



Enugu State University of Science & Technology Journal of Social Sciences



Journal of Social Sciences

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published by

Faculty of Social Sciences
Enugu State University of Science & Technology
www.esutjss.com

Attitude of Nigerian Students Towards Death Anxiety

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Abstract

Age and years of study as factors in death anxiety were examined among students in Enugu, Nigeria. The aims of this study are to examine whether age as a factor will significantly influence attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety; also to verify whether years of study as a factor will significantly influence attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety. This study investigated the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety. A total of 130 participants comprising 108 young fresh students (64 fresh and 44 stale), and 22 adult students (7 fresh and 15 stale) were selected from the population of undergraduate students of Enugu state university of science and technology. A 15 item questionnaire designed to measure death anxiety: Death Anxiety Scale was administered on the participants based on survey design. A Two Way Analysis of Variance F-Test using the method of unweighted means was applied as a statistic to analyze the data based on unequal numbers. The findings revealed that $F(1, 126) = 1.12$ at $P > .05$ on age as a factor; $F(1, 126) = 1.32$ at $P > .05$ on years of study as factor; and interaction between age and years of study as factors $(1, 126) = 0.10$ at $P > .05$ on death anxiety as dependent variable. It was concluded that death anxiety is a common social problem being expressed in the same pattern among university students irrespective of age and years of study.

Keywords: anxiety, fear of death, depression, education, Nigeria

Introduction

Death and dying is one of the universal concepts that awake people consciousness. It is a natural consequence of living and is humankind's primary existential constraint (Becker, 1973; Yalom, 1980). Research on death and dying has found that human beings tend to fear death and have a high need to defend against the awareness of their morality (Cicirelli, 2002; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Wass & Neimeyer, 1995; Yalom, 1980). However, the fear of death, referred to as "death anxiety," stems from the psychological knowledge and individual awareness that all living organisms are doomed to perish (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Yalom, 2008). Death anxiety can be defined as the feeling of dread or terror that accompanies the awareness of an individual's helplessness and vulnerability to complete annihilation and non-existence (Cicirelli, 2006; Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Rank, 1978).

Becker (1973) is of the notion, the awareness that gives rise to death anxiety requires both reflective and conceptual cognitive processes of which only humans are capable. This ability to understand life and death through reflective, conceptual, and forward thinking creates an insoluble diemmma for humankind (Becker, 1973; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, &

Schimmel, 2004). Death anxiety is seen as “Vague uneasy feeling of discomfort or dread generated by perceptions of a real or imagined threat to one’s existence” (Moorhead et al, 2008). Christian (2008), perceived it as pervasive fear of non existence, or as a fear experiencing nonbeing. Yalom (2002), also perceived it as a dread that resides in the unconscious, a dread that is formed early in life at a time prior to the development of precise conceptual formation a dread that is terrible and in Choate and exists outside of language and image.

However, Socialization seems to be one of the ways student learn or acquire knowledge about life which leads in developing of their attitude. Shermer, (1992) explored the attitudes of dental and medical students towards death anxiety. A significant difference was observed between them. He suggests that the difference were as a result of area of specialization and the frequency of death cases. An attitude can be defined as a positive or negative evaluation of people, objects, event activities, ideas or just about anything in your environment (Zimbardo et al 2008). In the opinion of Bain (2003), an attitude is the relatively stable overt behaviour of a person which affects his status. North (2002) also defines attitude as “the totality of those states that lead to or point toward some particular activity of the organism. The attitude is, therefore, the dynamic element in human behaviour, the motive for activity. For Lumley (2004) an attitude is a susceptibility to certain kinds of stimuli and readiness to respond repeatedly in a given way which are possible toward our world and the parts of it which impinge upon us. It is how one judges any person, situation or objects. Attitudes are judgments; they develop on the ABC model (affect, behaviour and cognition). A study conducted to investigate the relationship between death anxiety and attitude towards life with sample of 100 students (N = 100) at Payam-e-Nour University in Rezvanshahr, Iran in 2015 showed that there was a significant correlation between the rate of death anxiety and attitude towards life. A correlational study that examined death anxiety factors among 243 Spanish nursing students with varying years of experience found that students with more experience had lower fears related to death. High levels of death anxiety were found among Egyptian female students compared with Spanish students who were slightly older and more experienced.

A Hungarian study that utilized pre- and post-testing examined whether a semester long thanatology and palliative care course for medical students and a 40 hour palliative care course offered to health professionals had effects on the participants’ death anxiety and attitudes. Findings demonstrated that overall death anxiety was reduced as a result of the courses in both groups. The training program incorporated communication, psychology of bereavement, support, societal viewpoints on death and dying, and symptom management. More research has been conducted on incorporating death education in undergraduate nursing programs. One study examined the impact on death anxiety of a 13 week program of instruction which incorporated training lectures, discussion, and activities to help undergraduate students better understand life and death issues pertinent to health care. Using the CFDS, the study found reductions in death anxiety among the intervention group who received training over the course of semester as compared to a comparison group.

