

Fear of death in relation to religiosity in adults

Slávka Démuthová¹

¹ Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Nám. J. Herdu 2, 917 01 Trnava, Slovakia, slavka.demuthova@ucm.sk

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Abstract Fear of death is an universal and widespread type of fear among humans. There are many factors that worsen, or help to cope with the fear of death. The primary goal of the study is to examine the connection of religiosity with the fear of death. For measurement of the fear form death The Original Collett-Lester Scale has been used. For religiousness we used the Religious Orientation Scale – Revised by Gorsuch & McPherson measuring two dimensions – extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity. Age and sex were monitored, too. Results show, that none of the monitored types of religiosity is connected with the levels of fear of death. It seems that age is more important factor than religiosity. Limits of the study and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Key words Death, fear of death, religiosity, intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity

1. INTRODUCTION

Fear of death is an universal and widespread type of fear among humans. It is closely tied to everybody's existence (Démuth 2003) and much of the reactions that the prospect of death arouses is normal and even valuable from the biological point of view (Hinton 1979). On the other hand, when it is not appropriately handled (e.g. is ignored, or exaggerates into a phobia) it becomes a problem for affected individual.

There are many factors that worsen, or help to cope with the fear of death. It is known, that e.g. low self-control (Chui & Chan 2013), low self-esteem and life failures (Routledge 2012) rise the levels of anxiety connected with the knowledge of certain mortality. The other factors positively associated with the fear of death are, for instance: higher age, (Tsai, Wu, Chiu, Hu & Chen 2005), death thoughts in individuals lacking of meaning of life (Routledge & Juhl 2010), searching for the meaning in life (Lyke 2013), or the discrepancy between desired and expected time left to live (Cicerilli 2006).

The influence of religiosity on the fear of death has been heavily discussed during last decades. As the researches published contradictory results, the need for more specific examination has arisen. In the past, the need of dividing between intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation Gorsuch & McPherson 1989) has been stressed. Lately it seems, there is also the difference between the

religious involvement; it is essential to divide between strong, moderate and weak believers (see e.g. Ellis & Wahab 2013).

2. AIMS OF STUDY

The primary goal of the study is to examine the connection of religiosity with the fear of death. We expect that the faith in any kind of afterlife, especially the intrinsic religious orientation will lower the fear of own death. On the other hand, being a believer has also an effect on the value and ideological orientation, it makes people more sensible and tolerant to others, willing to help and sacrifice for them etc. Therefore we assume that believers/ intrinsically orientated subjects will show bigger fear of death of others than nonbelievers /extrinsically orientated subjects. We expect that when comparing the impact of age, sex, experience with the death of someone close, and the fact whether the subject is believer, or not, the last one will cause the biggest differences in the fear of death.

3. SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Subjects were Slovak male (N=24, 38,1%) and female participants aged from 19 to 69 (mean = 39,62 years; st. deviation = 14,76) from various social and educational backgrounds.

For measurement of the fear form death The Original Collett-Lester Scale (Lester 1990) has been used. It consists of 36 general statements requiring the indication of subject's agreement on the six-item scale (from strong agreement – score 1 to strong disagreement – score 6). It measures four basic subscales – the fear of own death, fear of the death of others, fear of own dying and fear of the dying of the others. Each scale consists of different number of questions (9 for the fear of own death, 10 for the fear of the death of others) and therefore the scales enable to reach different maximum of the raw score. To be able to compare the means of each scale we liberated the weight of each question into the weighted score. The higher level of score subject reaches in the specific category, the lower the fear corresponding to this category is. The Original Collett-Lester Scale is being used widely (Abdel-Khalek & Lester 2004, Tomás-Sábado, Limonero & Abdel-Khalek 2007) and its validity has been proved by many researches (see e.g. Kolawole & Olusegun 2008, Venegas, Alvarado & Barriga 2011).

