

**A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF AGE,
SEX, AND RELIGIOSITY TO DEATH ANXIETY**

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An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
James A. Huff

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to determine the relationship between age, sex, and religiosity to death anxiety in a rural community in Northern Mid-Tennessee. The subjects were 142 students enrolled during the Fall Quarter, 1984, at Austin Peay State University. Templer's Death Anxiety Scale and Allport and Ross' Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale were administered to the subjects. Data were analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation and the Point biserial correlation. Significant correlations between the independent variables and death anxiety were obtained, which suggest that those people who "live" their religion rather than "use" it have lower death anxiety. The findings between gender and death anxiety showing females to have higher death anxiety than males may suggest that this is a "culturally produced expectation" related to rural southern communities. The correlations between age and death anxiety suggest that old age is not the time of life when people most fear death, thus refuting Feifel's classic study.

The present researcher believes that an extension of this research is needed in order to control for those individuals who are non-religious and to determine whether the relationship between sex and death anxiety is culturally determined.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by James A. Huff entitled "A Study of the Relationship of Age, Sex, and Religiosity to Death Anxiety." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

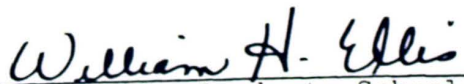

Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:


Second Committee Member


Third Committee Member

Accepted for the
Graduate Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
LIST OF TABLES	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. METHOD	8
Subjects	8
Description of the Instrument	8
Procedure	9
3. RESULTS	10
4. DISCUSSION	11
REFERENCES	14
APPENDIX A	19
APPENDIX B	21

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
1. Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations of All Variables and Death Anxiety	18

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Dying is an integral part of life, as natural and predictable as being born. But whereas birth is cause for celebration, death has become a dreaded and unspeakable issue to be avoided by every means possible in our modern society. Perhaps it is that death reminds us of our human vulnerability in spite of all our technological advances. We may be able to delay it, but we cannot escape it (Kubler-Ross, 1975, p. 5).

The dreaded issue of death is seen as a major source of anxiety which humankind faces (Leming, 1979, 1980, p. 348). Some historians feel that the primary reason for human's belief in religion and God(s) is to reduce this source of anxiety (Kastenbaum & Aisenberg, 1976, p. 94). If this is true, the assumption can be made that with increased religiosity we should find a decrease in death anxiety.

The study of the relationship of death anxiety and religiosity has yielded contradictory results even though it has been extensively studied since the early 1950's. A primary problem in earlier studies has been methodology (Minton & Spilka, 1976, p. 262). A major source of

methodological error has been the use of measures of both variables, religiosity and death anxiety, which have not had adequate reliability and validity.

Feifel (1955, 1959) studied 82 male patients at a VA mental hospital. He reported that the religiously oriented subjects held significantly greater fear of death in their later years than nonreligious subjects. Feifel hypothesized that in the religious subjects a fear of hell and a need to have their sins expiated prior to death were major contributors to this fear. Feifel's research was an early landmark study because of the finding that fear of death and religiosity are directly related, although Martin and Wrightsman (1965) were critical of the study because of a lack of statistical analysis of data.

Martin and Wrightsman (1965) studied 58 adults in three protestant churches in Tennessee. The subjects ranged in age from 18 to 75 years. They found no significant relationship between religious attitudes and age to the fear of death. They found an inverse relation between religious participation and the fear of death.

Williams and Cole (1968), using 161 students in various introduction psychology classes, administered the Religious Participation Scale to each subject. Those subjects scoring below one standard deviation constituted the low religiosity group, where those above one standard deviation constituted the high religiosity group. To both groups the Perception

of Death Scale was administered. No significant relationship was found between the variables.

Templer and Dotson (1970) studied 213 junior and senior level students in various psychology classes. They used Templer's Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) and eight religious variables and found no significant relationships between them. The authors hypothesized that a lack of relationship between the variables could be attributable to a lack of religiousness of college students.

