

Concepts of Death among Filipino Children

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ABSTRACT : *This study aimed at exploring of the concepts of irreversibility, universality, finality, causality of death and Filipino children's other concepts of death. It investigated 30 children, ages 7–11 as the participants, utilized semi-structured questions, and drawing exercises. Findings show that the development of concept of death among Filipino Children is not a single construct and requires understanding the different concepts of irreversibility, universality finality and causality of death. Grasping these concepts require understanding of non-corporeal continuation, dys-functionality, all-inclusiveness, unpredictable, inevitable, immobility, and insensitivity. Children understand that sickness, tragedy or accidents and personal conflicts are conditions that really do or can bring about the death of a living thing. Filipino children's other concept of death lies in their belief in the divine providence and old age. The concepts of death among Filipino children is regarded as either concrete or abstract and goes on evolving towards maturity through socialization, personal experiences and children's observation in the environment.*

Keywords: *irreversibility, universality, finality, causality, divine providence, old age*

I. INTRODUCTION

Children are usually associated or visualized with positive images that would most likely be a picture of youth filled with smiles and giggles, running and jumping, laughing and playing. And because of such positive ideas, society, especially adults, tries so hard to avoid creating links between children and negative things. On the contrary, whenever people think of death the usual picture that would come to their minds would most likely be a picture of drought, destruction, and decay filled with sobs and moans, tears from crying, sorrow and pain. It has been a practical notion in society that death triggers negative emotions. Death is hardly ever associated with children, and children are very often uninformed on ideas that explain death. It can be attributed to the fact that children barely show hints of a particular emotion on the matter; practically because of their little knowledge regarding death in terms of exposure and experience. And on very rare instances, whenever children do encounter death, be it in cases that involve their pet, an old relative, or a sibling, adults would most often give false notions and explanations regarding the matter, or would not talk about it at all. As a result, an opportunity is missed in finding out what the child is really thinking and whether or not such impressions are true.

Children may not be fully aware of the constructs with regards to understanding death. As such, they often associate death with sleep, without knowing that it is irreversible, universal, and final (De Spelder & Strickland, 2005). However, some children, particularly those who have seen death or those children who are experiencing life-threatening illnesses or diseases may think otherwise. Loss is something that everyone experiences- whatever age, gender, sex, educational background, or socioeconomic level. Such encounter brings untold sadness, anxiety, depression, and the feeling of emptiness. People may experience being uninterested in or saddened by involvements and activities one would normally enjoy (Villar, 2009).

School Psychology is a field of psychology and education, which aims to work collaboratively with students, parents, teachers, and other professionals to address student issues. Specifically, it assists in diagnosing and remediating mild to serious emotional problems of children, youth, parents and teachers at all levels of education. It is quite significant to have knowledge of how children use their mental processes in learning and adapting to different life situations, which include death. The researcher views that the concept of death is a concern of psychology and education for it involves experiences, emotions, and cognitive functioning, thus it can be further evaluated. Moreover, it is essential to become aware of children's construct concerning death, particularly those who have seen death or suffered from loss of a family member. As such, the researcher believes it is imperative to embark on a research study that will locally assess the concepts of death among Filipino children. Understanding children's concept of death may help professionals reduce, if not eliminate problems of students affecting their total development, specifically children who experience grief due to the loss of the significant others, or even loss of their loved pets, for which they spent most of their time, emotions, and attentions.

The present study presumed that children have different concepts of irreversibility, universality, finality and causality of death. Filipino children may have different understanding on the possibility of coming to life after death. This may be different from their view on how death applies to all living things, which includes death among plants, animals and humans. Furthermore, the present study presumed that children have various concepts on how all life-defining bodily functions cease at death and the events that cause death to all living things. Lastly, the researcher presumed that participants have distinct concepts of death because of the rich value system and way of life among Filipinos in general.

The focal point is to determine the concepts of death among selected Filipino children. Specifically, this study answered the following questions: (1) What are the concepts of irreversibility of death among Filipino children?; (2) What are the concepts of universality of death among Filipino children?; (3) What are the concepts of finality of death among Filipino children?; (4) What are the concepts of causality of death among Filipino children?; and (5) What other concepts of death among Filipino Children can be revealed in this study?

This study is anchored on Mark Speece’s study on the concept of death. Despite the large number of studies which have been conducted, there has been surprisingly slow progress or confusion in this area (Speece & Brent, 1992). To this effect, Speece and Brent listed a number of reasons, among which two appeared uncertainty or mix-up of the names for, definitions of, and of the various aspects of the concept of death; and (b) lack of reliable, valid standardized measures for these aspects.

