WISDOM, RELIGIOSITY, PURPOSE IN LIFE, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

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Abstract

A major psychological task in old age is to come to terms with the finitude of life. This study tests the relationships between wisdom, religiosity, purpose in life, and attitudes toward death, using a sample of community dwelling 123 older adults (56+) living in North Central Florida. Wisdom was defined as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality qualities. Controlling for socioeconomic status, gender, race, and the other variables in the model, multivariate regression analyses show that wisdom has a negative effect on death anxiety and escape acceptance of death, and intrinsic religiosity has a positive effect on approach and escape acceptance of death. Extrinsic religiosity is positively related to fear of death, death avoidance, and neutral acceptance of death. Purpose in life is unrelated to attitudes toward death if wisdom is included in the model, but it is negatively related to fear of death and death avoidance if wisdom is excluded. Similarly, wisdom is negatively related to death avoidance if purpose in life is eliminated from the model.

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One of the major psychological tasks in life and particularly in old age is to make sense of death and dying. Erikson (1963) proposed that a person’s life can be subdivided into eight different stages or developmental tasks. In old age, people have to come to terms with their life and the “inalterability of the past” (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986, p. 56). If they are able to look back without any major regrets and are satisfied with the way they have lived and what they have accomplished, integrity can be achieved. The successful resolution of that last crisis, integrity versus despair, supposedly results in wisdom which, according to Erikson (1964), “… is detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself” (p.133). Wise elders are able to maintain the integrity of experience while at the same time acknowledging the physical deterioration of the body and the nearing of death.

Using a sample of community dwelling 123 older adults (56+) living in North Central Florida, this research examines three personality qualities that are often assumed to alleviate death anxiety and negative attitudes toward death: wisdom, religiosity, and a feeling of purpose in life (Tomer & Eliason, 2000a). Attitudes toward death are assessed by the Death Attitude Profile–Revised (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994), a multidimensional construct that measures fear of death, death avoidance, and death acceptance. Death acceptance, in turn, is assessed by three components: neutral acceptance of death (death is accepted as a fact of life), approach acceptance of death (death is perceived as a gateway to a blissful afterlife), and escape acceptance of death (death is considered an escape from a dreadful existence).

Wisdom is defined as a combination of cognitive, reflective, and affective personality characteristics (Ardelt, 1997, 2000; Clayton & Birren, 1980). This basic and parsimonious definition of wisdom is compatible with most intrinsic theories of wisdom (e.g., Clayton & Birren, 1980; Holliday & Chandler, 1986; Sternberg, 1990) and also with extrinsic theoretical approaches that follow the wisdom traditions of the East (Takahashi, 2000). Wise people tend to look at phenomena and events from many different perspectives to overcome subjectivity and projections (reflective dimension) and to discover the true and deeper meaning of phenomena and events (cognitive dimension). This process tends to result in a reduction of self-centeredness, which is likely to lead to a better understanding of life, oneself, and others and, ultimately, to an increase in sympathy and compassion for others (affective dimension). Hence, a wise person comprehends that physical deterioration is but another part of life, a fact that can neither be ignored nor denied. Wise people are expected to be unafraid of death because they understand the true nature of existence, have lived a meaningful life, and,
therefore, are able to accept life as well as death (Tomer & Eliason, 2000a). However, so far, the relation between wisdom and attitudes toward death has not been empirically tested yet (Kastenbaum, 1999).

Similarly, the main task of religion is to make sense of life and death (Wong, 1998). Carl Jung (1969) observed that most religions could be considered “complicated systems of preparation for death” (p. 408). Moreover, religious people are presumed to be less afraid of death because they often believe that they will be rewarded for their religious behaviour in the afterlife (Templer, 1972). Yet, there are important differences between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity.

Intrinsic religiosity can be defined as a way of life and a commitment of one’s life to God or a higher power. Every event is viewed through the religious lens, which provides meaning (Donahue, 1985) and establishes what Berger (1969) called “an all-embracing sacred order” (p. 51). Extrinsic religiosity, by contrast, is more superficial and ego-driven. According to Donahue (1985) it can be defined as a “religion of comfort and social convention, a self-serving, instrumental approach shaped to suit oneself” (p. 400).

Studies generally indicate a negative association between intrinsic religiosity and death anxiety, whereas the association between extrinsic religiosity and death anxiety is not necessarily significant (e.g., Fortner, Neimeyer, & Rybarczyk, 2000; Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994; Templer, 1972; Thorson & Powell, 1990; Tomer & Eliason, 2000b). In fact, Donahue (1985) reports a positive relation between extrinsic religiosity and fear of death based on a meta-analysis of the literature.

