



Death anxiety as a function of belief in an afterlife. A comparison between a questionnaire measure and a Stroop measure of death anxiety

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Abstract

Three groups with different kinds of beliefs about life after death (religious believers, atheists, and agnostics) were compared on a questionnaire measure of death anxiety and a Stroop task with death-related words. Although the religious believers reported less death anxiety than the atheists and the agnostics on the questionnaire measure, they did not differ from the other two groups on the Stroop measure. On the other hand, there was a significant interference effect of the death-related words among all subjects, and this effect correlated with age. The results are discussed in terms of the validity of self-report measures and Stroop interference measures of death anxiety. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Is there a relationship between religious belief and death anxiety, such that religiously involved people experience less fear of death? Several studies (Aday, 1984; Alvarado, Templer, Bresler, and Thomas-Dobson, 1995; Minean and Brush, 1980; Gibbs and Achterberg-Lewis, 1978; Templer, 1972; Wittkowski and Baumgartner, 1977; Young and Daniels, 1980) have shown that persons who score high on religious attitudes tend to score lower on measures of death anxiety. One of the religious variables which have been found to correlate with death anxiety is belief in an afterlife (e.g. Alvarado et al., 1995; Minean and Brush, 1980). These studies, however, have all relied on self-report measures of religious attitudes and death anxiety, and it is possible that the results are influenced by self-presentation concerns. For example, if a religious person harbours a belief that

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religious persons should not be afraid of death, and wants to present him- or herself as such a person, then this might affect his or her way of answering self-report questionnaires about death anxiety.

In order to test the hypothesis of a negative relationship between religious attitudes and death anxiety in a more objective way, therefore, we need a measure of death anxiety that does not rely on self-report. One such possible instrument is the emotional Stroop task. One of the most robust findings in cognitive research on anxiety is that patients with anxiety disorders and subjects with high trait anxiety show Stroop interference for threat words, i.e. they take longer to name the colour of threat words than neutral control words (for a review, see Williams, Mathews and MacLeod, 1996). Moreover, this effect seems to be relatively specific to words referring to the particular kind of anxiety that the person experiences. Social phobics, for example, have been shown to exhibit Stroop interference for social threat words, although not for physical threat words (Hope, Rapee, Heimberg and Dombeck, 1990; Lundh and Öst, 1996; Mattia, Heimberg and Hope, 1993).

If Stroop interference is a reliable index of anxiety, it may therefore be expected that individuals with anxiety about death will show more Stroop interference for death-related words, and that the index of Stroop interference for death-related words may be used as a measure of death anxiety. The purpose of the present study was to compare subjects with different kinds of beliefs about life after death with regard to their death anxiety, as measured both by a self-report questionnaire and by a Stroop task with death-related words.

In an earlier correlational study, Saboonchi and Lundh (1997) used a Stroop task which involved a category of death-related words together with a Swedish translation of Templer's (1970) Death Anxiety Scale (DAS). The DAS is a 15 items questionnaire with statements like "I am very much afraid to die" and "The sight of a dead body is horrifying to me". The results showed a significantly prolonged colour naming latency on the death-related words among the 70 subjects. The degree of Stroop interference for death-related words did not, however, correlate with the subjects' scores on the Death Anxiety Scale ($r = -0.09$). The fact that the death-related words did interfere with the colour-naming task among the subjects does suggest that the Stroop interference index for death-related words measures some kind of emotional response to death-related information. The lack of correlation between the Stroop measure and the self-report DAS measure may either mean that these two measures capture different aspects of death anxiety, or that one or both of these measures are impure measures of death anxiety since they are influenced by other processes. The DAS self-report measure may, for example, be influenced by self-presentation concerns, and the Stroop measure may be influenced by conscious coping strategies for dealing with anxiety-related information.

As a self-report measure, the present study made use of Templer, Lavoie, Chalguban and Thomas-Dobson's (1990) 17-item Death Depression Scale (DDS). Templer et al. found that the DDS had good internal consistency, and correlated $r = 0.67$ with the Death Anxiety Scale (DAS). Although the DDS was constructed with the purpose of providing an instrument for assessing depression, rather than anxiety, associated with the topic of death, Templer et al.'s study indicated that there were no significant differences between the DDS and the DAS in their pattern of correlations with general anxiety and general depression. Both the DDS and the DAS did, in fact, correlate more highly with anxiety than with depression, which makes it appropriate to use the DDS as an instrument for assessing death anxiety.

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