Concept of death may be regarded as internal mental representations on the matter, which can either be concrete or abstract. Irreversibility, also called irrevocability (Kane, 1979), is the understanding that once a living thing has died, its physical body cannot live again (Orbach et al., 1985). This sub-concept includes recognizing the impossibility of changing the biological course of life or returning to a previous state (Smilansky, 1987). Inevitability, as defined by Smilansky (1987), is the understanding that all living things must eventually die. Speece & Brent (1984) used a similar definition, but referred to the sub-concept as universality rather than inevitability. Finality or the cessation of function or non-functionality (Speece, 1995) is the understanding that all life-defining bodily functions including metabolism, feeling, movement, and thought, cease at death. Causality, according to Speece & Brent (1984), is “the understanding of the conditions or events that really do or can bring about the death of a living thing.” Causality involves an abstract and realistic understanding of the external and internal events that might possibly cause an individual's death.

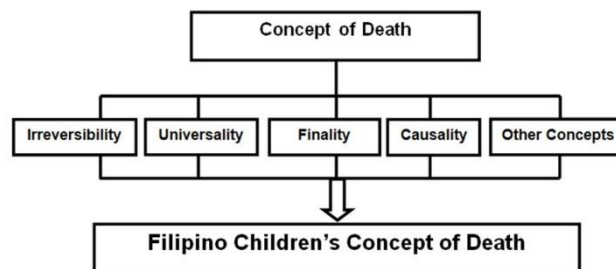


Figure 1. A schematic diagram showing the relationship of the research variables

The above framework refers to the set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables (Sevilla, et. al., 1995). Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of research variables used. It postulates how different variables may contribute a different acquisition and development of the concept of death among Filipino children.

This study is in line with the researches done by previous psychologists that assessed the concept of death of children. Similarly, this study involved examining children's concepts of death with the use of drawing exercise. It adopted the idea pertaining to the sub-concept universality (Speece, 1995) and its notions namely all-inclusiveness and inevitability for better assessment. Furthermore, it adopted the idea of Kane (2012) that the sub-concept of finality should have the notions of immobility, dys-functionality, and insensitivity for better assessment. Similarly, this study resembles the study done by Gerald Koocher (1974), in which he used a particular age group in accordance to Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental model (1954). Working with existing researches, the research admits that it presents limited local research literature on assessing children's understanding of death. However, there are some unique aspects pertaining to the development of concepts of death among Filipino children revealed in this study.

The present study differs from other researches for it has adopted definitions of sub-concepts of the concepts of death from previous different researches. Unlike the work of Gerald Koocher (1974) which divided its respondents into three (3), particularly pre-operational, concrete operational, and formal operational thought, the researcher decided to use only the concrete operational thought. Unlike the work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1997) on the experiences of terminal children facing their own deaths and bereaved grieving on death of a loved one, making it the epitome of several similar stage theories of bereavement, this study focuses on

children's internal mental representations regarding death, which are either concrete or abstract. As such, her theory captures some of the ambivalence of accepting one's own death or that of another while at the same time providing a simple framework for organizing a complex of emotional responses that can be experienced in the process. Lastly, unlike the other researches and experiments done by previous researchers, this study does not assess the child's concept of death with the use of variables like I.Q., anxiety level, and stress level but rather it delved into the respondents' depth of responses

II. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized qualitative research method in assessing the concepts of death of selected Filipino children. The researcher provided information about the naturally occurring cognitive representations of death among Filipino children. It sought to explore children's understanding, the study based on their experiences and feelings on seeing death among people and other living organisms. It made use of thirty (30) children, ages 7–11 years, and living in the cities of Tanauan, Lipa and the Municipality of Balete in Batangas, Philippines. Non-probability sampling, particularly purposive sampling was utilized by the researcher for this study. Purposely, it specified the criteria that the respondents should be within the age 7-11 years, following Jean Piaget's concrete operational level of cognitive development. Specifically, respondents were classified into three groups: (1) those who have seen death of a family member or death in the neighborhood within the past sixty (60) days; (2) those who have seen death it in more than two (2) months, but less than a year previous; and (3) those who have seen in more than a previous year.

