

Extending Terror Management Theory to Increase Understanding of Older Adults' Views of Death

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BACKGROUND

- Research on death anxiety and TMT reveals age-related differences in views of death: older people report less death anxiety than younger.
- The dearth of research extending TMT to older people limits explanation of this age difference.
- Individuals with intrinsic religious orientations report less death fear than those with extrinsic orientations. As such, we argue that religious worldview development may be redolent of a change in orientation from extrinsic to intrinsic.
- We applied Baltes' lifespan development perspective to TMT to examine how experiences influence worldview change over time. We argue that worldview adaptations can bolster older adults against death threat and ameliorate death anxiety.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of lifespan experiences in the development of worldview adaptations?
2. How might lifespan experiences be integrated into worldview belief systems?
3. How do older people with strong religious worldviews reflect on the prospect of their own death?

SAMPLE AND METHOD

Sample: 8 American (4 women, 4 men) and 8 German (4 women, 4 men) adults aged 65 to 93; life-long Lutherans (to hold religion constant)

Procedure: focus group discussions to identify individuals who were particularly articulate about their faith for 1- to 2.5-hour personal interviews about the role of spirituality in their lives

Transcripts transcribed verbatim; German transcripts translated to English

ANALYSIS

Multi-phase Directed Content Analysis of Transcripts

Phase 1: General reading, highlighting areas for further exploration and coding

Phase 2: Application of theory-generated, a priori codes (categories = life events, death, worldviews)

Phase 3: Application of new codes for theoretically-relevant text that did not fit initial coding scheme

Rigor (all phases): thematic, theoretical, and methodological memos; audit trail; co-researcher discussions to resolve interpretative differences; triangulation of theories; search for disconfirming evidence; peer debriefing

RESULTS

Theme 1: Lifespan Experiences Bolster Worldviews

Participants reported a perceived growth from adversity, manifested as an adaptation in religious worldview, in describing death as an opportunity for change. When asked if she ever received a "second chance," Emma (German, 68) responded without hesitation:

"It [second chance] came 100% after my husband's death."

She believed the loss of her husband was an opportunity to start over both spiritually and interpersonally. Other incidents that contributed to perceived strengthening in worldview belief were wartime experiences, changes in health and prolonged sickness.

Theme 2: Relational Faith

Almost all participants viewed their faith as relational and highly influenced by the community of religious others, who were sources of strength in times of adversity, influenced religious conversion, and supported lifetime faith practice. Tom (American, 80), reported:

"It's more than Bible study, it's sharing ... we have gone through divorces, deaths, disappointments in children, and have supported each other. And we feel very open."

Such experiences were common, and likely contributed to the efficacy of religious worldview-based meaning making.

Theme 3: Future Time Perspective = Change in Outlook

Participants believed their outlook matured with changes in worldview belief, while also reporting an enhanced perspective through the process of growing older. They exhibited openness to learning and development, becoming "ripe with age," and with realization of life's finitude, shifted focus to family. Miriam (American, 80) described a "looking back" perspective that resulted from experiences with adversity and contributed to an appreciation for life's finitude:

"...but until you've lost something like that [referencing death] and been through a lot of trials and troubles, you really don't know. But, I think it's all for a purpose...I think it helped my faith grow, I really do...maybe I've grown stronger in faith with all those troubles, 'cause you can look back and see and realize how much He's done for you."

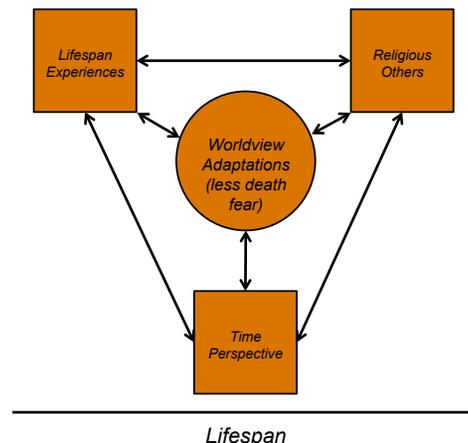
Theme 4: Outcome - Fearless Death

Three-fourths of participants discussed the prospect of their own death, but none mentioned fear, anxiety, or avoidance. Instead, they viewed death as rational, comforting, and an opportunity to re-connect with deceased loved ones. Rebecca (American, 93) explained: [On losing significant others]

"No, I knew it was time for them to go. They were all old and of course every person dies. It must be God's will, isn't it? Everybody is going to die. Some die old and some die young... I know He is my savior, and I'm ready to die, I think! When my time comes, I hope I'm ready."

CONCLUSIONS

- Lifespan experiences, including trauma and adversity, can contribute to perceptions of deeper religious experience and a closer connection with God and the sacred. As such, worldview adaptations may consist of social, spiritual, and personal development across the lifespan that bolsters worldview faith (gains) in response to challenges (losses).
- Similarly, experiences with adversity contributed to a perceived change in worldview that bolstered against death-related fears and anxieties. This worldview was believed to be different than that held earlier in life, which suggests age- or experience-related differences to mortality salience.
- Consistent with literature focusing on religion and aging, participants made meaning of lifespan experiences using religious worldviews. During times of extreme adversity, participants relied on belief systems as sources of resilience.
- Adults in the sample displayed a deep faith that supported a wisdom-like perspective in old age. Their views of death were fearless and without conscious anxiety, which they attributed to faith-based worldviews.



References

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