As the majority of Slovak population belongs to the Catholic denominations (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2013), the Religious Orientation Scale – Revised by Gorsuch & McPherson (1989) constructed and frequently used in this environment has been used for the measurement of the intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation. This scale originates in Allport & Ross (Gorsuch & McPherson 1989) who defined the extrinsic religiousness as instrumental in nature, immature and utilitarian. Extrinsic religiousness is used to achieve extra-religious (psychological and social) goals. In intrinsic religiousness, the motive for religiousness is more autonomous and ‘over-reaching’ (Flere & Lavrič 2008). The Religious Orientation Scale – Revised is 14-item scale where eight items (three reversed scored) tap the intrinsic orientation and six extrinsic. The rough score (gained by scoring on the 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” – score 1 to “strongly agree” – score 5) has been converted into the weighted one in order to enable the comparison again. The higher level of score subject reaches in the specific category, the lower is his/her religious orientation.

As every questionnaire forces participants to fit into a prescribed structure, we have asked participants also to reflect their own view of their religiousness (“I consider myself as a religious/nonreligious person”). To cover the possibility of understanding of being religious as to belong to and follow some official religion only, we also asked participants about their belief in the afterlife. Age and sex were monitored, too.

4. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the basic data of the sample. From the descriptive analysis it is obvious that **the highest level of fear** (the lowest score 32,48) report **younger subjects** (age under 40) when it comes to the **death of others**. In this age people are still strong and full of energy, therefore they expect the death is far away from them. They do not deal with the death issues, they avoid and suppress the death thoughts. On the other hand, they’ve already formed very strong and existential relationships to some subjects (life partners, children etc.) and therefore the thought about losing somebody in this age is very stressful. Based on Erikson’s (1968) theory of eight life stages, the coping phase that enables to deal with death issues comes in older age. This theory confirm our findings which show that the **lowest level of fear** in all sample (41,56) show subjects **above 40** when it comes to **their own death**.

Analysis orientated towards the differences between the groups of subjects shows that the biggest difference are visible in age and the lowest in sex. To outline more general statements the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U-test has been used. Shapiro-Wilk test of normality showed that the distribution of one variable cannot be counted as sufficiently normal therefore the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U-test for comparing the groups has been used.

Table 1

Differences in means of the fears from death and dying in different groups of subjects

Fear of death – general (mean 71,44)

Variable (N)	Mean	Difference
Age Under 40 (32)	67,23	-8,57
Age Above 40 (31)	75,80	
Male (24)	72,43	1,60
Female (39)	70,84	
Believer (52)	71,29	-0,86
Nonbeliever (11)	72,16	
Intrinsic orientation (31)	72,56	2,15
Extrinsic orientation (29)	70,41	

Fear of own death (mean 38,10)

Variable (N)	Mean	Difference
Age Under 40 (32)	34,75	-6,81
Age Above 40 (31)	41,56	
Male (24)	39,31	1,95
Female (39)	37,36	
Believer (52)	38,64	3,08
Nonbeliever (11)	35,56	
Intrinsic orientation (31)	38,79	1,11
Extrinsic orientation (29)	37,68	

Fear of death of others (mean 33,34)

Variable (N)	Mean	Difference
Age Under 40 (32)	32,48	-1,76
Age Above 40 (31)	34,24	
Male (24)	33,12	-0,36
Female (39)	33,48	
Believer (52)	32,66	-3,94
Nonbeliever (11)	36,60	
Intrinsic orientation (31)	33,77	1,04
Extrinsic orientation (29)	32,73	

4.1 Fear of death in believers vs. nonbelievers

First analysis concerns the variable that divides the subject into the group of believers and non-believers. From the total number of 63 participants 52 (82,54%) assigned themselves as believers. Table 2 shows, that believers are generally more afraid of the death than nonbelievers (the higher level of score subject reaches in the specific category, the lower the fear corresponding to this category is). When it comes to the own death, believers report less fear than nonbelievers and they are much more afraid of death of somebody else than nonbelievers. Being religious brings strong belief, that God will help the man in his/her hard times and won’t put on him/her more than is able to bear. This may be the reason why the fear of death is lower in this group than in the group of nonbelievers.