The research made use of 11-item semi-structured questions aimed at getting the children's concept of death concerning irreversibility, universality and its notions, finality and its notions, and causality. Furthermore, drawing exercises instructing the participants to draw a picture of death and follow-up questions were also facilitated. This study underwent two phases: the first phase focused on how the research chose the participants and necessary documents to ensure that all were accounted for which means that all participants agreed to be part of the study. In the data gathering phase, only one question was asked: "What images you can draw every time you think about the word, death? This also served as a tool for developing rapport between the researcher and the participants. After the draw-a-picture of death exercise, researcher-made interview-guide questions were used, followed up by questions. Parents were also interviewed to seek validity of the responses. Componential analysis (CA) assumes that the meaning of any given word is represented best by a unique bundle of meaningful features. The research utilized the participants' statements in analyzing the aspects of language into contrastive components and distinctive feature in assessing different concepts of death under universality, irreversibility, finality and causality.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Concepts of Irreversibility of Death among Filipino Children

All participants describe their understanding of irreversibility of death. It includes statements about the possibility of returning to life (or earth) after death. Children manifested almost the same understanding of the irreversibility of death. Most children however, agreed to the fact of the impossibility of returning to life after death. Irreversibility upon death also appeared to be evident in their drawings. However, some children believe that death may be reversed. As such, once a person died, these children still believe in the possibilities that the person might live again.

A considerable number of the studies in this area were designed, at least in part, to determine when children achieve a mature adult understanding of death as represented by the simple definitions. Not surprisingly, age is the most common variable to be examined in relation to children's concepts of death. Overall, it suggests that there is a positive relationship between age and children's concepts of death (Speece, 1995).

1.1 Non-corporeal Continuation

Non-corporeal continuation responses (e.g., heaven) are common among Filipino children; the existence of such belief among them is not surprising. Religion and spirituality create a great impact on Filipino culture in general. Such responses occurred, despite the fact that the instructions and questions dealt specifically and exclusively with the death of the physical body. This study highlighted the importance of non-naturalistic understandings of death, in addition to naturalistic (bio-scientific) understandings. Non-corporeal continuity is the thought about whether some form of personal continuation exists after the death of the physical body as in reincarnation in a new body, or ascension of the soul to heaven without the body (Speece, 1995).

The existence of non-corporeal continuation responses raises both theoretical and methodological issues for the study of children's concepts of death (Hagey, 1991). The appropriate methodology for exploring children's understandings about non-naturalistic aspects of death, as separate from their understandings of the irreversibility and non-functionality of physical death, remains an interesting challenge.

1.2 Dys-functionality

Most children believe that death is temporary and irreversible. Children believe that the dead could never live again because they were placed inside a coffin and buried in graves; their hearts turn non-functional; they lose the ability to breathe; lose all the blood inside their system, their bodies decompose and turn into skeletons.

According to Speece (1995), younger children are more likely than older children to view death as temporary and reversible. Some young children see death as similar to sleep (from which you will wake up) or like a trip (from which you will return). Children think death can be reversed as the result of magical or medical intervention (Speece & Brent, 1992). In contrast, the simple definitions of irreversibility do not adequately reflect the complexity of how many older children and adults conceptualize death (Brent et al. 1994). Most of that complexity appears to be the result of two considerations—the possibility of medical reversal of death and that of non-corporeal continuation after physical death. When children were asked questions about irreversibility, a few children referred to accounts of a dead person being brought back to life in a hospital. These accounts are more likely to be given by older children and were qualitatively different from those of other children who sometimes expressed unrealistic notions that doctors could make many or all dead people alive again by relatively simple means. As such, medical reversibility, which appeared to be evident among western children, was not observed and not evident from the responses given by Filipino children.

2. Concepts of Universality of Death among Filipino Children

All participants describe their understanding of the universality of death. It includes the construct that death applies to all groups of living things and no living thing is exempt from death. Children have different understanding of the universality of death, as they gave direct answers signifying that living things will eventually die. However, children have different responses on ideas that no living thing is permanent in this world and different notion on the unavailability of death.

2.1 All-inclusiveness

Respondents provided direct answers signifying that living things, particularly people, animals, and plants, will eventually die. Children are well aware that no living thing is exempt from death. Noticeably, the respondents actually thought of human death first before animal death or plant death based on their responses. All of them stated that death happens to people, before a followed statement that suggests that it happens to animals and plants, too. For these children, all living things will eventually die because everything in this world is bound to end; it is the will of the Divine Creator; it is the “right” time of the person (to die); somebody fails to take care of them; death is caused by sickness and untoward events. However, some participants believe that death does not apply to all groups of living things. These children believe death does not apply to plants because they continue to grow; death should not apply to all because it brings pain; it should be caused by someone (or something); they are loved (by other people); it brings pain to others; it is not needed; and that life makes the world beautiful.

