Death Anxiety and Death Denial: 
Nigerian and Australian Students’ 
Metaphors of Personal Death

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ABSTRACT. Ninety-two Nigerian students and 114 Australian students completed Templer’s (1970) Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) and Feifel and Nagy’s (1981) death fantasy measure of positive and negative death metaphors. They were also asked to write his or her own metaphor of personal death. Results of the DAS showed that the two groups did not differ significantly on the level of conscious death anxiety, but Nigerian students’ scores were significantly higher on both positive and negative personal death metaphors scales. Also, significantly more Nigerian students wrote personal metaphors of their own and more often used a neutral metaphor to describe their personal death. Australian students more often used a positive or a negative metaphor. The Nigerian students thus evidenced less death denial than the Australian students did.

IT IS COMMON for researchers concerned with psychological perspectives on death to observe that awareness of, and reflection upon, death occurs in all human societies (Feifel, 1990; Kastenbaum & Costa, 1977; McCarthy, 1980). Writers such as Kubler-Ross (1975) have noted that cultures differ in their ways of explaining and giving meaning to death, but there has been little comparison of societies in relation to attitudes toward death and dying.

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Several researchers have characterized contemporary Western society as death denying (Becker, 1973; Kubler-Ross, 1969). Feifel (1977, 1990) claimed that in Western society there has been an expulsion of death from everyday common experience. Fragmentation of family ties and dismantled communities have deprived people of the emotional and social supports that might otherwise cushion the impact of the death of family members. Typically, people now die in hospitals or other institutional care settings, and funeral arrangements are handled as commercial enterprises in such a way as to decontextualize grief and mourning. Death has become a mystery for most Westerners, increasingly representing an “unknown” to be feared.

Studies comparing Western death-related attitudes with those of Asian cultures (McMordie & Kumar, 1984; Schumaker, Barraclough, & Vagg, 1988; Westman & Canter, 1985) have shown that individuals in Asian societies tend to report lower levels of death-related anxiety, which has been interpreted as reflecting an Eastern view of death as an “incident of on-going existence” (Westman & Canter, 1985, p. 419) and one of life’s realities to be accepted.

The observed lower levels of death-related anxiety has been attributed to the role of religious beliefs within a society (Florian & Snowden, 1989; McCarthy, 1980). However, Feifel (1990) found that, in many developing nations, other factors are also important determinants of death-related attitudes, including supportive extended family and community networks and more frequent encounters with death as a consequence of relatively poorer living and health standards and shorter life expectancies.

Nigeria, as a former British West African colony, provides a cultural setting in which death-related attitudes may be contrasted with those of a developed Western country such as Australia (which is also, inter alia, a former British colony). Although there is considerable diversity in the ethnic identities of Nigerian citizens, English is the major language of instruction in schools and universities. The major religious systems are Christianity and Islam. And although Nigeria has escaped the civil unrest and natural disasters afflicting some other developing African nations, its economy is not strong and its health services lag behind those of developed Western countries.

Average life expectancy in Nigeria is approximately 50 years, and the death rate is 17.6 per thousand head of population, compared with an average life expectancy of approximately 65 years and a death rate of 7.2 per thousand head of population in Australia (United Nations, 1991). Like most sub-Saharan African nations, Nigeria is facing a possible future public health crisis in relation to the large number of individuals believed to be at risk of becoming infected with HIV and subsequently developing AIDS (Anderson, May, Boily, Garnett, & Rowley, 1991).

In Nigerian society, death of a family member is viewed as a family crisis of major proportions: notwithstanding, death is accepted as universal and inevitable, and families maintain a ritual mourning period as a means of coping with their
stress, grief, and loss. There are many differences among the various West African ethnic groups in the details of their mourning rituals, inheritance of property, and status of survivors following the death of a family member. However, in most ethnic communities, the extended family receives friends and other mourners over a period of many days. They discuss the death and talk about the deceased; they recall episodes from the past and tell each other how much they will miss him or her, crying freely (Folke, & Deck, 1988; Gijana, Louw, & Mangani, 1989; Peil, 1991). In the present study, we tested the hypothesis that in a country such as Nigeria, where individuals typically live more closely with death, there would be lower levels of death denial, but not necessarily lower levels of death-related anxiety than in Western society generally.