Finally, one might suspect that older people whose lives do not appear to be worth living due to physical and/or emotional strain would welcome death the most (Wong, 2000). However, past evidence suggests that, paradoxically, those elders who have found meaning and purpose in life tend to be less afraid of death and also more ready to let go (Fortner, Neimeyer, & Rybarczyk, 2000; Nicholson, 1980; Quinn & Reznikoff, 1985; Tomer & Eliason, 2000b; Wong, 2000). Tomer and Eliason (2000b) speculate that “….having a strong sense of one’s life as meaningful may encourage an appraisal of death as an unavoidable price that one has to pay for a meaningful life and may encourage one to focus on one’s life and important life goals” (p. 147).

In the present study, the following hypotheses are tested. Hypothesis 1: Wisdom is negatively related to fear of death and death avoidance, but positively related to neutral acceptance of death. No predictions are made regarding the association between wisdom and approach and escape acceptance of death. Because wise older people are assumed to understand the true and deeper meaning of life and, hence, be able to accept life as it is, including physical deterioration and the existence of death, they are likely to accept death as a fact of life but unlikely to be afraid of death or to avoid any thoughts about death. However, not all wise elders might believe in a blissful existence after death, and they also might not conceive death as a relief from a dreadful existence.

Hypothesis 2: Intrinsic religiosity has a negative effect on fear of death and death avoidance and a positive effect on neutral, approach, and escape acceptance of death. Older adults who have devoted their lives to God or a higher power and who believe in a blissful life after death should neither be afraid of death nor try to avoid thinking about death. On the contrary, those adults should look forward to a life after death that promises to be much better than their current existence, and they should not hesitate to accept death as a fact of life.

Hypothesis 3: Extrinsic religiosity is unrelated to attitudes toward death or might even be positively related to fear of death. Religion that is primarily based on self-interest rather than religious devotion to a higher cause is not expected to reduce fear of death or death avoidance or to increase neutral, approach, or escape acceptance of death.

Hypothesis 4: A sense of purpose in life has a negative effect on fear of death, death avoidance, and escape acceptance of death and a positive affect on neutral acceptance of death. No prediction is made with regard to the association between purpose in life and approach acceptance
of death. Older people who perceive life as meaningful might also perceive death as meaningful, which is likely to reduce their fear of death and death avoidance and to increase their neutral acceptance of death. Furthermore, elders who still feel a sense of meaning and purpose in life should be less likely to view death as an escape from a terrible world. However, a sense of purpose in life might or might not be related to the belief in a blissful afterlife. Socioeconomic status (SES), gender, and race are included as control variables in the analyses, although no predictions are made regarding the direction of the associations. Some studies find a positive correlation between SES and fear of death (Pollak, 1979), whereas other researchers report a negative relation between SES and death anxiety (Nelson, 1979; Richardson & Sands, 1986). Similarly, the direction of the association between death attitudes and gender or death attitudes and race is not clear. Many studies indicate that women tend to report significantly higher levels of death anxiety than do men (Davis, Martin, Wilee, & Voorhees, 1980; Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994; Rigdon & Epting, 1985; Sanders, Poole, & Rivero, 1980; Young & Daniels, 1980), yet Fortner, Neimeyer, and Rybarczyk (2000) failed to discover a significant association between death anxiety and gender in a meta-analysis of 49 studies of older people. Correspondingly, some studies find that African Americans report greater fear of death than do Whites (Cole, 1979; Sanders, Poole, & Rivero, 1980; Young & Daniels, 1980), whereas other studies indicate a greater fear of death for Whites than for African Americans (Thorson & Powell, 1994) or no significant difference between African Americans and Whites with regard to death anxiety (Florian & Snowden, 1989; Marks, 1986; Pandey & Templer, 1972).

METHODS

Procedure

Initially, data collection took place between December 1997 and June 1998. Respondents were recruited from 18 close-knit social groups of older adults located in North Central Florida. Group members who volunteered for the study were visited at home by a member of the research team who delivered and explained the self-administered questionnaire. The research team member also offered to conduct the interview if the respondent needed assistance in completing the survey. Ten respondents accepted this offer. All other 170 questionnaires were returned by mail in stamped, pre-addressed envelopes.

