

An Investigation of the Development of the Concept of
Death Using Children's Drawings

by

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Abstract

It was the purpose of this investigation to examine the development of the concept of death in children. The study utilized a technique which could be applied across all of the age levels considered in the investigation. Using 120 children from ages 3 to 11 years, the investigator examined their drawings and answers to a structured interview. Each child was judged as to the objects, themes and processes involved in his conception of death. In addition each subject was assigned a maturity score (M score) according to how he answered the questions about his drawing. The structured interview which yielded the M scores was developed by a review of the relevant literature in which 12 developmental aspects of the concept of death were delineated.

It was found that children of the three age groups examined used different themes in their drawings. The oldest group of children used different objects and processes in their conceptualization of death. Generally, as the children became older, they tended to conceive of death as happening to humans, mostly on account of biological processes. On the other hand, younger children comprehended the concept of death more readily in terms of animals and with more active external causes. The children's maturity scores were influenced by the themes and processes that they inferred in their drawings, but not by the objects they used. A child's age was the most significant determinant of the M score.

As well as the above analyses, the structured interview items were examined as to how well they discriminated between the high and low M subjects within each age group. Most items were significant in de-

lineating the high and low scorers in at least one of the age groups except for the time and finality of death items. The futurity of death item was a significant question in each age group.

The results were discussed according to the findings of previous research and the results were interpreted in the light of child development factors. Implications of this study and the direction of future research were also discussed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	INTRODUCTION	1
	The Importance of Death as a Research Topic	1
	Death as a Concept	2
	The Development of Thought	3
	The Concept of Death in Children: A Review	6
	The Psychoanalytic Approach	6
	The Pioneering Studies	7
	Recent Research	11
	Future Implications for Research	17
	The Developmental Aspects of Death	18
	Focus and Purpose of the Present Investigation	23
II	METHOD	28
	Subjects	28
	Apparatus and Questionnaire	29
	Procedure	29
	Data Analysis	30
III	RESULTS	31
	The Use of Objects Themes and Processes	31
	The Inquiry	36
	The Questionnaire	36
	The Questionnaire and Influences on the Maturity Scores	38

TABLE OF CONTENTS (cont'd)

CHAPTER		PAGE
IV	DISCUSSION	45
	The Use of Objects, Themes and Processes in the Drawings	47
	The Questionnaire	49
	Influences on the Maturity Scores	55
	Future Research	56
	Conclusions	57
	REFERENCES	60
	APPENDICES	64
	Appendix A: Definitions of Objects, Themes and Processes	64
	Appendix B: The Questionnaire	65
	Appendix C: Scoring Key	66
	Appendix D: Raw Data	67
	Appendix E: Frequency Counts of the Items Mentioned Spontaneously	70
	Appendix F: Phi Coefficients on Each Questionnaire Item Within Each Group	71
	Appendix G: The Number of Correct/Incorrect Responses on Each Item of the Questionnaire Across Groups	72

List of Tables

Table		Page
1	Percentages of Human and Nonhuman Drawings in Group 1, Group 2 and Group 3	32
2	The Use of Themes in Percentages by Group 1, Group 2 and Group 3	33
3	The Use of Processes in Group 1, Group 2 and Group 3	34
4	Chi Square Statistics Resulting from Comparing Objects, Themes and Processes Across Groups	37
5	The Most Significant Items as Determined by Phi Coefficients Within Each Group	39
6	Analysis of Variance of the Maturity Scores Examining the Effects of Group and Objects	41
7	Comparisons Among Group Means of Subjects' Maturity Scores	42
8	Analysis of Variance of the Maturity Scores Examining the Effects of Group and Themes	43
9	Significant t Tests of the Comparisons of Theme Maturity Means	44
10	Analysis of Variance of the Maturity Scores Examining the Effects of Group and Processes	46

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Death as a Research Topic

In the past, social scientists have examined almost every aspect of human behavior, yet the most universal and irreversible of life's occurrences -- death, has been largely ignored. It has been described as a neglected area of research (Faunce and Fulton, 1958), as a social problem (Wrenn and Mencke, 1975) and as a taboo area (Feifel, 1959). Kubler-Ross (1969) has noted that as yet our society uses euphemisms to describe death and that most individuals deny the finality and inevitability of death.

