

LIFE SATISFATION AND ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

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INTRODUCTION

. Many studies report that advancing age brings a favorable, accepting, and less fearful attitude toward death (Bengston et al 1977; Kalish & Reynolds 1976; Kastenbaum 1966; Spilka 1967; Williams & Wirths 1965). But the relation between fear or acceptance of death and age becomes more complicated with added variables. Swenson (1961) reported that although age was an important correlate of death acceptance, a basic religious conviction by the elderly was equally important to identify an accepting reaction. Other studies show a relation between age and fear of death with such variables as health, activity level, marital status, religiosity, education, living conditions, and other social and psychological variables (Alexander & Alderstein 1959; Feifel 1956; Jeffers et al 1961; Rhudick & Dibner 1961). The Life Satisfaction Index A (Neugarten et al 1961) provides a technique to relate several variables to old age and death attitudes.

ADJUSTMENT & DEATH ATTITUDES

. Why elderly people fear and evade the issue of death, or why they accept it in a positive way may relate to inner resources available to cope with environmental shocks that often accompany old age. One type of shock is loss. People must cope with a variety of losses as they grow old - the death of friends and family, the loss of physical functions, youthful appearance, active social roles, and important relations (Kalish 1975). These losses create special adjustment problems for the elderly, and tax their coping mechanisms. Ability to cope necessarily varies among individuals. Each shows different adjustment skills (Tallmer & Kut-

ner 1969). One loss may not lower the adjustment level for a well adjusted person, but the accumulation of losses may produce a sharp reduction in adjustment capacity, followed by a leveling effect. Until then, the elderly person continues out of adjustment, with a decline in life satisfaction and a reduced sense of well being. Attitudes toward death are closely linked to the ability to adjust to losses and the life circumstances surrounding old age. Such environmental shocks and ability to cope may greatly influence what Butler calls the "life review" (1963). As time and the expected future become shorter, many elderly people begin to reminisce. Life review can help, in enabling older people to see their accomplishments, and to deal with feelings of nostalgia and regret. The ability to cope with environmental shocks produces a favorable life review, and a high degree of life satisfaction, which influences the attitude toward death.

. We will test these propositions:

- 1) A high degree of life satisfaction among the elderly is associated with a positive, nonfearful or accepting attitude toward death.
- 2) A low degree of life satisfaction among the elderly is associated with a fearful or evasive attitude toward death.

. Other variables, such as religious commitment, education, and life style, not included here, do influence the outlook on one's past. The relations between each of these variables and life satisfaction have been documented to support the validity of life satisfaction as a "summary" variable (Adams 1971).

DATA COLLECTION A questionnaire including 1) socio-personal items, 2) a death attitude checklist and Swenson's 6-item forced choice rating scale, and 3) Swenson's Life Satisfaction Index A (Swenson 1961) was given to 174 elderly respondents in South Carolina. The questionnaires were given

individually by counselors and outreach workers from social service agencies, who had regularly served the respondents, and had their trust. This facilitated data collection from handicapped persons in the sample.

MEASURE OF LIFE SATISFACTION

. The Life Satisfaction Index defines five components of well being which make up life satisfaction: 1) zest for life; 2) resolution and fortitude; 3) congruence of desired and achieved goals; 4) positive self concept; 5) mood tone. With 5 ordinal levels per item, it scales from 0 to 20. A high score characterizes those who 1) feel that now is the best time of life; 2) do not feel "resigned", and are unafraid of death; 3) feel that they have achieved their life goals; 4) feel they are important; and 5) have a happy, optimistic attitude. A low score characterizes those who: 1) display apathy; 2) are intro- and extra-punitive; 3) feel that they have missed opportunities; 4) feel that they are sick, weak, or incompetent; 5) are depressed, bitter, or irritable (Neugarten et al 1961).

DEATH ATTITUDE MEASURES

. Attitudes toward death were indicated by a 35-item death attitude checklist, and the 6-item forced choice rating scale. Swenson developed a list of 35 words and phrases which could describe attitudes or feelings people may have in thinking about their own death. With cluster analysis, Swenson identified two groups by two basic attitudes: 1) positive or forward looking, with 39% of his sample, and 2) actively evasive, with 33% of his sample. He found no "fear of death" cluster. The 6-item forced choice scale rated death from a wonderful experience to a fearful experience.

. Swenson's scales were used in this study, but factor analysis was substituted for cluster analysis. By Armor's method of "factor scaling" we construct 3 unidimensional scales, two of which cor-

respond closely to the dimensions revealed by Swenson (Armor 1974). The three scalable dimensions were labeled positive, evasive, and negative, based on content analysis of the items. The positive scale defines death as happiness, wonderful, and a beautiful experience. The evasiveness scale included: "don't think about it", and "still a long way off". Items in the negative scale were: "sadness", and "difficult to accept". Evasive response on this scale matches the "active evasive" response on the 6-item scale.