Ten months after the initial interview, all respondents with known addresses were contacted by mail for a follow-up survey. Participants who did not return the second questionnaire within two to three weeks were called by phone to remind them of the survey and to ask whether they needed assistance in filling out the questionnaire. Ultimately 123 respondents or about 70% of the initial sample with known addresses returned the follow-up survey. All measures in this research are taken from the follow-up study with the exception of the control variables.

Sample

The sample consists of 123 White and African American older adults who range in age from 56 to 88 years with a mean and a median age of 73 years. Seventy-two percent of the respondents are women, 80% are white, 62% are married, and 82% are retired. Ninety-one percent of the respondents have a high school diploma and 31% have a graduate degree.

MEASURES

Attitudes toward Death

The Death Attitude Profile–Revised (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994) was used to assess five attitudes toward death: fear of death, death avoidance, neutral acceptance of death, approach acceptance of death, and escape acceptance of death. Fear of death is the mean of seven items (e.g., I have an intense fear of death. Death is no doubt a grim experience.) with an alpha-value of .84; death avoidance is the average of five items (e.g., I avoid death thoughts at all costs. I always try not to think about death.) with an alpha of .85; neutral acceptance of death is the average of five items (e.g., Death is a natural aspect of life. Death is neither good nor bad.) with an alpha of .55; approach acceptance of death is the mean of 10 items (e.g., I believe that I will be in heaven after I die. I look forward to life after death.) with an
alpha of .97; and escape acceptance of death is the average of five items (e.g., Death will bring an end to all my troubles. Death provides an escape from this terrible world.) with an alpha of .73. The scale of all the items ranges from 1 (strongly agree) through 5 (strongly disagree), which was reversed for all items before the average was computed.

**Wisdom**

The Three-Dimensional Wisdom Scale (3D-WS) was administered to measure the cognitive, reflective, and affective effect indicators of the latent variable wisdom (Ardelt, 1999). The 3D-WS consists of items from already existing scales as well as newly developed items. The cognitive dimension of wisdom assesses an understanding of life or the desire to know the truth. It is the mean of 14 items (e.g., I often do not understand people’s behaviour. Ignorance is bliss.) with an alpha-value of .85. The reflective dimension measures a person’s ability to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives and to avoid subjectivity and projections. It is computed as the average of 12 items (e.g., I always try to look at all sides of a problem. When I am upset at someone, I usually try to “put myself in his or her shoes” for a while.) with an alpha of .71. Finally, the affective dimension of wisdom captures the extent to which an individual develops sympathy and compassion for others and avoids negative emotions and behaviour. It is measured as the average of 13 items (e.g., Sometimes I feel a real compassion for everyone. If I see people in need, I try to help them one way or another.) with an alpha of .72. All items were assessed using one of two 5-point scales, ranging either from 1 = strongly agree through 5 = strongly disagree or from 1 = definitely true of myself through 5 = not true of myself. The scale of the positively worded items was reversed before the average of the items was taken.

**Religiosity**

Religiosity was assessed by Allport and Ross’ (1967) Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religion Scale. Intrinsic religiosity is the mean of 9 items (e.g., I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life.) with an alpha of .89, and extrinsic religiosity is the average of 11 items (e.g., A primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity.) with an alpha of .81. All items are measured on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) through 5 (strongly disagree), which was reversed for all items.

**Purpose in Life**

A sense of purpose and meaning in life was measured by Crumbaugh and Maholick’s (1964) Purpose in Life Test (King & Hunt, 1975). The scale is the mean of 9 items (e.g., I have discovered satisfying goals and a clear purpose in life. My personal existence often seems meaningless and without purpose.) ranging from 1 (definitely true of myself) through 5 (not true of myself). The scale of the positively worded items was reversed before the average was computed. The alpha-value for that scale is .83.

**Socioeconomic Status (SES)**

SES is the average of the longest held occupation and educational degree. Longest held occupation was coded by three raters using Hollingshead’s Index of Occupations (O’Rand, 1982). At least two raters discussed and jointly decided on all ratings for occupations whose code designation was not clear. The scale ranges from 1 (farm laborers, mental service workers) through 9 (higher executive, large business owner, major professional). Educational degree ranges from 0 (no high school) through 3 (graduate degree). It was first transformed into a 9-point scale before it was averaged with occupation. For respondents without an occupation, SES reflects their educational degree. Gender and race were coded as dichotomous variables.

