

A Study on Life and Death Attitudes Related to the Death and Bereavement Experiences of University Students in Japan

— An Examination Using the Death Attitudes Inventory —

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Abstract : In a previous study on the university students' attitudes toward life and death, it has been reported that female students show a greater tendency than male students to perceive death as liberation, and to believe in the existences of life span and fate. However, among the students involved in the study, the number of students who had never experienced the death of a family member was overwhelmingly large. This study, therefore, examined the attitudes toward life and death of university students in accordance with their bereavement experiences. The results showed that, in the third "death as liberation" factor, female students with bereavement experiences scored significantly higher than those without. This factor signifies the liberation of the soul and liberation from suffering, pain, bitterness, and the struggles of life. Thus, death was by no means perceived as something to be avoided, but was rather perceived as something positive. It was considered, that a new significance was being given to the concept of death, through its re-recognition, and the reconstruction of the self and one's surrounding in relation to this re-recognition.

Keywords : Attitudes towards life and death, bereavement experience, university students, welfare, thanatology

Introduction

We gain a variety of experiences while living our lives. University students, likewise, experience many things on a daily basis. While some students may have experienced exciting and joyous moments, there are also others who have experienced profound losses following the passing of their loved ones. What influences do such loss experiences have on the students' attitudes toward life and death?

In order to live through their own lives, and to be able to respect the dignity of the people they engage with, it is important for university students who are aiming to become care workers or healthcare professionals, to face and deepen their knowledge about life and death.

The importance of life and death education and research has been discussed by Itoshima (2005), in her research on the formation of attitudes towards life and death; Sonoda et al. (2007), in their examination of attitudes toward life and death of students who have completed the course on terminal care; Ishida et al. (2007), in their study of

nursing students' attitudes toward life and death; Murakami et al. (2012), in their research on students' attitudes toward death in the undergraduate training of social workers within the academic department; and by Sugiura et al. (2013), in their survey of pharmacy students' attitudes toward death. It is necessary for university students, regardless of their major, to build an attitude towards life and death as a way of thinking, a form of perception, and as a reflection of their own values.

How one faces one's own life and death, and faces the life and death in one's surrounding during adolescence, a stage when one develops the capability of perceiving things more objectively rather than subjectively, plays a significant role in the formation of later life. In an intergenerational study, Tomimatsu (2012) has described in detail about the attitudes toward life and death examined from a developmental point of view. Tange (1999) has noted that dealing with death as a subject during adolescence could also lead to the forming of the foundations for later life. Also, Morimoto (2005) has indicated that the period that

the nursing students study nursing science, is also the formative period for their ego identities. In just the same way, the period that university students study thanatology, must also be the formative period for their ego identities. The study by Morimoto (2005) has also suggested that the establishment of the ego identity has an effect on attitudes toward life and death. Therefore, it is all the more necessary to examine the attitudes toward life and death of adolescents, particularly of that of university students in their late-adolescence years. Morikawa (1999) has remarked the need for an approach or curriculum that takes into account the developmental stages of each student. For considering the life and death education in universities, it is crucial that the studies on attitudes toward life and death are conducted with a focus given to adolescents.

In the intergenerational study on attitudes toward life and death, Tomimatsu (2012) has observed a significant difference among age, gender, presence or absence of bereavement experiences, and the experience of feeling close to death. Particularly, in the context of the relationship between attitudes toward life and death and bereavement experiences, significant tendencies were observed, which depended on the presence or the absence of bereavement experiences relating to the death of a significant person. The study has revealed that for those with significant bereavement experiences, death has a positive effect on life, and also that the bereaved have a greater tendency to seek meaning in death. The significance of the effects of bereavement on attitudes toward life and death, as well the significance of their relationship, has been discussed in the studies of Kawai (1996), Sawai (2000), Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2001), Yamazaki et al. (2002), Uchinuno (2003), Furuya et al. (2003), Tachibana (2004), and Akasawa (2003). In order to examine attitudes toward life and death, it is necessary to consider its relationship with bereavement experiences.

However, not all studies are suggestive of a significant relationship between the attitudes toward life and death and experiences of bereavement. Ishida (2003) has suggested that differences could arise in attitudes toward life and death, depending on whether the term "close" in "death of a close person" is clearly defined for the

subjects, or on whether the term holds the same meaning for all subjects, and depending on how close the "friend" actually was to a subject. Also, in the study by Sugiura (2013), no significance has been proved contrary to expectations. Sugiura has explained, that the results may have been offset by the tendency to refuse the anxiety towards death and thoughts about death, when death is perceived as a reality following their bereavement experience relating to the death of a close family member. The study also did not involve a detailed survey on the relationship between the students and the subject, and on the time that has elapsed since the bereavement experiences. Sugiura has also pointed out, that the collection of additional information will be necessary for further analysis. As described above, the relationship of the students with the subject, and the time that has elapsed since the bereavement, plays a significant role in the study of bereavement experiences. It is presumed, that the way in which the close person passed away, could also have an effect on the results.