2.2 Unpredictability

Participants agreed that death is unpredictable and that no one can ever understand the timing of death. They believe that only the Divine Creator knows when people die and people lack the power to predict neither death nor future. These children believe that death happens instantly, anytime, or any day and it is the will of the Divine Creator; death happens as people grow; and death happens when people are ill and not taken care of.

2.3 Inevitability

Children understand the inevitability of death, the necessity with which death applies to living things. They believe that people die, because they cannot escape aging and even accidents; and it is people’s fate and the will of the Divine Creator. They believe that death is part of the life cycle; we cannot escape aging; and people are created equally by the Divine Creator. Furthermore, they believe that death ends suffering and that (good) people will eventually go to heaven; people can never anticipate accidents (that cause death); death makes the soul leave its body; no one can tell when death will happen; the people (children) are helpless; and only the Divine Creator knows about death. On the notion of inevitability, that defines death as unavoidable; respondents are well aware that death is ultimately unavoidable for all living things, regardless of its specific cause. Again most of the respondents that gave detailed explanations only addressed death unto humans, and the idea of animals and plants can nowhere be seen, based on the content of their responses. Although responses contained ideas that no living thing is permanent in this world, different responses on the necessity of death were revealed. Children suggest of an everlasting afterlife in heaven, which respondents explain as a reason why death is a necessity. Such findings may be related to the statements drawn by Nancy Close (2002) indicating that young children’s understanding of death is not only influenced by their cognitive capabilities but also influenced by some environmental and cultural aspects such as religion.

3. Concepts of Finality of Death among Filipino Children

Children understand the finality of death as revealed in this study. Most children could identify the immobility, dys-functionality and insensitivity after death. As such, death brings inability to perform motoric movement, bodily and sensory functions. According to Speece (1995), once a living thing dies, all of the typical life-defining capabilities of the living physical body (e.g., walking, eating, hearing, seeing, thinking, and learning) cease. Specifying the person's physical body distinguishes this aspect of the concept of death from the issue of whether some non-corporeal aspect of a person, such as the spirit, is capable of any life-like functions (e.g., loving, helping) after death.

3.1 Immobility

Children believe that death causes cessation of physical activity functions. For them, death causes immobility, because their souls have gone to heaven; the dead would not be able to walk; their brains no longer function; they turn into skeletons; and their bodies stiffened, unable to rise again. Under the notion of immobility, participants acknowledged that the dead are not capable of any physical motoric movement. Furthermore, participants provided detailed information that involves their belief of a spirit having control of the motoric movement among human. Such spirit would leave the body after death, thus disabling the motoric function of the living thing.

3.2 Dys-functionality

Children understand that death causes absence of bodily function (other than the senses) and dys-functionality. They believe that death causes heartbeat and breathing cessation because the body turns into skeletons; the body starts to decompose; all the nerves of the body stop functioning; souls are taken by the Divine Creator; blood stops functioning; and the souls become separated from their body. All participants recognize the dys-functionality of the body after death. Under the concept of dys-functionality, all participants were well aware of the absence of bodily functions other than the senses such as the respiratory and circulatory functions on death. This notion is practically the same with the concept of irreversibility of death. As such dys-functionality, appearing to be one concept of irreversibility, is also evident as a concept of finality.

3.3 Insensitivity

Children also understand that death causes absence of mental and sensory functions such as thinking, dreaming, and feeling (insensitivity). They believe that death causes thinking, emotions and haptic function cessation because their souls depart from their bodies; they could not to feel anything at all; their brain stiffens; and their body would not react at all. Some children still believe that dead people have mental and sensory functions because they would still wish to live and they are capable of hurting every time one of their family members does wrong; they can visit the people [family members] they left; and dead people would still be able to move.

Under the notion of immobility, children are well aware that the dead are incapable of any physical motoric movement. Under the notion of dys-functionality, children are well aware of the absence of bodily function other than the senses such as the respiratory and circulatory functions upon death. Under the notion of insensitivity, children are aware that dead people are incapable of feeling.

However, some children believe that dead people are still capable of mental and sensory functions so that they can visit the people [family members] they left behind; and dead people would still be able to move. However, they failed to justify their answers further and repeatedly stated the same answers.

