

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID AS A THANATOLOGIST¹

Why did you develop a death anxiety scale?

As psychologists, we spend much of our time looking for predispositions and long-term indications of why people become who they are and why they behave as they do. We neglect the role of serendipity.

I went to Cambridge University to read physics and switched to psychology because I was depressed during a bout of influenza one Christmas. The Department of Psychology at Cambridge University was heavily experimental. Their library, however, had, perhaps by mistake, purchased *Clues to Suicide* by Shneidman and Farberow (1957), which I discovered and read and which moved me greatly.

I ended up at Brandeis University because I fell in love with an American college student whom I met in France, and because Brandeis University sent a flyer to Cambridge University advertising generous fellowships for foreign students. (More serendipity.) As it turned out, my graduate work was paid for by Revlon Cosmetics or, more precisely, the Revson Foundation. I had the opportunity to work with Abraham Maslow who let us choose our own topics for dissertations, and so permitted me to study death and suicide.

Finally, I had to take a graduate course with a new assistant professor who had us read Edwards's (1957) book on scale construction and assigned us the task of constructing a scale. I chose to measure the fear of death.

As I reviewed the literature on the fear of death, I was struck by the absence of well-designed scales for this trait (Lester, 1967). Although I am fascinated most by theory, I have been struck by how research to a large extent neglects theory and is stimulated by the availability of a good psychological test. For example, Rotter's (1966) notion of an internal versus an external locus of control can be related back to psychological theory, but the tremendous research activity on this topic was stimulated in part by the availability of his scale (and later those of others) to measure the trait.

I did not publish the so-called Lester Attitude Toward Death Scale until recently, although I used it in research and made it available to anyone who wrote for a copy (Lester, 1991a). It was really a graduate student exercise determined by the content of the course I was taking. But this exercise got me interested in test construction and suggested the possibility of measuring several components of a trait with one scale. My first scale measured two traits: the general attitude toward death, and inconsistency in death attitudes.

Serendipity again intruded when I took up my first teaching position at Wellesley College. Lora Jean Collett was working with Eugene McCarthy on his bid for the presidency.

¹ From Lester, D., & Templer, D. I. (1992-1993). Death anxiety scales. *Omega*, 26, 239-253.

Had McCarthy won, there might have been no Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale (Lester, 1990). But he lost, and Lora Jean asked how she was going to pass her course with me. We decided on the fear of death scale project.

I had been disturbed by the complexity of the content of the fear of death scales then available. It seemed to me that they were mixing several dimensions, in particular, death versus dying and whether consideration was being given to oneself or to another person. Additionally, there were also items on funerals, cemeteries and pessimism. These various aspects might be highly related but, if so, this relatedness was something that needed to be explored empirically.

Furthermore, I had never liked item-analyses (and factor-analyses in particular) to determine subscales. I have always preferred to use the manifest content of the items to choose my subscales. (Of course, I do carry out item-analyses and sometimes publish them, but I do not give them greater weight than content). So we wrote four subscales: fear of death of self, fear of death of other, fear of dying of self, and fear of dying of others. (I left the funeral scale until later [Lester & Blustein, 1980]).

It perhaps noticeable to others that, although I teach about the reliability and validity of psychological test, I was not overly interested in exploring the reliability and validity of my own scales. Luckily, by the time I formally published both scales, others had conducted a great deal of research with them, so that I could present a fairly good manual for each scale (Lester, 1990, 1991a).

Has being a research on death affected your professional life?

I am primarily known as a “suicide scholar,” though I also conduct research into the fear of death and into murder. But I think that being a death scholar does have professional implications. Death is not a respectable topic for psychologists. A perusal of the textbooks for the core curriculum of psychology quickly reveals that death and suicide are almost never mentioned (save that abnormal psychology texts have a brief section on suicide in the chapter on affective disorders.) Death is not a topic amenable to laboratory research, and psychology has been addicted to laboratory research.

Of course, psychologists do occasionally move out of the laboratory to conduct research. But academic psychology focuses on experimental control and laboratory analogs for human behavior. To me, that kind of research is no different from crossword puzzles or chess problems. What has interested me is human behavior in its natural setting. Hence I focus, for example, on murder, rather than some pale laboratory analog of aggression such as shocking a stooge in a learning task for making errors.

Psychiatrists can study death because fears of death, suicide, and murder are in important problems for them. For sociologists, suicide, received a certain measure of respectability by Durkheim’s (1897) work on the topic. But no famous theoretical psychologist has ever focused on death (except, of course, for the existentialists who remain on the fringe of the field).

To remedy this situation, I recently wrote a book in which I took the major theories of personality and saw to what extent they might enlighten us about suicide (Lester, 1988). I have also explored the major systems of psychotherapy for counseling the suicidal client (Lester, 1991b). Through these books, I hope to influence textbook writers that it is permissible and even useful to discuss suicide.

I believe that those whose scholarly focus is death will be less likely to be offered positions in the psychology departments at major universities.

What are the conclusive and significant findings about death anxiety?