In this study, after laying down the survey methods, the data was analyzed and examined with a focus on the presence and absence of bereavement experiences, in order to deepen the understanding of the effects that bereavement experiences have on the attitudes toward life and death of university students.

Method

Participants of the Survey

Participants of the survey were students enrolled in the thanatology course, which was opened in the second semester at a health and social services university. This included a total of 134 students who had agreed to participate in the study, of which 77 were male, and 57 were female. Their ages ranged from 18-24.

Content of the Survey

2 types of surveys were used, including the survey on basic attributes, and the Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) for surveying the attitudes toward life and death.

Survey on Basic Attributes 34 question items were prepared for the survey on basic attributes. Of the 34 questions items, the first 21 items included

questions concerning age, gender, religion, and experiences with end-of-life care, and items 22 to 35 included questions concerning bereavement experiences, the deceased, and the time at which the bereavement was experienced.

Survey on Attitudes toward Life and Death The Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) was used for surveying on attitudes toward life and death. The Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) is a questionnaire method developed by Hirai et al. (1999) for measuring the attitudes toward life and death of Japanese subjects, for which the reliability and validity has previously been verified (2000). The Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) consists of 7 factors, which includes factor 1 "Belief in the Afterlife," factor 2 "Anxiety towards Death," factor 3 "Death as Liberation," factor 4 "Avoidance of death," factor 5 "Feeling of Purpose in Life," factor 6 "Concerns about Death," and factor 7 "Belief in a Life Span." A total of 27 question items were prepared for the survey. Sets of 4 question items were assigned for each of the factors from factor 1 to factor 6, and 3 question items were assigned for factor 7. A 7-point scale was used for the evaluation of each question item, the lowest point being 1 and the highest point being 7. Therefore, for each of the factors from factor 1 to factor 6, the lowest possible score was 4 points, and the highest possible score was 28 points. As for factor 7, the lowest possible score was 3 points, and the highest possible score was 21 points. In this method, the scores for each factor were to be obtained instead of the total score of all the factors combined.

Survey Period/Location and Procedure

Survey Period and Location The survey was conducted in January 2014.

Survey Procedure Participants were provided with

an explanation concerning the aim of the survey and its ethical considerations before the start of the survey. The survey sheets were handed out directly to the participants, and collected immediately after they were completed.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted with the approval of the ethics board of the research institution to which the author belongs. In regards to the protection of personal data, the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards and provisions of the Chubu Gakuin University.

Results and Discussion

Concerning the Experience of Bereavement

Attitudes toward life and death are formed and established through various experiences gained within society, including those experienced at home and in school. Most notably, the experience of bereavement marks a turning point in one's attitudes toward life and death. Table 1 shows the result of the survey concerning the presence and absence of bereavement experiences among the participants in the study. 79 out of the 134 survey participants have responded that they have bereavement experiences, while 55 have responded that they have no bereavement experiences. The proportion of participants with bereavement experiences was 59.0%, as shown in the table. By gender, it was found that 63.6% of all the male students (49 students) have bereavement experiences, and 52.6% of all the female students (30 students) have bereavement experiences. The number of male students with bereavement experiences was slightly higher.

In a previous report (Katagiri, 2014), survey participants, fulfilling the same requirements as

Table 1 Presence and Absence of Bereavement Experiences of Students

	Presence	Absence	Total
Male Students	49(63.6)	28(36.4)	77(100)
Female Students	30(52.6)	27(47.4)	57(100)
Total	79(59.0)	55(41.0)	134(100)

Note : The numbers inside the () are %.

this study, had been asked the question, "Do you have the experience of providing end-of-life care to a member of your family?" To which, 15.0% (17 students) had responded, "Yes, I have the experience," while 82.3% (93 students) had responded, "No, I don't have the experience." By gender, 13.8% (8 students) of the male students, and 17.0% (9 students) of the female students had responded, "Yes, I have the experience." As shown in these results, the number of students with end-of-life care experiences had been extremely low. Although it was considered, that the results could be a reflection of the spread of the nuclear family structure, there was a concern that the usage of the term "end-of-life" might have had an influence on the outcome. It was possible that there had been students among those that had participated in the study, who had not been able to understand the meaning of the term. Also, the low number of those with experience could have been caused by the expression used in the question concerning the subjects' "care" experiences. Therefore, in the present survey, the expression "bereavement experiences" was used instead of the expression "end-of-life care experiences." As a result, the number of those with bereavement experiences significantly rose, as shown in Table 1. Although a direct comparison is not possible, the proportion of "yes" responses increased from 15.0% to 59.0%. This suggests that a problem had existed with the way in which the subjects of the previous study had understood the expression, "end-of-life." Despite this, the influence of the spread of the nuclear family structure has been pointed out as a reason