**ANALYSIS**

The factor score estimates of the latent variable wisdom were computed before the variable was included in the bivariate correlation and multiple regression analyses. The factor score estimates are an estimate of the latent variable wisdom. They are calculated by regressing the estimate of the latent variable on a weighted function of its indicators (Bollen, 1989; Jöreskog, Sörbom, du Toit, & du Toit, 1999). The resulting variable has a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.
The latent variable wisdom was created through a confirmatory factor analysis procedure using the cognitive, reflective, and affective indicators of the 3D-WS and LISREL 8.30 (Ardelt, 1999; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996). The reflective dimension of wisdom had the highest factor loading with an unstandardized factor loading of .37 and a standardized loading of .84. This result is compatible with theoretical considerations that reflective thinking should promote both a deeper understanding of life and human nature and the development of sympathy and compassion for others. The factor loadings of the cognitive and affective dimensions were restricted to be equal because (a) there is no theoretical reason for one loading to be higher than the other, and (b) the 2-difference between a model with and without this equality constraint was not statistically significant. The unstandardized factor loadings of the cognitive and affective dimensions of wisdom were .31 and their standardized loadings were .50 and .61, respectively.

**RESULTS**

**Bivariate Correlation Analyses**

Results of bivariate correlation analyses show that the correlation between fear of death and death avoidance is relatively high, the association between approach and escape acceptance of death is moderate, and no significant correlation exists between neutral acceptance of death and the other death attitudes (see Table 1). Wisdom and purpose in life are negatively related to fear of death and death avoidance, and intrinsic religiosity is positively related to approach and escape acceptance of death. By contrast, the association between wisdom and escape acceptance is negative. Extrinsic religiosity is positively correlated with fear of death and death avoidance, and negatively correlated with approach acceptance of death.

**Table 1**

| Correlation matrix of attitudes toward death and predictor variables; pairwise selection of cases | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) | (10) | (11) | Mean | Std. Dev. | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Fear of death | - | .61* | - | - | - | .01 | - | - | - | - | - | 2.37 | .77 | 122 |
| (2) Death avoidance | | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 2.32 | .81 | 121 |
| (3) Neutral acceptance of death | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 4.16 | .41 | 123 |
| (4) Approach acceptance of death | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3.96 | .95 | 122 |
| (5) Escape acceptance of death | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3.58 | .75 | 123 |
| (6) Wisdom (factor score estimates) | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0.00 | 1.00 | 123 |
| (7) Intrinsic religiosity | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3.94 | .77 | 123 |
| (8) Extrinsic religiosity | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 2.79 | .74 | 123 |
| (9) Purpose in life | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 4.35 | .53 | 119 |
| (10) SES | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 5.66 | 2.33 | 123 |
| (11) Gender (1 = female) | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | .72 | .45 | 123 |
| (12) Race (1 = White) | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | .80 | .40 | 122 |

* p<0.01; † p<0.05
MULTIVARIATE REGRESSION ANALYSES
Multivariate regression analyses were performed to test the effects of the independent variables on attitudes toward death after controlling for the effects of the other independent variables in the model (see Table 2). As predicted in Hypothesis 1, wisdom is negatively related to fear of death but contrary to expectations, it is unrelated to death avoidance and neutral acceptance of death. In accordance with Hypothesis 2, intrinsic religiosity has a positive effect on approach and escape acceptance of death, but contrary to Hypothesis 2, it is unrelated to fear of death, death avoidance, and a neutral acceptance of death. By contrast, extrinsic religiosity is positively related to fear of death and death avoidance, but also to neutral acceptance of death, thereby partly confirming and partly rejecting Hypothesis 3. As expected, extrinsic religiosity is not associated with approach and escape acceptance of death. Contrary to Hypothesis 4, purpose in life is unrelated to attitudes toward death after controlling for the other independent variables in the models.