Researchers into death-related attitudes and cognitions (mostly in Western cultural settings) have found that they are structurally complex (Durlak & Kass, 1981; Feifel & Nagy, 1981; Kastenbaum & Costa, 1977). For example, low scores on self-report measures of death anxiety may indicate either genuinely low death anxiety or high (unconscious) denial of death anxiety (Kastenbaum & Costa, 1977; Schumaker, Warren, & Groth-Marnat, 1991). Feifel (1990; Feifel & Nagy, 1981) argued that fear of death can be tapped at a less conscious, or fantasy, imagery level by asking respondents to report how well various metaphors of death describe their views of their own personal death. A greater use of negative metaphors was said to be indicative of higher death anxiety.

In the present study, we used measures of conscious death anxiety (Templer, 1970) and the less conscious, or fantasy, level of death concern (metaphors of one’s personal death) (Feifel & Nagy, 1981) to test the hypothesis. A group of Nigerian university students was contrasted with a group of Australian university students to investigate differences in their conscious level of death anxiety and their usage of metaphors of personal death.

Method

Subjects

The Nigerians were 92 students (65 men and 27 women) enrolled in a social science degree course at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, Nigeria. English is the language of instruction used at the university. The most frequently reported ethnic identities of the students were Yoruba (69%), Ibo (12%), and Hausa (9%). The majority (65%) described their religious backgrounds as Christian; 19% were Islamic, and the remainder did not indicate religious affiliation. The students’ mean age was 24.6 years ($SD = 2.3$).

The Australians were 114 students (30 men and 84 women) enrolled in a social science and humanities degree course at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. The majority (85%) characterized themselves as
 Anglo-Saxon in background; most of the remainder (11%) identified themselves as being of Greek or Italian heritage. Almost all the students reported a Christian religious background, although 5% described themselves as having a Jewish religious upbringing. Their mean age was 27.2 years ($SD = 6.8$).

**Materials**

Conscious level of death anxiety was assessed by means of Templer’s (1970) 15-item Death Anxiety Scale (DAS). Items contain statements describing affective reactions to contemplating death (e.g., “I am very much afraid to die”). In the original version of the scale, respondents answered each item simply as true or false. In the present study, each item was answered on a 4-point scale ranging from false (1) to true (4); total scores could thus range from 15 to 60. We modified the DAS because, in preliminary studies, some students had reacted negatively to the restriction of making simple dichotomous responses. The internal consistency of the scale was found to be acceptable for the Australian sample ($\alpha = .84$) but low for the Nigerian sample ($\alpha = .59$).

Orientation to personal death at a less conscious level was assessed by using Feifel and Nagy’s (1981) death fantasy measure. The measure was constructed originally to meet a perceived need for a research instrument that could “circumvent more formal, intellectualized conceptions” of fear of death (p. 279). It offers six positive metaphors of personal death (a deserved holiday, a soothing breeze, a new baby, a soft pillow, a comforting parent, a family picnic) and six negative metaphors of personal death (an abandoned home, a runaway horse, a dead-end road, a devouring tiger, a thick fog, a dreamless space).

In the original version, Feifel and Nagy (1981) asked respondents to choose the six metaphors that best described their idea of personal death; positive metaphors chosen were scored +1; negative metaphors were scored −1. Scores could thus range from −6 (all negative metaphors chosen) to +6 (all positive metaphors chosen). In previous studies in which the measure was used (McLennan, Bates, & Heskin, 1992), the positive and negative metaphors defined separate factors that correlated moderately with each other.