Templer (1972), to test his hypothesis from the previous research, subsequently tested only very religiously involved persons. The subjects attended one of two interdenominational evangelical retreats in 1969. Templer found that five of the eight religious variables had a significant inverse relationship with his DAS.

Berman and Hays (1973) administered two death anxiety scales, a Belief in After Life Scale, and Locus of Control Scale to 300 college students. The authors found a small but significant relationship between belief in after life and fear of death; these were independent questions within the scales. However, between the Death Anxiety scales and Belief in After Life scale no significant relationship was found.

Kahoe and Dunn (1975), using 16 items from two death concern scales of Martin and Wrightsman and the Intrinsic-Extrinsic Religious Orientation scale (IEROS) of Allport

and Ross, found that intrinsically religious subjects had significantly less death concern. Their 70 subjects were from two Protestant and one Catholic congregation in a small town in Kentucky.

Stewart (1975) used a total sample of 117 undergraduates from the departments of religion, sociology, and psychology at Baylor University. A religious attitude and religious participation questionnaire were correlated with death anxiety. Stewart's study indicates that there is less death anxiety with subjects "who perceive of themselves as being highly religious, who are more fundamentalist in their religious orientation, who perceive of themselves as being near God, . . ." (p. 163).

Minton and Spilka (1976) correlated a 60 item questionnaire which measures ten death perspectives with the Allport and Ross IEROS and the Committed-Consensual measures scale constructed by Spilka. Most of the 328 subjects were undergraduate college students. The research indicated that the Intrinsic-Committed are positively related to positive aspects of death, such as receiving just rewards. They are inversely related to undesirable death perspectives, such as loneliness-pain, indifference, the unknown, and failure.

Leming (1979, 1980) tested Homan's thesis that death anxiety is socially learned in general and by religion in particular, through religion. Once the religious beliefs

have been assimilated, death anxiety should be lessened. Leming used a multi-stage cluster sample of 372 subjects from a rural community in Minnesota. The collection of background data allowed him to control for age, socioeconomic status, and religious preference. Measurement was accomplished through two religiosity scales and a fear of death scale. Leming found a curvilinear relationship between the variables, which substantiated Homan's thesis. Leming's study demonstrates that "religiosity seems to serve the dual function of afflicting the comforted and comforting the afflicted" (p. 358).

The hypothesis tested by McMordie (1981) "was that the strength of one's convictions in being religious or even non-religious is an important determinant in one's fear of death" (p. 921). Using 320 undergraduate psychology students, McMordie administered a religiosity checklist as well as Templer/McMordie Likert Death Anxiety Scales. The findings indicated a curvilinear relationship, thus substantiating the hypothesis.

Young and Daniels (1981) administered Templer's DAS and a five dimensional religiosity scale to 312 high school students in the rural south. Four of the five dimensions of religiosity were associated with lower death anxiety. The authors also found a weak but significant correlation between death anxiety and the variables of sex and race.

Florian and Har-Even (1983, 1984) sampled 225 high

school Jewish students from religious and non-religious schools. Students then were categorized through two dichotomous variables: sex and religiosity. The subjects were administered a multidimensional death anxiety scale. Males and females both attained significant fear of death but on two different dimensions of the scale. The researchers concluded, "hence, women's fear of death tends to be expressed in passive factors over which there is no control while male fear of death tends to be focused on factors over which greater control is possible" (p. 89). A significant positive relation was found between religiousness and two dimensions of death anxiety: punishment in the hereafter and consequences to family and friends.

As presented earlier, Martin and Wrightsman (1965) found no relationship between age and death anxiety. Their findings were contrary to the findings of Feifel (1955, 1959) who obtained a relationship in later years to death anxiety.

Pollak (1979, 1980), in an empirical review of correlates to death anxiety, found that beyond the developmental years no relationship exists between the variables of age and death anxiety. Pollak cites his own research on 100 graduate students as well as the research of Lester (1967) and Templer, Ruff and Frank (1971) who all used large samples and a wide variance of age. Another study by Templer and Ruff (1971) in which 2500 subjects were used with an age

range of 19 to 85 years, found no significant correlation between age and death anxiety.