One can speculate that this past denial can be attributed to man's inability to come to terms with his own death. Even the medical profession who deals daily with the terminally ill has found it difficult to define death in biological terms (Mant, 1968); so obviously, its psychological and social ramifications are even less easily definable.

Now after a period of generally avoiding death as a research topic, researchers are beginning to respond to the paucity of studies in the area by an ever-increasing focus on grief and bereavement, attitudes toward death and the concept of death itself (Fulton, 1966). Along with this research there is a movement among individuals which recognizes the importance of dealing realistically with the prospect of one's own death. As Feifel (1959, 1974) stressed, one's concept of death can be one of the most significant organizing principles in determining how an individual conducts himself in life. To an individual, death is not simply a biological event, but rather a psycho-

logical and social fact towards which one orients his behavior in life. Similarly, Elam (1969) elucidated this notion when he stated that one's interpretation of death like all other life events is dependent upon one's own life experiences and the developmental level at which one is operating. In other words whether a person sees the most significant part of death as the loss of awareness or feeling, the helplessness, the loneliness, the separation involved or the loss of self control depends on his life orientation. In short, Elam believed that one's approach to death is directly influenced by that which he values in life.

As yet little is known about individuals conceptions of death and what constitutes a "mature" concept. Its origins and the life experiences from which it stems have not been delineated. One way to understand the concept and its formation more fully is by examining the developmental aspects of the concept of death and the significant milestones in this development.

It is the purpose of this study to review previous death research involving children, and to establish a viable method to explore the development of the concept. Hopefully, by tracing the growth of the concept in children, a greater understanding of the concept of death can be achieved.

Death as a Concept

If one can consider death simply as a concept and ignore the attitudinal components, some consistent characteristics can be revealed. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) have emphasized six ideas in regards to the concept of death. They suggest that the concept of death is

relative to one's developmental level; and should be interpreted within that context. Secondly, they propose that the concept of death is exceedingly complex and cannot be thought of as an internally consistent structure. Thirdly, concepts of death can change within an individual. Fourthly, the "developmental goal" or what constitutes a mature concept is vague and ambiguous. Fifthly, death concepts are influenced by situational contexts. How we conceptualize death at a given moment is likely to be influenced by environmental factors. A certain setting may selectively draw out one type of cognition among the several an individual possesses. Lastly, death concepts influence one's behavior in remote and complex ways.

Furthermore, Kubler-Ross (1969) has proposed that concepts of death have cultural determinants. In a culture where one is insulated from death, one perceives it differently than in a culture where it is treated as a natural occurrence.

Any study which deals with the concept of death then, should be sensitive to the above propositions. Cultural and situational aspects should be controlled, the definition of the "mature" concept of death should not be biased by the researcher's orientation and the measuring tool should be broad enough to encompass the inconsistencies within an individual's conception of death. The developmental level above all should be considered, especially if the study involves children.

The Development of Thought

The cognitive development that occurs in a child cannot be ignored in any developmental study. Piaget (1930, 1932, 1952) has delineated a number of stages that occur in children and the type of

thinking which is characteristic of a child of that age level. It is interesting to consider the kinds of ideas that children could conceive of in these stages.

In the first of Piaget's stages, the sensorimotor period, the child is action oriented and is limited to the pursuit of concrete goals. The child's world is understood by the actions he performs upon it and through his immediate perceptions of it. On account of the young age of children of this stage and their lack of ability to communicate in any measurable way, this age has been omitted from most conceptual studies.

In the second stage of development, the preoperational subperiod, the child can reflect upon his behavior and organize it as it relates to a goal. This stage involves two shorter subperiods, the preconceptual (children two to four years) and the intuitive thinking (children four to seven years). The child is very concrete minded and he cannot conceive of the Piagetian notion of reversibility. That is to say, he is not yet able to take his thinking back to its point of origin. His thought is "egocentric" for he is not yet able to take another's point of view. The child tends to "centre" his attention on one detail of a situation, and he is unable to consider all aspects at the same time. His reasoning is what Piaget terms "transductive". For example, in the child's logic if A is like B in one way, A is like B in all ways. The preoperational child tends to focus on successive stages in a transformation, hence the child finds it difficult to understand a process.