The level of fear from own death is in believers even lower than the fear of death of somebody else. Many theologians and philosophers (e.g. Lewinas, Rosenzweig) assume that the essence of believing in God lies in love and responsibility for others (Tkáčik 2009). Similarly, according to the work of Paul Tillich the authentic religiosity is rooted in what he calls “experience of depth” (Slavkovský 2001) which causes the closer relationships. Believers therefore care much more for the suffering of others than of themselves.

Table 2

Differences in groups of believers and nonbelievers in the fear of death and dying

	Mean rank	Mann-Whitney U	p
Fear of death – general			
Believers	31,66	268,50	,751
Nonbelievers	33,59		
Fear of own death			
Believers	33,00	234,00	,346
Nonbelievers	27,27		
Fear of death of others			
Believers	29,92	178,00	,050
Nonbelievers	41,82		

4.2 Fear of death in intrinsic vs. extrinsic religious orientation

Intrinsic religiousness characterizes the interiorized values together with behaviour and thinking according to the faith (Striženec 1999). Therefore we assume that subjects with dominant intrinsic religious orientation will show the similar, but exaggerated tendencies as the religious group from previous comparison. According to the dominant score in two dimensions (extrinsic vs. intrinsic) of religiousness we were able to differentiate 95,2 of subjects (3 scored equally in both dimensions). From the number of 60 subjects 31 (51,67%) were dominantly intrinsically orientated. In all categories subjects with dominant intrinsic religious orientation scored lower than subjects with extrinsic orientation (see table 3). However, none of these differences was statistically significant.

Table 3

Differences in intrinsic and extrinsic orientated subjects in the fear of death and dying

	Mean rank	Mann-Whitney U	p
Fear of death – general			
Intrinsic orientation	32,58	385,00	,340
Extrinsic orientation	28,28		
Fear of own death			
Intrinsic orientation	32,10	400,00	,463
Extrinsic orientation	28,79		
Fear of death of others			
Intrinsic orientation	31,95	404,50	,505
Extrinsic orientation	28,95		

We tried to compare the differences in score according to the fact whether the subject is believer/nonbeliever or extrinsically/intrinsically orientated. From the table 1 it is obvious, that being a believer or nonbeliever differentiates the subjects in their fear of death (own and somebody else's, too) more than the category of religious orientation.

4.3 Fear of death and dying in younger vs. older subjects

Some authors stress the influence of age on preoccupation with the death topics. E. H. Erikson considers the dealing with this task as a part of critical developmental period (Erikson 1968). The table 4 presents the differences in fear of death in two age groups – between the subjects under the age of 40 and above 40. 32 subjects (50,79% from overall number of 63) fell into the age category below 40 (mean age 26,94, st. deviation 6,6037) and 31 subjects (mean age 52,71, st. deviation 7,5172) into the category above the age of 40. Statistically significant differences can be seen in the overall fear of death. **Younger participants score significantly higher** ($p < ,005$) **in fear of death than older** ones. This difference is dominantly caused by the “fear of own death” variable where **subjects under the age of 40 scored extremely higher** ($p < ,000$) **than group over 40**. This difference refers to the fact that young adults refuse the thoughts about the death and dying and the possibility of dying is for them highly unnatural and frightening. Dividing the participants into the age group below and above 50 did not bring any important changes.

Table 4

Differences in groups of younger and older subjects in the fear of death and dying

	Mean rank	Mann-Whitney U	p
Fear of death – general			
Intrinsic orientation	32,58	385,00	,340
Extrinsic orientation	28,28		
Fear of own death			

Intrinsic orientation	32,10	400,00	,463
Extrinsic orientation	28,79		
Fear of death of others			
Intrinsic orientation	31,95	404,50	,505
Extrinsic orientation	28,95		

4.4 Fear of death and dying in men vs. women and in subject with and without the experience with the death of somebody close

Further examination showed that there are no significant differences in any of tested variables neither between men and women nor between the subjects with and without the experience with the death of somebody close in this sample.

4.5 Comparison of differences in fear of death according to sex, age and religiosity

Due to results regarding no presence of differences neither in fear of the death nor in the fear of dying between men and women, we've conducted further research analysis on age and religiosity only.

