

**Afterlife And Fear Of Death****Rachel D.Uche**Department of Educational Foundations, Guidance & Counseling
Faculty of Education, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria***Abstract:***

The study set about to determine the extent to which the belief in afterlife mitigates the fear of death among middle aged non-teaching staff members of the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Through Stratified random sampling, 250 respondents were drawn, the ex-post facto design, structured questionnaire was used and the accruing data was analyzed using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation and independent t-test along the two hypothesis formulated . The result indicated fear of death having a positive correlation with belief in afterlife. But a non-significant relationship with gender. The conclusion is that these middle-aged individuals even though spiritually high enough to believe in the afterlife yet they indicate anxiety and fear of death, the only logical step to another meaningful existence.

Key words: Afterlife, death, fear

1.Introduction

Death means lifelessness, a permanent separation of the soul and spirit from the housing of the body (Weissman, 2000); it is the final cessation of all our hopes and dreams, our successes and our failures, our hates, our worries and our plans (Powers, 1995). No wonder it can be a fearful force for many, having to be snatched away from a familiar and comfortable existence. Death's tentacles are ubiquitous and as such can strike through diverse ways, people of all ages – young, middle aged and the old. Afterlife refers to the prospect of another existence after death and this has comforted people since the beginning of recorded time. Believers in the after life therefore, came to view death as a positive and logical step to another meaningful existence (Sachedina, 2005).

Attitude to death varies among the different human developmental stages. Young adults may not be that concerned about death, it may cross their minds but they may not linger on the subject; infact, to them, death due to organic related illnesses seem to be something peculiar to older persons (Marshall & Levy, 1990). Death, to the older person, is highly salient but not apparently as frightening as it was in midlife, perhaps because most individuals, having faced the inevitability, have come to terms with it (Hartup & Steven, 1999). Older adults may be more concerned about the period of uncertainty before death than they are to fear death itself; they are more anxious about where they will live, who will care for them, about the loss of control and independence that may be part of the last days (Marshall & Levy, 1990).

According to Levinson's (1978) theory of the seasons of man's life, confronting the inevitability of one's own death is one of the major psychological tasks of middle age. Such awareness is presumably triggered off by all those signs of body aging that begin to manifest in these middle years, as well as by the death of elderly parents (Bee, 1994). These events combine to break down defenses against awareness of death, and individuals become more consciously afraid. The notion of death, therefore, comes closer home, in the middle age, at which time, individuals bodies begin to send them signals that they are not as young, agile and hearty as they used to be; more and more they think about how many years they have left and how to make the most of these years (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987). Often, especially after the death of both parents, there is a new awareness of being the older generation next in line to die (Scharlach & Fredrickson, 1993). The death of elderly parents can therefore be a sobering experience for those in middle age because it can push such adults into resolving important developmental issues. Issues such as stronger sense of self, a more pressing and realistic

awareness of their own mortality as well as a greater sense of responsibility, contentment and attachment to others (Moss & Moss, 1999).

However, the human nature and survival instincts make it such that nobody wants to die, no matter the age. Fear of death, therefore, tends to be the most persuasive attitude because death means loss of relationships, loss of pleasures and beautiful things of life (Powers, 1995). Some individuals worry about inability to complete all that they set out to do, they feel they have not accomplished what they hoped in life and as such are not ready to let go (Zisook & Downs, 2000). A lot of fear has to do with the cessation of life. Individuals dread the finality of death, the thought of nothingness, of ceasing to exist, of separation from loved ones, the gnawing fear of being replaced and the thought of the decomposition of the body (kavanaugh, 1974).

Regardless, belief in the afterlife, the possibility of a blissful existence in another plane, after death, has been the source of hope and comfort for many throughout the history of mankind. Singh, Singh and Nizamie (2003) stated that belief in the afterlife helps many people face the prospect of death and that they find security in the certainty that proper religious rituals will be performed after their death. Mbiti in Dyer (2004) pointed out that the African-American attitude to death and dying is based on the principles of African philosophical beliefs that life and death, that is, the material and the spiritual are not dichotomous. He added that Africans refer to the act of dying as going away, being called away, and becoming God's property and so on. All these words, Mbiti continued, are reflections of belief that death is not a complete destruction of the individual, that life goes on beyond the grave. In Nigeria, among traditional worshippers, it is believed that the spirits of the ancestors are all around the living, protecting and watching over them (Ojuah, 2003).

In Islam, the belief is that the spirit of the dead returns to its creator (Sachedina, 2005). In Hindu religion, the belief is that the soul is neither created nor destroyed, souls are rather seen as ships in passing and therefore a continuum of life, that is there is life after death (Firth, 2005). The Buddhists believe in the afterlife and reincarnation, where a higher plane of living can be achieved (Keown, 2005). Orthodox Jewish belief, according to Dorft (2005) assures that the dead will rise again for the last judgment and a chance for eternal life. At the core of the Christian faith, is the belief that death is a transformation from the physical, that is, mortality to immortality (Engelhardt & Smith, 2005). The Christian faith further gives assurance of eternal bliss (heaven) for good works on earth and eternal condemnation (hell), based on evil works. The Roman

Catholic faith, even stretches further with a promise of purgatory, a transitional abode, where the soul is purged and purified for admission into heaven (Markwell, 2005).