In the concrete operations stage (ages seven to eleven years), the child develops to a point where he can conserve quantity and

number. He realizes the quantitative aspects of objects do not change unless something has been added to them or taken away from them. He also acquires the ability to deal with classes, to seriate and to better understand number.

In the final of Piaget's stages, the formal operational sub-period (eleven to fifteen years) the child can follow the "form" of an argument and disregard its content. He can also form propositions which become part of his cognitive structure.

Any study which deals with concept development should consider the level of a child's reasoning, his general cognitive abilities and what formulations are of central importance at certain developmental levels. From this brief review of Piaget's work it becomes clear, theoretically at least, that a child can only comprehend certain aspects of the concept of death at certain conceptual stages.

A child's view of death will have a close relationship to his cognitive level. A child's ideas may be greatly influenced by his level of cognitive reasoning and his understanding of constancy of an object (conservation). His transductive reasoning may cause a great deal of misinterpretation of the concept. A child's understanding of animism may be influential in the way a child perceives the death of that object. The role of the concept of time cannot be ignored since it will ultimately determine the child's conception of the finality aspect of death. It may also hold true that if a child is unable to think in terms of transformations but only states, he will have difficulty perceiving death as a process. If a child is egocentric in the Piagetian sense, it is questionable as to whether he can draw substantially from the experience of others in order to con-

ceive of death. All of the above assertions have been considered at least in part in the developmental research on death and some idea of how they can influence the concept can be gained by reviewing the literature.

The Concept of Death in Childhood: A Review

The Psychoanalytic Approach

The psychoanalysts were the first to show any real interest in examining children's ideas about death and although their findings are rather conjectural in nature and drawn from clinical data, they are worthy of consideration in this review. Grollman (1967) has pointed out that between the ages of four to six years, children begin to form unrealistic associations between death and a particular object, place, person or condition. For example, a child may come to believe that if one does not get run over, very sick, old or go to the hospital one will not die. This can be explained by recognizing that through the child's transductive reasoning processes, a child comes to the conclusion that death is situation specific.

Yudkin (1968) in his work speculated that a child's understanding of death begins with the experience of separation from its mother. Since the idea of time has not yet been developed, the young child cannot distinguish between short and long term separation. Even in infancy Yudkin claims that a child develops a sense of loss and absence that he likens to a "death experience". Maurer (1968, 1974) goes as far as to suggest that the game of peek-a-boo can exemplify the development of the death concept. Both authors proposed the notion that the idea of separation involved in death would be of importance

to the very young in their ideas about death.

Yudkin (1968) also proposed that the young have a very primitive idea of death and an extremely active fantasy which interact to produce many erroneous assumptions. He speculated that a child may interpret death in a moralistic way. A youngster may entertain the thought that death is committed by God for being bad, or that death is an extreme sort of punishment.

Rochlin (1967) posited that children at a very early age (three to four years) begin to entertain death wishes towards the frustrating objects in their environment. They also begin to feel guilt surrounding any deaths which do occur as if these wishes somehow brought about these deaths.

Generally, the psychoanalysts have emphasized three important ideas in regards to the development of the concept of death. Firstly, they have shown the role of fantasy in understanding children's ideas about death. This type of thinking may lead to moralistic interpretations of death and guilt feelings surrounding its occurrence. Secondly, many associations occur which lead to erroneous ideas about death. Thirdly, they stressed the role of separation in the development of the concept.

The Pioneering Studies

The early studies which dealt with death were exploratory at best, but they have contributed much to recent death research. Anthony (1940, 1971) studied death using four methods. She felt that if the concept of death was to be understood one must examine a child's "knowing", "imaginings", "acting" and "teachings" about death. In order to understand a child's "knowing" she utilized parent records

and a definition task. Anthony collected data from her colleagues concerning their children's verbalizations and reactions to death. This provided a basis for her later discussion of the growth of the death concept, but the results were from a biased sample and were anecdotal and subjective. This method tended to rely on overt verbalizations which were probably very much influenced by the attitude of the parent toward such verbalizations. It takes little account of the fact that many children may be inquiring in an internal fashion with no overt verbal component. The definition tasks she used provided a more precise way of measuring the concept. Anthony placed a child's response to defining death into one of five stages: (A) apparent ignorance of the word "dead", (B) interest in the word "death" but an erroneous concept, (C) definition by reference to an associated phenomenon, (D) correct but limited information and (E) a general, logical definition.