Table 5

Pearson's correlations between the fear and selected variables

Variable	r	p
Fear of death – general		
Age	,416	,001
Intrinsic orientation	,008	,952
Extrinsic orientation	0,43	,736
Fear of own death		
Age	,520	,000
Intrinsic orientation	-,085	,509
Extrinsic orientation	-,098	,442
Fear of death of others		
Age	,025	,847
Intrinsic orientation	,130	,310
Extrinsic orientation	,212	,096

From the table 1 there are obvious some tendencies of different relationship between the fear of death and age and religiosity. However, these differences are based on the descriptive analysis only therefore we used multivariate analysis where applicable. Table 5 presents the Pearson's correlations between selected variables.

The strongest correlation is present between **age and fear of the death**, mainly between age and fear of own death. The other correlations are not statistically significant.

5. DISCUSSION

The connection between the religiosity and the fear of death and dying is not simple. First of all, it is rather complicated to state what does it mean to be a “believer”. Statement of being a believer or a nonbeliever (positive or negative answer on the question “Are you a believer?”) divides participants into the two groups, which do not differ significantly in the fear of death in any of monitored variables. The only variable with difference near to the level of significance ($p=0,05$) is the fear of the death of others where believers show higher levels of fear than nonbelievers. Taking into account only the general belonging to the group of believers does not differentiate individuals properly. P. Wink and J. Scott (2005) used longitudinal data of 155 adults and came to the conclusion, that there is no linear relation between the religiousness and fear of death. They state it is

necessary to distinguish between the quality of religiousness as the relation between the fear and religiousness is rather curvilinear – individuals who are strong or weak believers feared death less than individuals who scored on religiousness moderately. This fact stresses the importance of distinguishing between the strong and weak believers.

One possibility of doing so is the measuring the level of intrinsic and extrinsic religion orientation. In our case, the intrinsically orientated believers showed nonsignificantly lower fear in all variables than extrinsically orientated believers. It seems again that intrinsic religious orientation as well as just claiming somebody is a believer has not very strong influence to distinguishing the levels of the fear of death. It is questionable, whether the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation are universally valid as two distinguishable factors. S. Flere & M. Lavrič (2008) discuss the possibility that these two orientations form two separate dimensions only within the American Protestants. In other European religious environments (including Roman Catholic which is the dominant religion in Slovakia - Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2013), extrinsic and intrinsic items form a single dimension (Flere & Lavrič 2008). The Pearson's correlation coefficient ,701 ($p < .000$) shows the strong positive relationship between these two dimensions in our sample, too.

Secondly, it is important to distinguish between the fear of death of self and of the others. Some authors state, that regardless of the degree to which individuals fear their own death, most individuals fear the death and dying of others (Bath, Debra M 2010). When it comes to own death the influence of religion is clear – being a believer or having an intrinsic religious orientation generally lowers the fear of death and fear of dying, too. When it comes to the others, the situation is more complicated: when we take the fear of death into account, then not believing at all or having an intrinsic orientation lowers (nonsignificantly) the levels of fear. This fact corresponds with Wink & Scott's (2005) findings of the moderate religiousness connected with the highest levels of fear of death. However, current studies conducted on this topic showed that the curvilinear relationship is typical for western countries, but is not valid e.g. in Malaysia or Turkey (Ellis, Wahab & Ratnasigan 2013). On the other hand, in the variable "dying of others" subjects with intrinsic orientation were more afraid than those with extrinsic.

Thirdly, it seems there are also other variables that may have relationship with the fear of death and can make the bigger differences than religiousness and its orientation. Subjects under the age of 40 showed significantly more fear of death than older subjects. This corresponds with the findings of e.g. Harrawood, White & Benshoff 2008/2009). The correlations between the age and fear of death were tighter than between the religiosity and fear. The need of studying the other influencing variables e.g. discrepancy between desired and expected time left to live (Cicerilli 2006), presence life threatening illness (Slaughter & Griffiths 2007), specific professions (Braun, Michal; Gordon, Dalya; Uziely, Beatrice 2010), meaning of life (Lyke, Jennifer. 2013) etc. is obvious.

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