4. Concepts of Causality of Death among Filipino Children

Children have different understanding with the causality of death. Most children agree that there are reasons why people die, while some believe that people could die without any reason at all. Causality involves comprehending the events or conditions that really do or can bring about the death of a living thing. It is the understanding of physical-biological factors that result in death.

4.1 Sickness

Participants appeared to identify sickness as a root cause of death. By analyzing the content of the responses, it can be observed that the first cause of death usually mentioned by the respondents is sickness. Probably, this is due to the respondents' knowledge about death through his or her own experience of sickness, thus allowing him or her to consciously think and mention of sickness first as the cause of death before mentioning other causes.

4.2 Accidents/Tragedies

Children gave ideas indicating accidents/tragedies were the frequent reasons given to the occurrence of death among living things. Sickness as the reason for death has the highest number of the responses, followed closely by accidents.

4.3 Personal Conflicts

Participants appeared to be identifying personal conflicts as one of the causes of death. Probably occurring to the respondents' knowledge about death through direct observation of what is happening around them. Thus, allowing them to consciously think and mention of personal conflict (i.e., brawls using guns and knives and disputes between couples or with other people) as the causes of death among others.

There is yet no consensus as to the mature understanding of Causality. Speece and Brent (in press) described it in general terms as involving both an abstract and realistic recognition of the various general causes of death (e.g., illness, accidents) and the understanding that death ultimately results from the failure of one or more specific internal bodily functions or organs (e.g., heart, kidneys, brain).

5. Other Concepts of Death among Filipino Children

This study presents other concepts of death as revealed in the statements of the participants. Children understand death happens through the divine providence, believing that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and that all that occurs in the universe take place under God's will and plan. Besides, old age is considered as another concept of death--Children believe that humans, animals, and plants will eventually die as they grow old.

5.1 Divine Providence

Children's belief in the divine providence is considered as another concept of death in this study as Filipinos in general have a deep faith in God. Innate religiosity enables them to comprehend and genuinely accept death in the context of God's will and plan. Thus, tragedy and bad fortune, which includes death has always been associated with faith and religiosity among Filipino children.

5.2 Old Age

Old age was considered as another concept of death, since participants provided a different understanding of old age under several sub-concepts of death. The respondents provided direct answers signifying that living things, particularly people, animals, and plants, will eventually die. Children are well aware that no living thing is exempt from death. Respondents revealed clear understanding of old age as one of the concepts of death, and that, all living things will eventually die as they grow older. Furthermore, old age also appeared to be relevant under the concept of unpredictability of death, since the participants agreed that death is unpredictable and that no one can ever understand the timing of death.

In previous studies, old age was considered as a significant variable in understanding the concept of death. Smilansky (1987) identified old age as one of the aspects of inevitability, this includes universal mortality and personal mortality. She defined "old age" aspect as an understanding of the biological sequence of life and death. Kane, (1979) however, identified old age as one of the internal causes [causality] of death, including illness.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, the researcher concludes that the development of concept of death among Filipino Children is not a single construct and requires understanding the different concepts of irreversibility, universality, finality and causality of death. Filipino children's other concepts of death embrace their belief in the divine providence through accepting death in the context of God's will and plan; and that as people grow older they eventually die. The concept of death among Filipino children is regarded as either concrete or abstract and it continues to evolve towards maturity through socialization, personal experiences and children's observation in the environment.

In view of the drawn conclusions, the study recommends that School Psychologists collaborate with teachers, parents and other professionals in designing and implementing a school counseling program in addressing children's construct concerning death, particularly those who have seen death or suffered from loss of a family member and are experiencing grief. Guidance Counselors should also provide programs and adequate support services that would cater death education among children. Children need to have a positive outlook towards death with emphasis that death is an integral part of the life cycle. Use psychoeducation in counseling children with mental health conditions and their families, particularly those who are in grief to grasp death as the final act of life. There is a felt need to promote a free or less expensive hospice care to help children to live life with minimal disruption in normal activities while remaining in the home environment to empower

them to deal with their condition optimally. They may also expand the scope of the study by looking for respondents with different age brackets, particularly younger children. Finally, future researchers may conduct a study that would assess and compare the concept of death among age levels and cognitive levels, particularly among the pre-operational stage, and formal operations. In addition, future researchers can further improve the researcher-made instrument in assessing the children's concepts of death and may consider religion and case illnesses, such as terminally ill children as significant variable in understanding Filipino children's concept of death.

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