Pollak (1979, 1980) cites numerous studies which found no sex differences with regard to degree of death anxiety. Pollak found, however, that some current studies have demonstrated a relationship. Such results coincide with previous related research by Young and Daniels (1981) and Florian and Har-Even (1983, 1984).

The current study expands the research cited through the use of instruments which have exhibited reliability and validity. Without the use of valid instruments the relationship between death anxiety and religiosity cannot be fully understood.

The primary hypothesis based on the research cited was that death anxiety should decrease with those people who "live" their religion rather than "use" it. Therefore, with an increase in intrinsic and a decrease in extrinsic religiosity, death anxiety should decrease. Since, both the intrinsic and extrinsic subscales measure the same intrinsic-extrinsic continuum they should both reflect this relationship.

The secondary hypotheses based on the research reviewed was that no relationship will be found between the variables of age and sex with death anxiety. The vast majority of the studies demonstrated a lack of relationship of age and sex to death anxiety.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 142 Austin Peay State University undergraduates and graduate students. There were 51 males and 91 females with an age range of 18 to 83. All who participated in the present study did so voluntarily.

Description of the Instruments

Templer's DAS (1970) was used to determine the degree of death anxiety. Templer's scale was used because of its demonstrated reliability and validity, and because, according to Kurlycheck, "more normative data are available on Templer's Death Anxiety Scale than any other measure" (Young & Daniels, 1981, p. 224). The DAS is one of the most widely used instruments for measurement of death anxiety. Test-retest reliability of .83 was determined by Templer after a three week interval. Validation was conducted on patients at a state mental hospital in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Those patients who expressed high death anxiety had significantly high scores on the DAS than a control group (Templer, 1970). A copy of the DAS is included in Appendix A.

To measure religiosity, the multidimensional scale IEROS by Allport and Ross (1967) was used. It has demonstrated adequate item-to-subscale reliability. "In the studies by Feagin and by Allport and Ross, as well as in unpublished

research available to us, the Intrinsic-Extrinsic Scale appears consistently to demonstrate its construct validity" (Robinson & Shaver, 1973, pp. 702-703). Item to subscale correlations ranged from .18 to .58 (Robinson & Shaver, 1973). The exact item to subscale correlation is shown next to the item on the scale in Appendix B. The intrinsic and extrinsic scale items were interspersed to prevent response-set agreement. In both scales the higher the score the more extrinsically oriented the individual. This allowed for an analysis of a total score on each individual through simple addition of the two subscale scores. The two dimensions of the IEROS have been demonstrated to be factorially independent. The basic difference between the two dimensions is that the extrinsically motivated persons uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated person lives his religion (Allport & Ross, 1967).

Procedure

The two scales with a cover letter and a release form were presented to students at the end of various sessions at Austin Peay State University and collected by the researcher at the end of the following class meeting. In addition, individual students were selected from the university roster in order to increase age variance required for analysis. An overall return rate of 71% was obtained.

CHAPTER 3

Results

The Pearson product-moment correlation and the point biserial correlation were used to compute the correlation coefficients. Age and death anxiety showed a negative and significant relationship ($r = -.197$, $p < .018$).

The correlation between sex and death anxiety was significant ($r = -.246$, $p < .003$). Females were found to have higher death anxiety than males.

The correlations between the intrinsic and extrinsic scales with death anxiety were significant ($r = .179$, $p < .031$ and $r = .335$, $p < .00$) respectively. Those correlations indicate that the less intrinsic and the more extrinsic an individual is, the greater the death anxiety. The IEROS total scale reflects the same outcome which was significant ($r = .294$, $p < .001$). Table 1 shows the correlations, means, and standard deviations of all hypothesized variables with death anxiety.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

The present research found significant correlations between age and sex with death anxiety. The findings do not support the secondary hypotheses and the majority of studies reviewed.

The negative correlation of age with death anxiety ($r = -.197$, $p < .018$) indicates that as age increases death anxiety decreases. This refutes Feifel's statement that "old age is the time of life when people most fear death" (Feifel, 1955, p. 375). It does support the findings of Martin and Wrightsman (1965) who found a significant negative relationship between these variables in two of three congregations they studied.