Therefore, in the present study, a modified version of the measure was used; respondents were asked to describe how well each metaphor described their view of personal death on 5-point scales ranging from not at all (1) to very well (5). Separate scores were computed for the six positive metaphors and the six negative metaphors. Scores on both Positive Metaphor and Negative Metaphor scales could thus range from 6 to 30. The internal consistency (\(\alpha\)) of the Positive Metaphor scale was found to be .77 for the Australian students and .75 for the Nigerian students; for the Negative Metaphor scale, the corresponding coefficients were .73 and .68, respectively. These values were judged acceptable, given that each scale comprised only six items.
Procedure

Both sets of students completed the measures anonymously in the classroom. Two judges independently categorized each of the students’ own metaphors as negative, neutral, or positive in terms of its thematic content, following the findings reported by Ross and Pollio (1991). The interrater reliability (Cohen’s χ) of the categorizations was .98.

Results

The standard deviation of the Nigerian students’ scores on the DAS was twice that of the Australian students (Table 1). This difference, together with the unequal numbers of men and women in each sample, suggested that the use of a multivariate comparison procedure was not appropriate, a conclusion confirmed by the finding that the Box’s M test statistic for violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption was significant. Accordingly, we carried out three separate factorial univariate ANOVAs (Gender × National Group) to compare the two groups of students on the measures of death-related beliefs and attitudes. An adjusted significance level (Bonferroni correction) of .006 was used to take into account the nine comparisons involved.

On the DAS, there was no significant interaction between national group and gender of student, F(1, 202) = 0.24, ns; mean scores of male and female students did not differ significantly, F(1, 202) = 0.51, ns; and there was no significant mean difference between Nigerian and Australian students, F(1, 202) = 0.39, ns. On the Positive Metaphor scale, there was no significant interaction between

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Means and Standard Deviations of Scores on the Measures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men (n=65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>38.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>9.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>19.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>4.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>NM</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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</tbody>
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Note. PM = Positive Metaphor scale. NM = Negative Metaphor scale. DAS = Death Anxiety Scale.
national group and gender, \( F(1, 202) = 1.10, p = .30 \), and no significant difference between male and female students’ mean scores, \( F(1, 202) = 0.04, \text{ns} \); however, Nigerian students had a significantly higher mean score, \( F(1, 202) = 68.6, p < .001 \). On the Negative Metaphor scale, there was no significant interaction between national group and gender, \( F(1, 202) = 3.61, p = .06 \), and no significant difference between male and female students’ mean scores, \( F = 0.10, \text{ns} \); however, the mean score of the Nigerian students was significantly higher, \( F(1, 202) = 16.55, p < .001 \).

When we read students’ responses to the instruction to write a metaphor of their own describing their view of personal death, we found that 85% of the Nigerian students had provided a metaphor, but only 58% of the Australians had been able to do so, \( \chi^2(1, N = 145) = 16.4, p < .001 \). Of the 78 Nigerian students who wrote a metaphor, 76% gave neutral metaphors, 15% gave positive metaphors, and 9% gave negative metaphors. By comparison, of the 67 Australian students who wrote a metaphor, 37% gave neutral metaphors, 36% gave positive metaphors, and 27% gave negative metaphors, \( \chi^2(2, N = 145) = 21.9, p < .001 \).

There were clear differences between the two groups in the contents of their metaphors. Nigerian students’ neutral metaphors referred to the inevitability of death or death being a debt or price to be paid, or a combination of these. Australian students’ neutral metaphors were quite varied: a journey, a new beginning, a final ending, and a new way of being. Nigerian students’ positive metaphors referred in various ways to death being an entrance to paradise. Australian students’ positive metaphors were varied: an exciting adventure, being reunited with loved ones, being in the presence of God, having eternal life, resting from labors. The few negative metaphors given by Nigerian students referred to the pain of dying and the ending of life. Australian students’ negative metaphors spoke of the uncertainty and anxiety of what might lie beyond death, the parting from the things of this life, and the finality of absence of life.