Finally, a study conducted on 343 Indian nursing students found that death anxiety was not associated with related attitudes about euthanasia. According to theory of Thanatophobia (Freud, 1913) was one of the earliest researchers who explored the content and nature of death. He hypothesized that people express a fear of death, called thanatophobia. According to Freud, it was not actually death that people feared, because nobody believes in her or his own death. That which one does fear cannot be death itself, because one has never died. People who express death-related fears, actually are trying to deal with unresolved childhood conflicts that they cannot bring themselves to come to terms with and to display and show emotion relating to the conflict.

Tomer and Eliason (1996) proposed the model of death anxiety. The model suggested that mortality salience, which means the awareness of one's own death, are connected to the three determinants of death anxiety, namely the meaningfulness of death, the past-related regrets and future-related regret. According to this model feeling much past-related regret, future-related regret, or inclining to perceive deaths being meaningless are all factors contributing to higher death anxiety concurrently, morality salience could activate the coping process which influenced the beliefs about the self and the world, and in turn affect the three determinants of death anxiety. Heidegger, (1927) the German Philosopher, on the one hand showed death as something conclusively determined, in the sense that it is inevitable for every human being, while on the other hand, it unmask its indeterminate nature via the truth that one never knows when or how death is going to come. Heidegger does not engage in speculation about whether being after death is possible. He argues that all human existence is embedded in time: past, present, future and when considering the further, we encounter the motion of death. This then creates angst. Angst can create a clear understanding in one that death is a possible mode of existence which Heidegger described as "clearing." Thus, angst can lead to a freedom about existence, but only if we can stop denying our mortality (as expressed in Heidegger's terminology as "stop denying being-for-death").

Statement of Problem

Death Anxiety is associated with fear, dread and uncertainties concerning the future. Physical sensations can be a consequence, including an increased heart rate, stuffy breathing and sweating (Uretsky, 2002). However, student often develops this negative attitude towards dying based on what is happening in the environment; when this occurs it will definitely affect them in their studies whether young or adult students. The fact is that majority of the student are not expose to death experience before entering school. It means that 70 percent of them have not work in care centre where their can witness death issues. Thus, those that are fortune to serve in such centre are less likely to exhibit death anxiety than those that have not serve when enrolled as student. In Zyga et al.'s (2011) study conducted in Greece, renal nurses with more experience and training in palliative care had lowered death fear and more positive attitudes about caring for

dying patients. The focus of the study, therefore, is to ascertain the level attitude of students is being influence by death experiences of students in schools. The researcher sought empirical based evidence on the death anxiety and attitudes of student to support the study. With the above, this study intent to focus attention on the problem stated below.

- Will age as a factor significantly influence attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety?
- Will years of study as a factor significantly influence attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

- There will be no significant influence of age as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety.
- There will be no significant influence of years of study as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety.

Method

Participants

A total of 130 participant comprising 108 young students (64 fresh and 44 stale), and 22 adult students (7 fresh and 15 stale) were sampled from the population of undergraduate student of Enugu state university of science and technology. They are between the ages of 16-35 years, with a mean age of 21.96, and standard deviation of 2.9 years. They were drawn from different faculties of social sciences, law, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Applied Natural Sciences, Education, and Environmental sciences.

Instrument

The researcher used 15 – item inventory designed to measure the concerns, fears, apprehensions and forebodings people often have about dying. It was administered in group after establishing adequate rapport with the clients.

A score of 1 point is given for each expected response. The following are the expected responses for the items,

- a. I point for each “T” marked in items 1, 5, and 15.
- b. I point for each “F” marked in items: 2, 3, 4,6,7,8,9,10, 11, 12, 13, and 14.
- c. Final score: Add together the number of “T” and “F” correctly marked in the items to obtain the total score for DAS. Templar (1970) provided the original psychometric properties for American samples while the properties for Nigerian samples were provided by Adebakin (1990), Erinoso (1996) and Uzosike (1998). The reliability coefficients reports by Templar (1970) are:KR-20 internal consistency =.76 3-week test-retest =.83 Adebakin’s (1990)

3 – week test – retest = .15 concurrent validity coefficients were obtained by correlating DAS with fear of personal Death scale (F P D S) developed by Florian and Kravetz (1983); Templar (1970) obtained .74 while Adebakin's (1990) obtained .45.

Procedure

A total of 180 copies of the questionnaire were distributed by the researcher across the target population within a period of four weeks. 30 copies of the questionnaire were distributed in each faculty using cluster sampling. 162 were returned out of the number distributed, while 32 were discarded and 130 that are correctly filled were scored, tabled and analyze in order to test the hypotheses.

Design and Statistics

A survey design was adopted based on distribution of copies of the questionnaire across the target population, while 2 x 2 ANOVA using the method of unweighted means was applied as a statistic to analyze the data.

Results

Table 1: Summary table of means on attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety

	Years of study	
	Fresh	stale
Young	$\bar{X} = 6.11$	$\bar{X} = 5.57$
Age	n = 64	n = 44
	$\bar{X} = 6.57$	$\bar{X} = 6.07$
Adult	n = 7	n = 15

From table 1 above, adult fresh student obtain the highest group means of 6.57, followed by young fresh student

($\bar{x} = 6.11$), adult stale student ($\bar{x} = 6.07$), and young stale student ($\bar{x} = 5.57$). A high group mean indicates high level of death anxiety, while a low group mean indicates low level of death anxiety.

