Attitude toward Death and the Purpose in Life among Korean Adolescents

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Abstract. This study was performed to investigate the attitude toward and purpose in life among adolescents. Participants were 293 students from middle and high school in Seoul and Kyunggi province. The Korean version of the Fear of Death Scale, the perception of purpose in life scale (PIL), and Death Depression Scale (DDS) were used to collect data. The subjects reported attitude toward death in a moderate degree and did not perceive a clear purpose in their life. There was negative correlation between the respondents’ attitude toward death and their PIL. These findings suggest that professionals working with adolescents should provide an adequate health education to foster a positive attitude toward death and assist adolescents to clarify their meaning of lives.

Keywords: Attitude, Death, Life, Adolescent

1 Introduction

Adolescence is a period of rapid physical, psychological, social, and spiritual transition, during which adolescents develop their personal identities by exploring how to cope with that transition. When adolescents fail to discover those values, they become confused about their true self-identity and dissatisfied with themselves, and may then resort to socially undesirable, deviant behavior, and even to suicide to find some kind of breakthrough in their life. In addition, adolescents do not generally have a strong sense of life after death or a steadfast belief in the future, thus often resulting in shortsighted and emotionally motivated decisions. The definition of death is associated with the meaning of life and other mental issues, beyond their physical dimensions [1].
A person’s attitude to death has a profound impact on their attitude toward life, and even toward their purpose in life (PIL) and their achievements [2].

Death education includes spiritual health; it will be extended death awareness and perceptions through learning about death. Basic education on death promotes the establishment of personal value and helps adolescents to build solid assumptions with which they may criticize existing values, such as sympathy for death and the existing approach to death [3]. Such education on death can help young to adolescents form their self-identities. Education on death can be very useful for allowing adolescents to foster a positive approach toward life issues by helping them to recognize life and death as being the same. However, no studies have investigated how adolescents view death, which is central to various aspects of adolescent behavior.

The objective of this research is to examine the attitude toward death and the purpose in life in adolescents.

2 Method

2.1 Samples

The number of study subjects was 294 students who agreed to participate from 6 classes from 1st grade of middle school to 3rd grade of high school located in Seoul and Kyunggi province. Prior to administration of the survey, a letter was sent to the students’ parents of guardians to inform them about this study. Those students who agreed to participate in the survey filled out the participation consent forms before being surveyed. All students attending the school were eligible to participate. The study was conducted during the period from August 31 to September 30, 2013 in cooperation with the teachers responsible for health education. All ethical approval about this research was acquired by the university Institutional Review Board.

2.2 Measures

Attitude toward death

The attitude toward death was measured using the Korean version of the Fear of Death Scale, which was originally developed by Collect and Lester [4], translated by Seo [5] as a Korean. It was 5 points Likert scale and 36-question tool, a higher score indicating that the respondent has a more fear of death. The overall Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of the scale in previous research was 0.75 [4]. In present study, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.71.
The purpose in Life (PIL)

The purpose in life scale was developed by Crumbach & Maholick [6] and translated by Namgung [7] as a Korean version. A 20 item scale designed to measure respondents' level of meaning and purpose in their lives. Respondents rate each item on a 7-point scale that is specifically designed for that item. Scores are aggregated. Thus the minimum score is 20 (lowest purpose) and the maximum score is 140 (highest purpose) [6]. A Cronbach's alpha in a study of relationship between adolescents' alienation, depression, purpose in life and suicidal ideation [8] was .87. In this study, the internal consistency of this tool was 0.84.

Death Depression

Death depression was measured using the Death Depression Scale (DDS), developed by Templer, Lavoie, Chalgujian, Thomas [9], translated to Korean by Choi, Lee, Shim, Ko, Ahn, So [10], which is a 2-point-scale about yes or no, 17-question tool. A higher score obtained with this tool indicates a higher level of death depression. When this tool was first developed, its Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.77 [10], while it was 0.84 in this study.

2.3 Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and Pearson’s correlation using SPSS version 14.0 (Chicago, IL, USA). The level of statistical significance was set at \( p < 0.05 \) for all of the statistical tests.

3 Results

3.1 Characteristics of the Participants

Of the 294 participants, 102 were boys (34.4%) and 192 were girls (62.3%). The mean age was 16.06±1.21 (range: 14-19). The largest group of participants have a religion 289 (98.3%) and only 5(1.7%) participants had not religion. 253 (86.1%) responded that their socioeconomic level was ‘moderate’ of the total spectrum, while 26 (8.8%) and 15 (5.1%) of them reported their socioeconomic status to be ‘low’ and ‘high,’ respectively. Most of the participants (152, 51.9%) stated that they were satisfied with their allowance, while 80 (27.3%) and 61 (20.8%) participants responded that they felt ‘moderately’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their allowance, respectively. When asked about their health status, 123 (41.8%) said they were ‘healthy,’ while 97 (33.0%), 51 (17.3%), and 23 (7.8%) participants answered they were ‘more or less
healthy,’ ‘very healthy,’ ‘not healthy,’ and ‘not healthy at all,’ respectively. With regard to their degree of satisfaction with life, 137 students (46.6%) responded they were ‘satisfied’ with life, while 112 (38.1%) and 45 (15.3%) said they were ‘very satisfied’ and ‘moderately satisfied’ with life, respectively.

3.2 Attitude toward Death, Purpose in Life, and Death Depression of the Participants

Table 1 shows the degree of attitude toward death, purpose in life, and death depression of study participants. In this study the score for attitude toward death was 43.6±7.5 (range: 16–80). It was a higher score than the middle, showing that they had a negative attitude toward death. The measurement developers divided PIL results into ‘pursuing a clear PIL’ (more than 112 points), ‘pursuing an uncertain PIL’ (92–111 points), and ‘no meaning in life, no purpose’ (less than 92 points). The subjects’ PIL score was 65.5±15.7 (Mean±SD; range: 20–140), it was means that the participating adolescents did not perceive a clear purpose in their life. The subjects’ DDS score was 6.9±4.0 (range: 0–17), it was below the middle, demonstrating that the subjects did not have a high level of death depression.

Table 1. Degree of Attitude toward Death, Purpose in Life, and Death Depression of the Participants                                                  (N=294)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean(SD)</th>
<th>Min.-Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward death</td>
<td>16–80</td>
<td>43.6(7.5)</td>
<td>22-73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in life</td>
<td>20–140</td>
<td>65.5(15.7)</td>
<td>26-106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death depression</td>
<td>0–17</td>
<td>6.9(4.0)</td>
<td>0-17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Correlations among study variables

Table 2 shows the association among study variables. There were negative correlations between the respondents’ PIL and their attitude toward death (r=-0.14, p=0.014), and between their attitude toward death and death depression (r=-0.62, p<0.001), highlighting the correlation between a greater PIL and positive attitudes toward death, with lower levels of depression.

4 Conclusions

This study was conducted to identify the attitudes toward death and the death depression levels among Korean adolescents. The participants in the present study had a negative attitude toward their death. This may be because the study participants are young adolescents who do not have clear attitudes toward life and death. The participants in this study felt that they had no clear purpose or meaning in their life. Adolescents need to make constant efforts and preparations to find the true positive meaning.
in their life.

The results of this study can serve as a background for developing measures to lower the death depression levels of adolescents, foster positive attitudes toward death, help adolescents discover their purpose in life, and ultimately to maintain and improve the mental health of adolescents. The study findings can also provide a solid background for the development of relevant policies for adolescents who are going through the tumultuous period of discovering their self-identities.

References