Table 2
Effects of wisdom, religiosity, and purpose in life on attitudes toward death; multiple OLS regression analyses with selected controls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Fear of Death</th>
<th>Death Avoidance</th>
<th>Neutral Acceptance of Death</th>
<th>Approach Acceptance of Death</th>
<th>Escape Acceptance of Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic religiosity</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic religiosity</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.33***</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in Life</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = female)</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (1 = White)</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.55</td>
<td>-.27**</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p<.01; ** p<.05; * p<.10

The effects of other control variables (age, subjective health, marital and retirement status) were not statistically significant

SES is negatively related to death avoidance and approach acceptance of death, and male and White elders are more likely than are female and African American elders to accept death as a fact of life. Finally, African Americans tend to fear and avoid thinking about death more than do Whites.
CONCLUSION

For the older adults in this study, fear of death and death avoidance are independent of their acceptance of death (Feifel, 1990; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). By contrast, the association between fear of death and death avoidance is relatively strong. Older adults tend to encounter death more frequently and on a more personal level than do younger adults, and they often have already accepted the fact that their own death is more than a theoretical possibility (Thorson & Powell, 2000). Hence, some older adults might have come to terms with the finitude of their life and might even look forward to a life after death and a reunion with their loved ones, while still being afraid of the unknown that death represents. Other older adults might not be afraid of death, but they also might not be convinced that there is indeed a life after death. Furthermore, neutral death acceptance is unrelated to any of the other death attitudes. As shown in Table 1, the mean of this scale is relatively high and the standard deviation is lower than for the other death attitude scales. This indicates that most of the older adults in this study accept death as a fact of life regardless of their fear of death or their belief in a blissful afterlife.

Controlling for socioeconomic status, gender, race, and the other variables in the model multivariate regression analyses show that only wisdom has a negative effect on fear of death as predicted. However, the correlation between the 3D-WS and the Purpose in Life Test is relatively high (r = .61; see Table 1). Although a strong association between the two constructs is theoretically expected (Eriksen, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986), multicolinearity occurs if both measures are included in the same model. If wisdom is eliminated from the model, the negative effect of purpose in life on fear of death becomes statistically significant as anticipated. Similarly and as predicted, the negative effect of purpose in life on death avoidance becomes significant if wisdom is removed from the model and vice versa. Hence, both wisdom and a sense of purpose in life seem to be important factors in decreasing older people’s fear and avoidance of death. However, both wisdom and purpose in life are unrelated to neutral and approach acceptance of death. Neither wisdom nor a sense of purpose and meaning in life appears to be required to accept death as a fact of life.

Only intrinsic religiosity is highly and positively related to approach acceptance of death. Apparently, intrinsically religious older adults tend to believe in a blissful afterlife, which allows them to look forward to a life after death. Intrinsic religiosity is also significantly related to escape acceptance of death, although this association is much weaker than the previous one. Intrinsically religious older people, whose life is filled with physical and emotional suffering, might welcome the prospect of a blissful afterlife. Interestingly, wisdom (but not purpose in life as predicted) has a negative effect on escape acceptance of death. Wise elders might be less likely to feel that their existence is bleak, or they might be less likely to see death as the solution to their problems.

Surprisingly, intrinsic religiosity is unrelated to fear of death, death avoidance, and neutral acceptance of death, whereas extrinsic religiosity has a positive effect on those death attitudes. This is consistent with an earlier meta-analysis of the literature by Donahue (1985) who also found a positive correlation between extrinsic religiosity and fear of death. Extrinsic religious people might be exposed to religious doctrine in church, but because they do not necessarily live a religiously devoted life they might be afraid of the unknown and an uncertain future after death. Due to their fear of death, they might also try to avoid thinking about death. However, extrinsic religiosity has a positive effect on neutral acceptance of death. In fact, for extrinsically religious older adults a neutral acceptance of death might be their way of dealing with the prospect of death. Although they might fear death and might try not to think about it, they nevertheless tend to accept the fact that death is an integral part of life that cannot be avoided.

Future studies are required to replicate these analyses with a larger and more representative data set of older adults. However, the analyses revealed that it is important to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity when studying attitudes toward death and that both wisdom and a sense of purpose and meaning in life might reduce older people’s fear and avoidance of death.
References


**Author Note**

The research was supported by a Brookdale National Fellowship, a grant from NIH/NIA (R03 AG14855 01), and a Research Initiation Project Award from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Florida. Special thanks go to Carla Edwards, Anna Campbell, Adeen Woolverton, Nicolette Fertakis, Stephen Mayer, Dacia Caglin, Dana Federici, Amy Monk, Brad Tripp, and Elizabeth Brown for their help at various stages of the research project. A previous version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Searching for Meaning in the New Millennium, July 13 to 16, 2000, Vancouver, B.C.

**Endnote**

1. The effects of other control variables (age, subjective health, marital and retirement status) were also tested but results showed that they were not statistically significant. Those additional control variables were excluded from the analyses because they reduced the overall sample size by 17% in a listwise selection of cases.