This enabled the author to understand when specific developments occurred and when the "mature" conceptualization of death took place. Anthony noted in her examination of what children "know" of death that only after the age of seven did children describe death as the negation of living. This led to her assertion that the concept of animism was important in the development of its antithesis, death. In her discussion she was of the opinion that the transition that occurred between Stage B and Stage C was marked by the development of causality, since at this time some children were beginning to inquire about the "why" of the process. In Stage C she felt that the ritual concerning death became all-important. Within this stage folklore (Grim Reaper) came into play. Although in this part of her investigation the metho-

dology was more objective, it was heavily dependent upon the child's relationship with the interviewer and the child's ability to express himself verbally. It also could produce a rather threatening situation for some children if it was not introduced by a rapport-building activity.

In order to study the second area, children's imaginings, Anthony used story completion tasks. She found that death in a child's fantasy was seen as a sorrow-bringing and fear-bringing phenomenon, grievous because of the separation and frightening because of the malevolence of action. The "acting" of death in children was deemed important in her study as well. She felt that the acting out of ideas and fantasies (mock funerals) helped in the biological conceptualizations of death. This method was advantageous as far as its lack of artificiality but it was subject to the interpretation of the observer. In her discussion of the "teachings" in regards to death, she noted that this is the area where cultural influences arise, but it is also how anxieties are learned.

Anthony had some interesting insights into children's ideas about death and one should not be overly critical of her methods because of the contributory function of her study. The major significance in Anthony's study was the emphasis she placed on the importance of animism and causality and her idea of considering the four areas of cognitions, play, teachings and imaginings about death.

Another pioneer in the field of death and children is Nagy (1948). In her study she employed written compositions, unstructured interviews and illustrations made by the children to investigate death. With the three to six-year-old children she established rapport by telling stories and then asked them to define four words, "death" being

among them. With the seven to ten-year-olds she used written compositions to examine their ideas. She asked the children to write down everything that came into their minds about death. After the completion of the task she asked them to draw a picture of death. By using a variety of techniques one can speculate that she was able to reach most of the children. Probably, they were all comfortable in at least one of the methodologies she used.

Nagy's results suggested that there were three stages in the development of the concept of death. Children between the ages of three and five characteristically denied death as a regular and final process. Death to this age group was a temporary departure, a changeable state. She also found that children extended living characteristics to the dead. Many of the children believed that the dead slept and ate in their coffins. Children tended to perceive of degrees of death. For example, they believed some people were "more dead" than others. In the second stage, between the ages of five and nine years, death became personified. Death was caused, a "death man" made it happen. Generally, death was seen as occurring from the outside, and at this time was not seen as a universal phenomenon. In the third stage death was conceived as a process, a dissolution of life. Children at this level begin to see the inevitability of death.

Although this study is an excellent exploratory one, Nagy varied the methods amongst age groups. The dependent measures of drawing, written compositions and oral definition tasks were not given to each age group. There were no real controls for intelligence or bereavement. Caution must be exercised if one generalizes these results, especially since the study was conducted in Hungary and cultural dif-

ferences may have come into play. Nagy's study did delineate the developmental aspects of death and she showed how many dependent measures can lead themselves to more significant results.

Both the above studies are fraught with methodological weaknesses, but they have contributed immensely to the encouragement of new research in the field. It is interesting to examine the more recent investigations involving children and death, especially since the role of television can be tapped.

Recent Research

Since Feifel (1959) has termed death a taboo topic, researchers have begun to involve themselves more fully with the topic. The developmental studies have taken many forms and have used a variety of techniques. It is difficult to compare the results of the studies since most techniques have not been standardized or validated except in an empirical sense.

