomenon of fear and read as follows: "What adjectives would you use to describe fear?"

The procedure of frequency analysis of the responses yielded relevant semantic units for constructing the semantic differential of existential fears. In qualitative analysis, the total number of words was reduced from 1193 to 203. Also, we conducted sorting to remove auxiliary parts of speech, sentences, phrases, so the number of indicators dropped to 36 main descriptors.

Table 1. "Psychosemantic Portrait of Bipolar Poles of Descriptors of Fears"



Results. The polar scales and the generalized results of the completed questionnaires (127 respondents) are presented in order of significance of descriptors in Table 1.

The chart represents the direction of change in attitude towards fears, demonstrating to which pole the subjects incline while rating the fears. It is noticeable that the curves of the three fears are very like and similar, together approaching one pole or the other. All the obvious differences can also be seen; at the same time, the interpretation of graphically shown data for each separate fear doesn't exhaust the question of its content load. Therefore, we then processed the data using the factor analysis procedure, which was carried out by the method of extracting the principal components and included rotation method of varimax with Kaiser normalization.

Factor analysis allowed us to identify the structure of the intercorrelations between the scales by classifying them. Next, we received the main semantic structures of fear as it is perceived by the subjects and excluded from the analysis less significant factors that explain least of the variance.

Then we made an attempt to compare the identified five-factor structures of each of the existential fears.

Table 2. Comparison of the factor structure of the semantic differential of the existential fears

Fear	Death	Loneliness	Meaninglessness	Freedom
First	Anxiety	Anxiety	Pressure	Safety
Second	Safety	Safety	Stability	Estimation
Third	Comfort	Openness	Anxiety	Stability
Fourth	Openness	Comfort	Safety	Dynamism
Fifth	Stability	Complexity	Comfort	Comfort
Total % of Variance	52.99	47.06	42.78	57.37

In the semantic space, the factor structures describing the experiences of the fear of death and the fear of loneliness are almost identical, only the fifth factor is different. For the fear of death, it is stability, for loneliness it is complexity. Perhaps the fear of death is more stable, unchanging, or even inevitable. The fear of loneliness, on the contrary, is not so stable, as it changes depending on a situation and many other determinants. At the same time, it is more complex, ambiguous, as our subject [2].

While the fear of death and the fear of loneliness are almost identical, the fear of meaninglessness is different in certain ways. In the first positions, it is characterized by the factors of pressure and stability. Perhaps because experiencing meaninglessness is associated with a grave, vague state of value decline, which creates a situation of uncertainty, instability, existential vacuum. The next set of factors that comes into play is identical to the factors of the fear of death and loneliness – the factors of anxiety, security, comfort. Thus, meaninglessness may acquire vulnerable, disturbing characteristics.

The factor structures of the fears don't differ from each other significantly, except for the fear of freedom, the structure of which doesn't contain the factor of anxiety. Considering the previous results – we have traced the tendency of the subjects to ascribe fear to the positive pole. This kind of fear evokes pleasant associations in the subjects. Then, the safety factor, the first and foremost in the structure, will indicate that the loss of freedom is not so scary. There are no special consequences that can impair either physical or social existence, i.e., the fear of freedom is experienced by the subjects as safe. The next factor, estimation, indicates that the experience of the loss of freedom is heavily emotionally charged with descriptive descriptors that form a certain desired perceptual image of this fear.

The stability factor, in this case, may indicate that freedom can threaten stability, steadfastness. This process is dynamical, which is communicated by the following factor of dynamism. In other words, freedom may be desirable only in cases when it doesn't interfere with balance, peace. This point is also confirmed by the last factor of the structure – comfort. Thus, E.Fromm's idea that comfort and stability depend not on freedom, but rather on limiting it has been confirmed.

Practical value. The semantic differential became an indicator of an individual state of the personal-meaning area and the emotional sphere of the subjects. Antonymic symbols-stimuli, which had underlain each of the identified factors, determined not only the attitude towards fear but also the dynamics of experiencing it, depending to what qualities the subject is inclined and how often it happens. The positive and negative values of each group have some meaning: the negative side of fear can completely or partially repress the positive one, or shift into the positive side, and vice versa. Something that caused pleasant feelings now evokes caution, anxiety. Positive characteristics of safety and comfort can be transformed into opposite characteristics of discomfort, and increase the unpleasant context of experiencing.

Conclusions. Factor analysis of the semantic differential of existential fears showed a multilevel structure in the semantic space of which five factors have been identified: they cover from 42.78% (the fear of meaninglessness) to 57.37% (the fear of freedom) of variance. In all of them, the most prevalent are the factors of "safety," "anxiety," and "comfort." But there are still some differences between the factor structures of each of the fears.

The fear of death is experienced by the subjects as stable, unchanging, inevitable. The fear of loneliness looks a bit different – the subjects perceive it as complex, perhaps because it may rather be situational than stable, i.e., to change over a period of time and depending on the situation.

As to the fear of meaninglessness, the most significant factors were the ones of pressure and stability, which may indicate a constant struggle of the meaning against external pressure, coercion. Perhaps the meaning doesn't have enough time to "be born" from the inside, because the modern social context increasingly requires from a personality rapid determination and ongoing action.

The fear of freedom is more desirable, "right" for the subjects. Perhaps the reason is that it's hard to experience the feeling of responsibility, traditionally associated with freedom. Obvious detachment from freedom is felt, i.e., the burden of responsibility makes us be more cautious with freedom, more afraid of it.

Thus, the semantic differential became an indicator of an individual state of the personal-meaning area and the emotional sphere of the subjects.

Abstract. The article describes the differences in the factor structure of the basic existential fears. The structures were identified in the research of existential fears using the semantic differential created specifically for this purpose.

Keywords: existential fears, semantic differential.

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