For both the Nigerian and the Australian students, scores on the DAS were not correlated significantly with scores on either the Positive or the Negative Metaphor scales. Scores on the Positive and Negative Metaphor scales were correlated significantly but moderately for the Nigerian students (\( r = .37, p < .001 \)) and were also correlated significantly though weakly for the Australian students (\( r = .22, p < .05 \)). Subjects, therefore, varied in their general tendency to report that the proposed metaphors---both positive and negative---described views of their own personal death rather than a differential endorsement of either positive or negative metaphors.

This finding is contrary to what was originally envisaged by Feifel and Nagy (1981) but is consistent with the findings of McLennan et al. (1992) and suggests that the measure may tap acceptance of the fact of death versus death denial rather than simply fear of death. No significant associations were found between the ethnic identities of the Nigerian students and the other variables, nor between subjects’ religious backgrounds, ages, and scores on the measures.
Discussion

Some potential limitations of the study should be noted. The first is the degree to which the findings can be generalized. The Swinburne students were reasonably typical of those enrolled in undergraduate courses at Australian urban universities, but there is considerable regional diversity across Nigerian universities in terms of ethnic identity of students. The second limitation involves the uncertainty with which measures developed in one society can be assumed to tap the same psychological constructs in another. Although English is the major language of instruction in Nigerian schools and universities, for most of the Nigerian students it was their second language and thus, perhaps, not likely to capture completely their cultural world views in relation to death. The relatively low internal consistency of the Death Anxiety Scale for the Nigerian students indicates that their patterns of responses differed somewhat from those of the Australian students.

Within these limitations, the results showed that, although there was no difference between the two groups of subjects on mean level of conscious death anxiety, the Nigerian students were more likely to report that positive and negative metaphors from Feifel and Nagy's (1981) measure described to some extent their own views of personal death; they were also more likely to write down a metaphor of their own describing personal death and more likely to write a neutral metaphor rather than a positive or a negative metaphor.

The finding that scores on Templar's (1970) DAS were not correlated significantly with scores on Feifel and Nagy's (1981) death fantasy measure is consistent with results reported by Feifel and Nagy and by McLennan et al. (1992) indicating that conscious death anxiety is not related strongly to acceptance at a less conscious level of the fact of ultimate personal death.

The relatively greater readiness of the Nigerian students to affirm that the items in the list of suggested metaphors of personal death described—at least to some extent—their own view of personal death indicates lower levels of denial of the fact of ultimate personal death. Likewise, their relatively greater readiness to volunteer a metaphor describing their view of personal death also indicates relatively greater acceptance of the reality of personal death. Taken together, the findings suggest that the Nigerian students exhibited, overall, lower levels of death denial than the Australian students did.

It could be argued that these observed differences merely reflect a greater degree of acquiescence in the Nigerian students, possibly as a consequence of English being a second language. In the absence of comparative data about levels of acquiescence in Nigerian and Australian students, this possibility cannot be entirely discounted. However, the fact that the two groups did not differ significantly in mean scores on Templar's (1970) DAS suggests that it is unlikely. The majority of items on Templar's self-report inventory are stated in the affirmative, so that if the Nigerian students had been more likely to exhibit acquiescence, their scores should have been higher on the measure.
The finding that the Nigerian students were significantly more likely to volunteer a neutral, rather than a positive or a negative, personal death metaphor is consistent with a cultural environment in which death has a recognized and accepted place. In contrast, in a Western culture, where the personal impact of death is expelled from everyday experience (Feifel, 1990), it is not surprising that Australian students were relatively more likely to offer positive metaphors, possibly as an idealizing defense against death-related anxiety and also relatively more likely to offer a negative metaphor, possibly expressing directly a fear of that which is alien.

REFERENCES


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