1. Play Rochlin (1967) following Anthony's (1940) example, chose to investigate children's ideas about death in a play situation. With a sample size of four and with no statistical analysis, Rochlin claimed that a very early age children develop defenses against death. He explained that a child's "magical thinking" is one example of their defenses against death. His psychoanalytic interpretations are largely subjective and speculative. Unfortunately, the only study involving play was poorly controlled with insufficient subjects.
2. Death Anxiety Another way researchers have examined death is by studying the anxieties children have surrounding it. Wahl (1959) through his clinical experience believed this phenomenon started as early as three years of age. Alexander and Alderstein (1958) using a

word association task showed that children as young as five years showed greater emotional reactions as measured by the galvanic skin response (GSR) to death words. Although this study deals with the affective component of the death concept and not the specific development of the concept itself, it revealed that at this early age children are responding in a differentiating way to death.

3. Projective Techniques Projective techniques, such as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) and sentence completion tasks have been used to study death and children. McCully (1963) used ten stimulus cards to examine the differences in fantasy productions of children with fatal illnesses, a progressive crippling disease and a normal group of children. Although the results of this study are not directly related to this investigation, McCully used this projective technique in an objective fashion and was able to prove that statistically significant differences existed among the groups.

Kastenbaum (1959) used a projective technique in his investigation of the idea of time in an adolescent view of death. Adolescents were asked to draw "time lines" in regards to certain life events. The length of the line represented time. It was found that there was a very low tolerance for the acceptance of death-connoting experiences and a rejection of the death-shaped time field. Kastenbaum's interest in the aspect of time and the futurity of death are important since they have implications as to whether children will think about death or consider it as an event so far in the future that they are presently "immune" to because of their age. Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1972) have stated in their writings that death and its futurity are important considerations in a child's view of death.

Tallmer, Formanek and Tallmer (1974) using an animate-inanimate concept acquisition scale, three TAT cards and a sentence completion task, attempted to show that lower socio-economic status (SES) children would have more adequate concepts of death at each age level than middle SES children, and that parental orientation and actual experience would affect the acquisition of the concept in all classes. Socio-economic status was measured by parental occupations and the residences of the children. Parental orientations were divided into secular or religious according to how the parent explained death. The results indicate that since the concept of death is significantly related to age, that the death concept has a definite cognitive component. Neither parent explanation nor children's experiences with death showed a significant relationship. Socio-economic status was significant; children of a lower SES had a more adequate concept. The authors attributed this to the life experiences of this group and because this group can relate to violent T.V. experiences. The findings of this study are extremely revealing but the interpretations of the authors are rather speculative.

4. Definition Tasks Definition tasks provide a more precise way of measuring the concept of death. These tasks involve an explanation of what death is verbally or written, and the responses are rated according to predetermined criteria. In most studies the criteria are either not defined or delineated so the results are incomparable.

Peck (1966) used a definition task to explore the development of the concept in 134 white male children. She examined the influence of chronological age, mental age as measured by a standardized intelligence test (Stanford-Binet), social class and the specific life experiences of the child (divorce or bereavement). She delineated five stages of con-

ceptual awareness and showed that these levels were associated with significantly different age groups. The child's mental age, as opposed to his chronological age proved to be more important. The concept of death was unmodified by social class (as measured by occupational categories) and death or divorce in the family had no effect on the development.

Bakshis et al. (1974) have been of value in that they have tapped an individual's knowledge about death in a way that is not subject to social approval factors. The Twenty Statements Test (TST) strategy as designed by Bakshis et al. is subject to the influence of vocabulary development and the ability of the subject to express himself in a written form. Since this test requires the subjects to write twenty statements in response to the question "What is death?", it cannot be used with any preschool children.

5. Structured Interviews By far the most popular research approach for examining the concept of death has been the structured interview, again the responses to a series of questions are rated in a predetermined way. Few of the questions asked are worded similarly to those in other studies and at times the questions are subject to social approval factors.

Safier (1964) utilized a structured interview methodology in her study. Using four questions and ten stimulus words which were substituted into the questions, thirty boys ranging in age from four to eleven years were given an animism score and a death score. The authors found a correlation between life and death responses in each age group. Safier showed that these two concepts are parallel in their development and she suggested that similar notions are operating in the attribution