Are there any conclusive findings which have great interest? Perhaps one such finding is that, however measured, death anxiety is associated with psychopathology. Perhaps another is that the concept of death (and, therefore, death anxiety) develops with age. It seems to me that not all adults will share the same concept of death, though, and their concepts of death might affect their death anxiety.

What are the most significant omissions in the death anxiety scale literature?

There is one major problem in the death anxiety scale literature, and that is the reliance on the self-report of conscious death anxiety. To be sure, it is sometimes foolish for psychologists to go to great lengths to measure psychological traits in people without their conscious awareness. Sometimes it is simply easier and just as valid to ask people directly about the focus of concern.

However, I believe that death anxiety is quite different at the conscious level (e.g., sitting at a desk and answering a questionnaire) from what it might be in other situations. In the 1960s and 1970s there were a few studies of subliminally-measured death anxiety, but general interest in this approach was never truly aroused.

Secondly, death anxiety under particular stressors may differ considerably from that experienced when taking a self-report test. For example, I always obtain minimal scores on death anxiety scales when I complete them myself. However, I have had occasional anxiety attacks about death and dying (especially at night and when traveling abroad). On occasions when the airplane in which I was flying seemed likely to crash, my death anxiety became quite high!

We need to find out what factors lead to the generation of our death anxiety. What childhood experiences, family patterns, and parental behaviors lead to the development of high versus low death anxiety? Donald Templer and I collaborated many years ago on a study of the association between the death anxiety of students and their parents; this was a first step, but much more needs to be done in exploring the genesis of death anxiety (Lester & Templer, 1972).

Another problem with death anxiety research is its lack of a theoretical basis. The only psychologists who place any importance on death anxiety are the existentialists who see death anxiety as one of the four major existential problems that we must deal with (along with

isolation, freedom, and will). I think research on death anxiety must draw from theoretical positions so that the research will seem to have greater implications for clinical psychology.

Have death anxiety scales lent themselves to a self-insulating, glass wall type of research?

Psychological research is stimulated much more by the development of particular scales than by theory. Of course, the scale itself may have a theoretical basis or influence, but, once the scale appears, it generates hundreds of studies if the concept measured appeals to people. This later research is often atheoretical. It is easy to criticize research which is scale-based rather than theory-based (or based on introspection of the objective phenomenon). However, the research findings so generated do form a body of knowledge which, appropriately reviewed, can lead to interesting insights. And there are, of course some researchers who do think a little beyond the constraints imposed by an existing scale.

What factors should a researcher consider before deciding to use a death anxiety scale?

I have a bias here, not surprisingly. I feel that a multi-component death anxiety scale is crucial. It is unlikely that a particular life experience would affect all aspects of death anxiety. It may affect attitudes toward death or toward the process of dying, for example, or attitudes toward one's own death or that of others. If a personality trait or experience is strongly related to all types of death anxiety, then it may well be related to all forms of anxiety, and have no special relevance to death anxiety.

On the other hand, to use a multi-component scale complicates one's results. What if only one of the component scales gives you the results you hypothesized? Does this make the article weaker and less acceptable to a good scholarly journal? Might it be better to use a one-measure scale and gamble on getting one strong association?

However, it might be better if investigators did think through their hypotheses more carefully and ask whether they expect a change in or association with all fears of death or merely attitudes toward funerals, death, or dying.

I think also that investigators should strive for greater creativity. For example, there are other components besides simple death anxiety. In recent years, I have devised a simple measure of Laingian ontological insecurity, including doubts that one really exists (Lester & Thinschmidt, 1988). What about the existence of reunion fantasies and beliefs in the existence of life after death? I was intrigued by the old research on metaphors of death, but here has been very little follow-up on that (especially in identifying the core metaphors) (McClelland, 1963).

What is your concept of death anxiety?

In my early work, my concept of death anxiety was determined by the technique of measurement. Could I devise an equal-interval scale to measure death attitudes? In thinking about the concept more, I decided that the items in the scales were rather heterogeneous, and so scales measuring different aspects of death and dying could be measured. However, in recent years, I have come to feel that the death attitude scale could (and perhaps should) be based more

on theory. For example, Laing's (1969) concept of ontological insecurity includes the feeling that one does not really exist. To develop a scale to measure death attitudes based on Laing's ideas not only might provide an interesting research instrument, but would also tie the research directly to theory. In fact, I have published a brief scale to do this, as noted above.

Because of the dependence of so much research, including my own, on scale-generated studies, I have not thought much at all about my own concept of death anxiety and which theories I might base it on. Being forced now to reflect on this, I would opt for a multiplicity of concepts. Teaching as I do a course on theories of personality, I would prefer to develop concepts of death anxiety from each of the theories. For example, from George Kelly's theory of personal constructs, we could focus on the difficulties in construing death. From Abraham Maslow, we could focus on both safety and security needs as generating a lower level (deficiency-motivated) death attitude. And from Freud we could search for infant fears (such as of destruction and mutilation) which could provide the basis for later fears of death.

As perhaps is evident from my research over the years, although I have my preferred theories, I like to be eclectic and use different theories to generate research hypotheses. And with regard to my own personal concept of death anxiety, surely all of this research on death has served to intellectualize my reactions to death and avoid reflection on my own personal death?

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