However, the afterlife is rather an unknown destination to the living as no one has been known to have died and returned to life. Though earlier studies of renowned thanatologist, Kubler-Ross (1981), related the accounts of persons who have shown some clinical signs of death and have been revived. These persons all claimed to have had some out-of-body experiences which were all remarkably similar. The study of Sabom (1982) with 116 cardiac patients also corroborated the accounts of Kubler-Ross's subjects. They also related near-death experiences that were similar to those of Kubler-Ross's patients.

First, there is a passage to a pain-free existence in which the body, no matter how deceased or mutilated, feels good, whole and sound. Second, there is an awareness of physical self that remains; there is an *out of body* sensation in which one can see and be aware of all that goes on while at the same time being apart, as if viewing a movie. Third, there is a sensation of being bathed in a warm golden light instead of being plunged into darkness or void. Finally, there is a flashback experience in which the events of one's life is reviewed and evaluated. Is this what death really is like? Do these experiences really provide a glimpse into the afterlife? No one can be too sure.

Indeed, the middle age is the next generation in line vulnerable to death through chronic diseases. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in middle age, followed by cancer and cerebrovascular diseases (National Centre for Health Statistics, 2004). Besides, the longevity picture in developing world is quite grim, where in sub-saharan Africa, life expectancy for male is 48 and 50 for female; in Nigeria specifically, the figure stands at 52 for males and 53 for females (Earth Trends, 2003-2008). Moreover, in Nigeria, persons in middle age, because of their fairly secure financial standing, are usually the target of kidnappers and armed robbers and even victims of politically motivated assassinations are usually of this age bracket.

Consequently, does the belief in a blissful life (afterlife) beyond the grave in any way mitigate the fear of death among middle aged non-teaching staff members of the University of Calabar? Does level of their spiritual involvement make any difference in their fear of death? Is there any difference in the fear of death between the male believers and the female believers in the afterlife?

Since fear of death seems to be the most pervasive according to Powers (1995) and Uche (2007), the purpose of this study therefore is to determine the extent to which belief in

afterlife mitigate the fear of death among middle aged non-teaching staff members of the University of Calabar. Belief in the afterlife is derivable from philosophical and religious inclinations.

2.Hypothesis

- Belief in the afterlife does not significantly influence fear of death among non-teaching staff members.
- Gender does not significantly influence fear of death among non-teaching staff members.

3.Methodology

The ex-post facto design was used since the researcher is examining retrospectively the effects of belief in the afterlife on the fear of death with a view to establishing a causal link between them. The study was carried out in the University of Calabar (UNICAL) located in Cross River State of Nigeria.

The stratified random sampling was employed in the seven units/departments and a sample of 250 was drawn from a total population of 1466 non-teaching staff, comprising both senior and junior members. The sample consisted of 178 males and 72 females with a mean age of 49.

Data was collected by means of questionnaire which required respondents to state their age and gender and then tick yes or no to 10 statements relating to the afterlife in part 1 and then to 6 statements referring to their fear of death in part 2. Statements in part 1 included:- existence of a supreme God who created human beings; eternal life with God after death; existence of a happier home beyond the grave etc. Part 2 statements included:- heaven may be my home, however, I prefer this earthly home; to be alive is good, however, to die is more beneficial in Christ; I avoid any discussion pertaining to death etc.

The reliability of the instrument was determined through the test-retest approach given at two weeks interval, to 60 staff members outside of the sampled pool. Using the Cronbach Alpha reliability estimate, values of 0.68 and 0.71 were derived for part 1 and part 2 respectively.

The instrument was administered to the 250 sampled members of staff in their various offices and the following day same were retrieved. The responses were later duly coded

and the accruing data were analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation and independent test. Summaries of results are presented in the following tables.

4.Results

4.1.Hypothesis 1

Belief in the afterlife does not significantly influence fear of death among non-teaching staff members.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation was utilized to test this hypothesis. The results of analysis of this data are shown in table 1.

Variables	\bar{X}	SD	r	sig. level
Belief in afterlife	18.34	1.88		0.01
			0.277*	
Fear of death	10.22	1.64		

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlation of belief in the afterlife and fear of death scores (N=250)

**P<.05; df=248 Critical r= .113*

The result in table 1 shows a calculated r value of 0.277 which implies positive relationship between belief in afterlife and fear of death. That is to say, even though non-teaching staff members have a strong belief in the afterlife, they still have a sense of fear of death. Since the calculated r is statistically significant at 0.01 significance level and 248 degrees of freedom, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

4.2.Hypothesis 2

Gender does not significantly influence fear of death among non-teaching staff members.