That females have greater death anxiety than males is reflected in the negative correlation of sex and death anxiety ($r = -.246$, $p < .003$). This supports the previously cited study of Young and Daniels (1981) who also used Templer's DAS. Young and Daniels believed that "these sex differences seem to be due to culturally produced expectations; for example, boys are expected to be brave and not show fear or anxiety" (p. 227). The present researcher believes this explanation may account for the differences in many research findings. Both the present research and that of Young and Daniels were conducted in

a rural southern community. It may be found that these culturally produced expectations are exacerbated in the rural south and are not as prevalent in other parts of the country. Such a difference could conceivably account for the significant correlation in the rural south but not in other areas of the country.

The primary hypothesis has been supported in the present study. Death anxiety is lessened as a function of an increase in intrinsic religious orientation and a decrease in extrinsic religious orientation. Those individuals who "live" rather than "use" their religion have lower death anxiety. This was supported by the study of Kahoe and Dunn (1975) who found a similar significant relation between intrinsically religious subjects and less death concern.

Of the two subscales, the extrinsic scale gives a higher significant correlation with death anxiety than the intrinsic scale ($r=.335$ and $r=.179$, respectively). The full IEROS correlation with death anxiety ($r=.294$) fell between the two subscales. This finding may be expected because the scales are significantly correlated to each other. The present researcher found a correlation of $r=.277$ ($p < .001$) which supports the correlation of $r=.21$ between the two scales in the study by Allport and Ross. This supports the need for further refinement of the two independent scales.

Although the present investigator believes that the extrinsic scale correlation with Templer's DAS is moderately weak, it does reflect a significant interaction between the variables of religious orientation and death anxiety. As these variables and how to measure them are better understood, a stronger relationship may be found. With this knowledge, hopefully, death will not be the "dreaded and unspeakable issue" and humankind can overcome a major source of anxiety. A lack of a stronger relationship also may be due to the inability of the IEROS to determine those individuals who are non-religious. This conclusion is similar to the one drawn by Templer and Dotson (1970). Future research can be directed toward the elimination of that problem.

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TABLES

Table 1

Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations of All Variables and Death Anxiety.

Variable	r	Mean	SD
Age	-0.197	30.303	14.091
Sex	-0.246	0.359	.481
Extrinsic Scale	0.335	28.683	6.891
Intrinsic Scale	0.179	22.549	7.441
IEORS	0.294	50.951	11.522
Death Anxiety	1.000	7.211	3.515

Correlations between the independent variables with death anxiety were all significant ($p < .05$) $n = 142$.

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

Templer's Death Anxiety Scale (DAS)

please circle the following statements True or False as they apply to you:

- | | | |
|---|------|-------|
| 1. I am very much afraid to die. | True | False |
| 2. The thought of death seldom enters my mind. | True | False |
| 3. It doesn't make me nervous when people talk about death. | True | False |
| 4. I dread to think about having to have an operation. | True | False |
| 5. I am not at all afraid to die. | True | False |
| 6. I am not particularly afraid of getting Cancer. | True | False |
| 7. The thought of death never bothers me. | True | False |
| 8. I am often distressed by the way time flies so very rapidly. | True | False |
| 9. I fear dying a painful death. | True | False |
| 10. The subject of life after death troubles me greatly. | True | False |
| 11. I am really scared of having a heart attack. | True | False |
| 12. I often think about how short life really is. | True | False |
| 13. I shudder when I hear people talking about a World War III. | True | False |
| 14. The sight of a dead body is horrifying to me. | True | False |
| 15. I feel that the future holds nothing for me to fear. | True | False |

Additional information:

Sex _____ Age _____

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

Allport and RossIntrinsic-Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale (IEORS)