. The checklist, scored on independent dimensions, and a forced choice rating scale seemed adequate for the expressed attitudes of the respondents. They are presumed to indicate an expressible contemplation of death.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

. The sample of 160 respondents ranged from 55 to 90 years, with an average of 70 years (sd=8.5). In the sample, 68% were female; 87% were white, 10% were black, 3%, race unlisted. About 47% were widowed; 44% were married; 51% lived alone, and 49% lived with spouse or children; 78% claimed good to excellent health, and 22% claimed fair to poor health; 35% reported some physical disability; and 17% reported a serious illness. Income ranged from under \$5,000. yearly for 62%, to more than \$15,000. for 15%. The entire sample was Protestant, and 65% educated less than high school.

. Life satisfaction scores ranged from 4 to 20, averaging 12.5 (sd=3.7), which is close to findings in other studies of aged populations (Acuff 1967; Lewis 1972; Neugarten 1961; Peppers 1976). Table 1 shows the distribution of responses to the Swenson 6-item scale, with results nearly identical to those earlier developed by Swenson. Nearly half of the elderly respondents (44%) had positive feelings about death, and only about 10% expressed fear. The Chi-square statistic shows significant difference for the data in

TABLE 1: DEATH ATTITUDE STABILITY:
1961 (SWENSON) AND 1976

Death attitude	Category	1961	1976
Great experience	Positive	46%	44%
Look forward to it	Positive	46%	44%
Don't think about it	Active-evasive	26	26
Some fear of it			
Very fearful	Negative	10	11
None of these fit my feelings	Passive-evasive	18	19

TABLE 2: DEATH ATTITUDE &
LIFE SATISFACTION LEVEL

Death Attitude	Life Satisfaction	
	High	Low
Positive	39	30
Active-evasive	11	31
Negative	10	8
Passive-evasive	14	15

$\chi^2 = 10.4$; $df = 3$; $p = .01$; $N = 158$

Table 2, comparing attitudes with the degree of life satisfaction.

A correlation analysis relating the summated scores on each of the 3 checklist scales and the life satisfaction scores revealed the following: $r = .17$ ($p=.02$) between life satisfaction and "positive" attitudes toward death, and $r = -.31$ ($p=.001$) for the relations between life satisfaction and evasiveness, and $r = -.26$ ($p=.001$), relating life satisfaction to negativism. These relations are as predicted, and tend to support the hypotheses.

DISCUSSION The relation between life satisfaction scores and the two measures of death attitudes tended to support the hypotheses. Results of correlational analysis of life satisfaction to the scales showed that those scoring high on life satisfaction also took a slightly more positive and less evasive attitude toward death. Those scoring low on life satisfaction tended to view death in a more evasive and negative way.

The significant effect of death attitudes on life satisfaction demonstrated in Table 2, with Swenson's 6-item scale, was primarily due to entries in the "positive" and "active-evasive" categories. The differences tended to agree with the correlation analysis.

The lack of distinction in life satisfaction scores in the negative category of the rating scale suggest the need for further research. Perhaps there is no relation between life satisfaction and a negative, fear-oriented attitude toward death. Many elderly people may have difficulty dealing with fear to the point of rejecting it as an influence on their perceived satisfaction with life. Fear of death may be such a powerful feeling for some persons that a strong psychological motive develops to deny it in life. Or, fear of death may be a common reaction in many people, regardless of life circumstances. It might be necessary to distinguish between normal and abnormal fear. Since items in the rating scale made no such distinction, we cannot estimate the meaning of responses to negative items by the small number of respondents in this category. Some respondents may have interpreted the item as normal fear, and others, as abnormal fear, independent of their general feelings toward life circumstances.

The same explanation could apply to life satisfaction scores in the "passive-evasive" category, corresponding to the item: "none of these fit my feelings". The meaning attached to this by the respondents is unknown. The most significant responses to the rating scale were in the "positive" and "active-evasive" categories, where life satisfaction scores varied as hypothesized. There is some tendency for death to be viewed more positively if one's review of one's life is satisfactory. If such a review reveals general dissatisfaction, there is a tendency to be less positive and more evasive in death attitudes. This reaction cor-

responds to the belief that: "I am not ready for death, and will not face it until I have satisfied my desire for success, and am satisfied with the life I have lived."

. Due to the wide range of potential intervening and antecedent variables, the relation of life satisfaction to death attitudes shown here must be taken cautiously. However, Bengston and associates (1977) indicate very little variation in death attitudes across social strata.

. The findings do support the deduced hypotheses, if we accept these assumptions:

- 1) ability to handle environment shocks affects life satisfaction;
- 2) life satisfaction reflects present life circumstances, past accomplishments, and defeats;
- 3) each one performs a review of one's past life;
- 4) this life review affects attitudes toward death.

. Acceptance of these assumptions makes this study potentially credible. Life satisfaction, as a reflection of ability to cope with the often difficult circumstances of old age may well be related to death attitudes, independent of other variables.

. A positive life review implies a general satisfaction with the ability to cope with the shocks of old age. One of the shocks is the reality of impending death. Positive live reviewers should be able to deal with death and accept it. This feeling would then be reflected in their positive attitude. If the coping mechanisms are insufficiently developed to deal with the threat of death, then satisfaction would be low, and one would tend to react negatively or evasively toward the subject of death.

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