for the fact that only a little over half of the subjects in their late teens and early twenties have had bereavement experiences. Setting aside the question of whether the rise in the nuclear family or the rise in hospital deaths came first, by 1976, the rate of home deaths had fallen below the rate of hospital deaths, and the rate of hospital deaths has currently gone far over 80% (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Vital Statistics Survey, 2014). This is reflected in the increase in the population of people who do not experience bereavement during the developmental years. Tange (2004) has noted that dealing with death as a subject during adolescence leads to the forming of a foundation of life. Koizumi (2007) has also pointed out the importance of bereavement experiences, especially those of loss and bereavement during adolescence, which could become an important process for obtaining a new individual identity. Worden (1993) has also remarked about the importance of bereavement experience, stating that those who have experienced bereavement have the ability to engage with grief in a more proactive manner. The lack of bereavement experiences in the context of lifelong development is an important topic for further investigation. It was decided that the next step was to examine the way in which bereavement experiences affect attitudes toward death and life.

The Relationship between Attitudes toward Life and Death and Bereavement Experiences

Table 2 shows the average scores of each of the 7 factors of the Death Attitudes Inventory

Table 2 The Average Scores of the DAI Factors According to the Presence or Absence of Bereavement Experiences

Factor Number and Name	Present (79 students)	Absent (55 students)	t value
1. Belief in the Afterlife	18.99 (5.99)	18.29 (4.40)	0.780
2. Anxiety towards Death	17.10 (6.44)	17.93 (6.17)	0.752
3. Death as Liberation	16.43 (6.16)	14.42 (4.24)	2.238*
4. Avoidance of Death	13.37 (6.03)	13.42 (5.08)	0.052
5. Feeling of Purpose in Life	15.67 (4.92)	16.00 (5.40)	0.361
6. Concerns about Death	16.08 (5.37)	15.40 (4.52)	0.793
7. Belief in a Life Span	11.70 (4.66)	11.44 (3.99)	0.346

Note: The numbers inside the () are standard deviations. The asterisk (*) indicates significance at the 5% level.

(DAI) according to the presence or absence of bereavement experiences. This was used to examine the relationship between bereavement experiences and the attitudes toward life and death. According to Table 2, no association was recognized between the bereavement experiences and all the factors excluding factor 3. However, the average score for those with bereavement experiences was significantly higher than those without for factor 3 "Death as Liberation." Factor 3 "Death as Liberation" of the Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) consists of four question items: "I believe that death is liberation from this from the suffering in this life," "I believe that death is liberation from the weight of this life," "Death is liberation from pain and suffering," and "Death liberates the soul."

It is clear that students with bereavement experiences have a greater tendency than those without, to perceive death as liberation, and to have a positive attitude towards death. It was considered that students with bereavement experiences do not perceive death as something that should be avoided, and have instead given new significances to the concept of death through its re-recognition. Next, an examination was conducted based on gender, given the results of the previous study in which female students had scored higher than male students for factor 3 (Katagiri, 2014).

The Relationship between Attitudes toward Life and Death and Bereavement Experiences Based on

Gender

Male Students Table 3-1 shows the average scores of the male students across the 7 factors of the Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) according to the presence and absence of bereavement experiences. According to the table, there were no significant differences observed for all seven factors among those with bereavement experiences and those without. This may have been due to the male students' tendency to be less concerned about death, or their lack of acknowledgement of death as a significant event. No significant differences were observed for the factors of the Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) between the presence and absence of bereavement experiences, by extracting and examining the data of only male students. However, the results for factor 1 "Belief in the Afterlife" and factor 2 "Anxiety towards Death" showed that students with bereavement experiences have a greater tendency than those without, to believe in the afterlife, and to be less concerned about death. The results for factor 3 "Death as Liberation" and factor 7 "Belief in a Life Span" showed that male students with bereavement experiences also have a greater tendency than those without, to perceive death as liberation and fate, and to have a positive attitude towards death. It was considered that male students with bereavement experiences do not perceive death as something that should be avoided, and have instead given new significances to the concept of death through its re-recognition. The scores of the female students have most

Table 3-1 Male Students' Average Scores for DAI Factors According to the Presence or Absence of Bereavement Experiences

Factor Number and Name	Present	Absent	t value
1. Belief in the Afterlife	18.71 (6.83)	17.75 (4.06)	0.774
2. Anxiety towards Death	16.49 (7.14)	17.36 (6.60)	0.540
3. Death as Liberation	16.12 (6.75)	14.79 (4.48)	1.037
4. Avoidance of Death	13.57 (6.54)	13.82 (5.15)	0.185
5. Feeling of Purpose in Life	15.41 (5.27)	15.89 (5.32)	0.382
6. Concerns about Death	15.98 (5.95)	15.43 (4.38)	0.463
7. Belief in a Life Span	11.63 (5.23)	10.96 (4.08)	0.624

Note: The numbers inside the () are standard deviations. The asterisk (*) indicates significance at the 5% level.