This hypothesis was tested using independent t-test statistics. The results are shown in table 2.

Variable	N	\bar{X}	SD	t-value	Sig. level
Male	178	10.17	1.70		.401
				-0.840	
Female	72	10.36	1.48		

Table 2: Independent t-test comparison of fear of death between male and female non-teaching staff members

**P>.05; df=248; Critical t=1.96*

The result on table 2 indicates that female non-teaching staff have a slightly higher fear of death score ($X=10.36$; $\bar{SD}=1.48$) than their male counterparts ($X=10.17$; $\bar{SD}=1.70$), which is however, not statistically significant ($P>.05$). Since the calculated t-value, -.840 is less than the critical t-value of 1.96 at .05 significance level and 248 degrees of freedom, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

5. Discussion

In this study, for the independent variable, *belief in the afterlife* the expected maximum score is 20 and minimum 10, however, the mean score stands at 18.34. This reflects a strong belief in the afterlife which is not surprising since majority of respondents belong to religious groupings whose article of faith include blissful existence way beyond the grave. On the other hand, maximum score for the dependent variable, *fear of death*, is 12 and the minimum 6, while the calculated mean score is 10.22. This is an indication of high level of fear of death among respondents who profess a strong belief in the afterlife, gender not withstanding.

The results of hypothesis one therefore, gives a strong indication of fear of death among middle aged non-teaching staff of the University of Calabar, in spite of their strong belief in the afterlife.

There is a positive relationship between belief in afterlife and fear of death ($r=0.277$; critical $r=0.113$). Meaning that the stronger the belief in the afterlife, the higher the level of fear of death. As baffling as this result is, it is not really surprising because this society studied, like most modern ones have become death denying. Individuals seem to be in denial of the ultimate fact of death, besides, because of the advances in modern medicine, people have become more confident of reaching old age because they are more likely to overcome illnesses that were once regarded as fatal (Macue, 1995). Similarly,

individuals could be blinded by materialism and cares of daily living that they lose focus on their spirituality and beliefs. The spiritually unaware run after transitory pleasure and material objects, believing that wealth, comfort, power and friends will bring lasting happiness and long life (Power, 1995). Uche (2010) also hinted to worldliness and materialism as probable reasons for denial and outright fear of death among senior citizens in Cross River State.

The result of hypothesis two indicate that there is no significant relationship between gender and fear of death ($t = -0.840$; male $\bar{X} = 10.17$; female $\bar{X} = 10.36$). Both male and female non-teaching staff members have high levels of fear of death despite their strong belief in the afterlife. Survival instincts of the human nature does not discriminate gender or creed. Death is dreaded by all because of its finality and the mystery surrounding it. Infact its seeming finality presents one of the most formidable challenges of the notion that human life has meaning and purpose, hence fear is the most commonly expressed response (Gordon, 2000). Both men and women have issues that tie them to this present existence which cause anxiety and fear at the thought of being pulled out early, because of close relationships and concerns about accomplishing life goals. Hence individuals seem to cringe at the thought of death because it spells the loss of relationships, loss of pleasures and inability to accomplish life goals (Zisook & Downs, 2000; Powers, 1995). Death is a mystery to all, no matter the age, gender or religious inclination, individuals therefore; tend to bargain with death to allow them stay longer on earth, perhaps because of fear of the unknown. For, what individuals dread most is the thought of nothingness, the decomposition of the body and infact it is the fear of the prospect of bodiless existence that has caused many religions to offer a new body on the other side of death (Moore & Williamson, 2003). It could also be that the individuals are not properly rooted in their religious beliefs, perhaps, because they pay little attention to prayer & meditation or because of their approach to their faith. Individuals with more literal approach tend towards fear and avoidance of death and as they try to face their deep rooted fear of death, they struggle to find solace in the literal biblical idea that believers will be rewarded and sinners will be punished (Duriez, 2003).

6. Conclusion And Recommendation

This study found that middle aged respondents in this university are highly religious and hence believe strongly in the afterlife with its promise of a blissful existence. However, this strong belief does not translate into acceptance of death through which the blissful

existence can be realized. In essence, these individuals' belief in the afterlife has done little to mitigate the fear of death, perhaps due to the fact that they are not spiritual enough to be ready to depart to the glorious beyond at anytime. They are more like unbelieving believers, whom death can easily take unawares, without adequate preparation, leaving survivors confounded and helpless.

There is therefore the need for counselors and religious leaders to reiterate the fact that belief in the afterlife goes hand in hand with acceptance of death. The fear of death or death anxiety only helps to preclude individuals from *putting their house in order* and making adequate preparations such that their loved ones will not be left in doubt and confusion upon their sudden passing on.

There should be sensitization of the middle aged individuals to the fact that this stage of life is often fraught with the unforeseen circumstances of death from age related diseases and societal insecurities. Hence there is the need to be prepared at all times.

7.Reference

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