Extrinsic Subscale

1. What religion offers me most is comfort when sorrows and misfortune strike. (.49)
 - a. I definitely disagree 1
 - b. I tend to disagree 2
 - c. I tend to agree 4
 - d. I definitely agree 5
2. One reason for my being a church member is that such membership helps to establish a person in the community. (.47)
 - a. Definitely not true 1
 - b. Tends not to be true 3
 - c. Tends to be true 4
 - d. Definitely true 5
3. The purpose of prayer is to secure a happy and peaceful life. (.51)
 - a. I definitely disagree 1
 - b. I tend to disagree 2
 - c. I tend to agree 4
 - d. I definitely agree 5
4. It doesn't matter so much what I believe so long as I lead a moral life. (.39)
 - a. I definitely disagree 1
 - b. I tend to disagree 2
 - c. I tend to agree 4
 - d. I definitely agree 5
5. Although I am a religious person I refuse to let religious considerations influence my everyday affairs. (.31)
 - a. Definitely not true of me 1
 - b. Tends not to be true 2
 - c. Tends to be true 4
 - d. Clearly true in my case 5

6. The church is most important as a place to formulate good social relationships. (.44)
 - a. I definitely disagree 1
 - b. I tend to disagree 2
 - c. I tend to agree 4
 - d. I definitely agree 5
7. Although I believe in my religion, I feel there are many more important things in my life. (.32)
 - a. I definitely disagree 1
 - b. I tend to disagree 2
 - c. I tend to agree 4
 - d. I definitely agree 5
8. I pray chiefly because I have been taught to pray. (.31)
 - a. Definitely true of me 5
 - b. Tends to be true 4
 - c. Tends not to be true 2
 - d. Definitely not true of me 1
9. A primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity. (.33)
 - a. Definitely not true of me 1
 - b. Tends not to be true 2
 - c. Tends to be true 4
 - d. Definitely true of me 5
10. Occasionally I find it necessary to compromise my religious beliefs in order to protect my social and economic well-being. (.18)
 - a. Definitely disagree 1
 - b. Tend to disagree 2
 - c. Tend to agree 4
 - d. Definitely agree 5
11. The primary purpose of prayer is to gain relief and protection. (.50)
 - a. I definitely agree 5
 - b. I tend to agree 4
 - c. I tend to disagree 2
 - d. I definitely disagree 1

Intrinsic Subscale

1. I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life. (.39)
 - a. I definitely disagree 5
 - b. I tend to disagree 4
 - c. I tend to agree 2
 - d. I definitely agree 1
2. Quite often I have been keenly aware of the presence of God or the Divine Being. (.44)
 - a. Definitely not true 5
 - b. Tends not to be true 4
 - c. Tends to be true 2
 - d. Definitely true 1
3. My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life. (.50)
 - a. This is definitely not so 5
 - b. Probably not so 4
 - c. Probably so 2
 - d. Definitely so 1
4. The prayers I say when I am alone carry as much meaning and personal emotion as those said by me during services. (.30)
 - a. Almost never 5
 - b. Sometimes 4
 - c. Usually 2
 - d. Almost always 1
5. If not prevented by unavoidable circumstances, I attend church. (.47)
 - a. More than once a week 1
 - b. About once a week 2
 - c. Two or three times a month 4
 - d. Less than once a month 5
6. If I were to join a church group I would prefer to join (1) a Bible Study group, or (2) a social fellowship. (.49)
 - a. I would prefer to join (1) 1
 - b. I probably would prefer (1) 2
 - c. I probably would prefer (2) 4
 - d. I would prefer to join (2) 5

7. Religion is especially important to me because it answers many questions about the meaning of life. (.28)

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| a. Definitely disagree | 5 |
| b. Tend to disagree | 4 |
| c. Tend to agree | 2 |
| d. Definitely agree | 1 |

8. I read literature about my faith (or church). (.41)

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| a. Frequently | 1 |
| b. Occasionally | 2 |
| c. Rarely | 4 |
| d. Never | 5 |

9. It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and meditation. (.58)

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| a. Frequently true | 1 |
| b. Occasionally true | 2 |
| c. Rarely true | 4 |
| d. Never true | 5 |