Table 3-2 Female Students' Average Scores for DAI Factors According to the Presence and Absence of Bereavement Experiences

Factor Number and Name	Present	Absent	t value
1. Belief of the Afterlife	19.43 (4.37)	18.85 (4.75)	0.478
2. Anxiety towards Death	18.10 (5.07)	18.52 (5.75)	0.291
3. Death as Liberation	16.93 (5.11)	14.04 (4.03)	2.383*
4. Avoidance of Death	13.03 (5.19)	13.00 (5.06)	0.022
5. Feeling of Purpose in Life	16.10 (4.33)	16.11 (5.57)	0.008
6. Concerns about Death	16.23 (4.34)	15.37 (4.74)	0.548
7. Belief in a Life Span	11.80 (3.64)	11.93 (3.92)	0.129

Note: The numbers inside the () are standard deviations. The asterisk (*) indicates significance at the 5% level.

likely influenced the results for factor 3 in Table 2, where a significant difference was observed.

Female Students Table 2-2 shows the average scores of the female students across the 7 factors of the Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI), according to the presence and absence of bereavement experiences. A significant difference was observed for factor 3 between the scores of those with bereavement experiences and those without.

The factors of the Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) were examined according to the presence and the absence of bereavement experiences, by extracting the data of only female students. A significant difference was observed for factor 3 "Death as Liberation." Factor 3 "Death as Liberation" consists of four question items: "I believe that death is liberation from the suffering in this life." "I believe that death is liberation from the weight of this life." "Death is liberation from pain and suffering." "Death liberates the soul." Given that a significant difference was observed for the data of female students with bereavement experiences, it was considered that female students with bereavement experiences have a greater tendency than those without, to perceive death not as something that should be avoided, and to have a positive attitude toward death. It was also considered that those female students have given new significance to the concept of death through its re-recognition, and the reconstruction of themselves and their surroundings. No significant differences were observed for the other factors to the extent of factor 3. However, the results for factor 1 "Belief in the Afterlife" showed that students with

bereavement experiences have a greater tendency than those without to believe in the afterlife. It was considered that students with bereavement experiences do not perceive death as something that should be avoided, and have given new significances to the concept of death through its re-recognition. The scores of the female students have most likely influenced the results for factor 3 in Table 2, where a significant difference was observed.

Conclusion

The experience of bereavement marks a turning point in an individual's awareness of life and death. In this study, the presence and the absence of bereavement experiences was examined among 134 survey participants. Of which, 79 have responded that they have bereavement experiences, while 55 have responded that they have no bereavement experiences. The proportion of students with bereavement experiences was 59.0%, outnumbering those without bereavement experiences. By gender, it was found that 63.6% of all the male students (49 students) have bereavement experiences, and 52.6% of all the female students (30 students) have bereavement experiences. The number of male students with bereavement experiences was slightly higher.

The association between the factors of the Death Attitudes Inventory (DAI) and the presence or absence of bereavement experiences was examined. There were no significant differences observed for the factors in the data of male students, but a significant difference was observed

in the data of female students for factor 3 "Death as Liberation." Based on this result, it was considered that female students with bereavement experiences have a larger tendency than those without, to perceive death not as something that should be avoided, and to have a positive attitude towards death. It was also considered that these female students have given new significances to the concept of death through its re-recognition, and the reconstruction of themselves and their surroundings.

University students experience many things on a daily basis. Among them, there are those who are in the process of forming and establishing their own attitudes toward life and death through their experiences of loss relating to the death of a close person. Others, who have never experienced the death of a close person, or are yet to have encountered death during their training, may also come to face the topic of life and death through their thanatology studies.

In order to live through their own lives, and to be able to respect the dignity of the people they engage with, it is important for university students who are aiming to become care workers or healthcare professionals, to face and deepen their knowledge about life and death.

For the future, we would like to verify the findings of this study using a polygonal approach, and through the collection of additional data. Also, given that an individual's attitudes toward life and death are established through various experiences within society, including those experienced at home, in the school, and in the local community, we would like to research further about the topic of life and death education. We want to clarify in detail what students experience in school education prior to university, and in what school subjects they were introduced in, and thereby deepen our knowledge about life-and-death learning as a means for fostering a sense of respect for human dignity.

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