Thus, the various group means are observed to be below the norm of 7.54 for males and 8.32 for females, indicating normal death anxiety level.

Table 11: Summary table of two-way ANOVA on attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety

Hypothesis I: There will be no significant influence of age as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety.

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	P
Rows (Age)	3.71	1	3.71	1.12	>.05
Columns (Years of study)	4.36	1	4.36	1.32	>.05
Interaction (Age vs. years of study)	0.32	1	0.32	0.10	>.05
Within cells	415.67	126	3.30		

From table II above, F- calculated value of 1.12 was found to be less than F- critical value of 3.91 at $p < .05$ indicating no significant out come. Hence, hypotheses I which stated that “there will be no significant influence of age as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety” is hereby accepted.

This means that age as a factor yielded no remarkable effect on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety.

Also, F- calculated value of 1. 32 was found to be less than F- Critical Value of 3.91 at $p < .05$ indicating no significant outcome. Hence, hypotheses II which stated that “there will be no significant influence of years of study as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety” is hereby accepted.

This means that years of study as a factor yielded no remarkable effect on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety. In addition, a non significant interaction effect of age and years of study as factors is observed based on the F- calculated value of 0.10 is less than F- critical value of 3.91 at $p < .05$. This means that the two factors jointly do not influence the attitude of Nigeria students toward death anxiety.

Summary of the Result

The summary of this result is stated below:

The outcome of this study yielded no significant outcomes in relation with age and years of study as factors in attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety. At $p < .05$.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the hypotheses tested were confirmed. The first hypothesis tested which stated that “there will be no significant influence of age as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety” was accepted. This means that age as a factor yielded no remarkable effect on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety.

This shows that non-significant effect of age as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety was observed to exist. The outcome of hypothesis one shows that age as a factor does not have a strong influence on attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety. Rasmussen and Berms (1996) advocate role of psychosocial maturity as better predictor of death anxiety than age and that as psychosocial maturity and age increase, death anxiety decreases.

Researchers have recognized the importance of beliefs, or cognitive factors in the perception of threat associated with death. For example, university students taking a thanatology course who were more religious reported less death anxiety, suggesting that religious beliefs buffered and provided a context of meaning for death (knight & Ezfenbein, 1993).

Similarly, certainty in belief in a continued and positive existence after death was associated with lowered death anxiety in a sample of terminally ill patients (Smith, Nehemkis, & Charter, 1993-1994). Another study reveals that committed religious beliefs and practices reduce death anxiety (Alvarado, Templer, Breslar & Thomas Dobson, 1995, Glas, 2007, Kraft, Litwin, & Barber 2007, Pierce, 2007).

The second hypothesis tested which stated that “there will be no significant influence of years of study as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety” was also accepted. This means that years of study as a factor yielded no remarkable effect on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety. This shows that non-significant effect on the years of study as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety was observed to exist.

The outcome of hypothesis two showed that years of study as a factor does not have a strong influence on attitude of Nigeria students toward death anxiety.

However, students who had formally experience an identity crisis (identity achievement status) and those who had not experienced identity crises (sterling & Van Horn, 1999).

A host of studies that have manipulated death awareness have provoked heightened death anxiety in subject (Goldenberg et al, 2006), Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel 2004). Late life death anxiety has been attributed to early experiences in life regarding the withholding of emotional comfort and nourishment and anxieties induced by separation (Bassett, 2007). In another study, Shermer, 1992 explored the attitude of dental students towards death and dying compared them with the attitudes held by medical students towards death. A significant difference was observed between the dental health student and medical student. He suggests that the difference were as a result of area of specialization and the frequency of death cases in each section.

Finally, the significant difference could be due to the fact that their course of study exposes them to situation where they are involved in health care service and experience death in real life situation. This may account for a reason why it does not support for the above outcomes, in relation to age and years of study.

Implications of the findings

The implication of age as factor with respect to no significant effect on attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety is that young students will express the same pattern of death anxiety like adult students.

Also, years of study as a factor with respect to no significant effect on attitude of Nigeria student towards death anxiety is that fresh students will express the same pattern of death anxiety like stale students. Apparently, the above implications readily gain support when the various group means are compared with the normative score based on Nigeria samples that indicates normal level of death anxiety.

Limitations of the study

One major problem encounter by the researcher is the attitude of the respondents towards the questionnaire, because many people see death as a taboo topic and may therefore be reluctant to discuss death. Also the researcher is faced with lack of funds and time during the research of this study.

Suggestions for Further Study

Based on the findings of this study one may recommend that future researchers should study other populations like hospitalized patients. Also future researchers should sample from church population and increase the sample size.

Summary

The findings of this study are summarized as follows:

A non significant influence of age as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety was observed.

Also, a non significant influence of years of study as a factor on the attitude of Nigeria students towards death anxiety was observed.

Conclusion

Based on the outcome of this study, the researcher hereby concludes that death anxiety is a common social problem being expressed in the same pattern among university students.

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