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FEAR OF DEATH AND STRUCTURE OF PERSONALITY WITH MEN IN THE EARLY AND LATE ADULTHOOD

Agnieszka Zawadzka¹, Agnieszka Dębska ¹, Łukasz Zawadzki ²

¹ Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences

² University of Silesia in Katowice Faculty of Philology

address for correspondence:

Agnieszka Zawadzka

Abstract

Introduction. Fear of death is the fear of ending one's own existence. While a man grows up he/she is aware that his/her life will be ended with death. Nevertheless, the awareness does not reduce the fear. An individual can see, hear, experience. He/she is surrounded by loved people, is determined to pursue his/her goals and death ends it all, it is the absolute end. Therefore, everyone is more or less afraid of it.

Aim. The aim of the study is to verify if there are any differences in the level of fear of death among chosen age groups and what affects and conditions them.

Materials and methods. The study involved 60 men divided into two age groups. The first

one included 30 men in their early adulthood aged 23 – 28. The second one included 30 men in their late adulthood aged 60 and more. The research tools were two questionnaires: FTVS – Fear of death and dying inventory by R. Oschmann and NEO-PI-R Five Factor Model (FFM).

Results. Men in their early and late adulthood experience fear of death in similar manner, fear of facing death, fear of mortality, fear of ending one's existence, fear of physical destruction, fear of life after death and fear of dying process. Personal characteristics relate with fear of death differently in groups of men in early and late adulthood.

Keywords: fear, personality, death

Introduction

Fear is a feeling that is known to all people. The ability to cope with it is a prerequisite for maintaining health and for surviving. Fear acts as an alarm, warning of danger. However, it can be a serious medical condition, since intense fear is one of the most unpleasant feelings for a human being. It can change human life into anguish by making him helpless and lonely.

Theorists and researchers have been trying to understand the kind of emotion called fear for years. Fear is a complex, multiplane reaction that involves several psychological systems. Feeling of fear incorporates three main characteristics:

- physiological stimulation,
- concern about the potential negative effects of the situation,
- emotional distress.

Physical, cognitive and affective symptoms must be present in order to diagnose anxiety in an individual. It should be mentioned that physiological stimulation caused by caffeine or other stimulants is not a fear, since it is not accompanied by anxious thoughts and unpleasant emotions. Likewise, concern about or fear of upcoming unpleasant events such as a family reunion, an appointment at the dentist's etc. do not always indicate that a person feels fear. Tension, nervousness or bad mood are also not tantamount to anxiety.

Anxiety leads to changes in the autonomic nervous system. The ANS consists of two parts: sympathetic and parasympathetic. Stimulation of sympathetic nervous system increases heart rate and blood pressure, quickens breathing and increases skin conductance and muscle

tension, at the same time decreasing gastrointestinal activity and the production of digestive juices. Blood flow decreases in peripheral vessels, e.g. in the face and hands area, and increases in the cardiac and muscle vessels. Activity of the sympathetic nervous system aims at preparing the body to cope with the imminent danger, by escaping or facing it. However, the role of the parasympathetic system has not yet been well investigated in terms of its role in anxiety reactions. However, stimulating it is counterproductive to sympathetic activity and causes effects such as slowing down the heart beat, reducing blood pressure, decreasing ventilation, and increasing gastrointestinal activity. Therefore, the parasympathetic system plays a dominant role when people are relaxed, calm and content. But it can also accompany some unpleasant emotions, such as repulsion, depression, anger or anxiety. A sudden drop in blood pressure can lead to dizziness, weakness, or disturbance of balance. Frijda suggests that as long as a person is able to cope with danger, the sympathetic system dominates, keeping the body ready to fight or escape. However, when all the possibilities for action are exhausted, the parasympathetic system can be activated, which will make the anxious person with high pressure, suddenly lose their strength and feel unable to remain on their feet (Leary, Kowalski, 2001).

Conception, birth and death are inscribed in the life of all living beings. All we see, hear, experience, what we are happy about and what causes fear and suffering begins from the moment of our birth and completely disappears in the moment of our death. Thus, death is the end of everything, the end of our life and the end of our world. Therefore, it is believed that the fear in its essence is always the fear of death, which cannot be conquered, since this kind of fear is stronger than it. It is the end of everything, everything loses its meaning, all values developed throughout life devaluate, the world which has been so real and stable becomes a delusion, a bubble that bursts at the moment of death. This position is right when one looks at a person's life individually. From a biological point of view, life of an individual cannot be isolated from the human species. Each person is inscribed in the genetic plan that he/she received from previous generations and is supposed to pass on to later generations (Kępiński, 2002, Bąk et al., 2004, Łukaszewski, 2010).

Fear of death is strongly linked to the personality of an individual. Psychology differentiates four main attitudes regarding the ways of describing personality. Some authors think that people systematically differ mentally, advocating the theory of individual differences, characteristic of neobehaviourism. Other authors believe that human behaviour is characterized by certain constancy, and their theories on personality are supposed to explain the determinants of that stability. Researchers assume that constancy of behaviour is

conditioned by the existence of specific internal structures, the so-called mental characteristics, and the set of these characteristics makes the human's personality. Either of the research groups do not differ substantially from one another. Some of them accept the more stable behaviour, and others differences between people, differences that have a fixed character (characteristics). Another group of authors considers personality a "mechanism" that determines the organization and directionality of human behaviour. This approach is particularly widespread among clinical researchers who deal with disorders and disorganisation of human behaviour. The pioneer of this approach was Z. Freud, but it is characteristic not only of the psychoanalytical orientation. The last group that can be distinguished are the researchers who examine the personality as a factor conditioning the ability of a person to manage his or her own behaviour. This approach is characteristic of cognitive psychologists (Allport, 1988, Tomaszewski, 1992, Gałdowa, 1999).

The aim of the study

The aim of the study was to determine if there were differences in the level of the fear of death in the selected age groups, what influences these differences and what are their determinants.

Research material and methods

The study was voluntary and anonymous. Only male population took part in the study. The first group were males in their early adulthood, i.e. between 23 and 28 years old. The second group were males in their late adulthood, i.e. over 60 years old. Each group consisted of thirty people. The common feature in both groups was education, minimum secondary or higher, without division into specific professions.

Two questionnaires were used for the study:

- FVTS - R. Oschman's Fear of Death and Dying Scale. It was adapted in Poland by J. Jastrzębski and S. Ślaski in 2008. This questionnaire consists of 48 statements forming six scales, which allow the measurement of six independent dimensions of fear of death.

- 1) Fear of facing death (FFD) concerns fear of direct contact with the dying person or with the deceased.
- 2) Fear of mortality (FM) refers to a person's concern about their plans and intentions, which will be jeopardised by death.
- 3) Fear of ending one's existence (FEE) manifests itself in the lack of acceptance of death.
- 4) Fear of physical destruction (FPD) refers to a person's concern about what will happen to the body after death.

5) Fear of life after death (FLD) refers to the lack of knowledge about what will be after death.

6) Fear of dying process (FDP) refers to the person's notion of the accompanying suffering.

- NEO-PI-R , also called "Big Five" is a 5-Trait Personality Model by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae. The questionnaire includes 240 items and covers the following personality factors:

- Neuroticism vs. emotional stability - reflects emotional adjustment versus emotional imbalance, the tendency to experience negative emotions such as fear, anger, guilt.

- Extroversion vs. introversion - refers to the quantity and quality of social interactions and to the level of activity, as well as the ability to experience positive emotions.

- Openness to experience - indicates the tendency to positive evaluation of life experiences, tolerance to novelty and cognitive curiosity.

- Agreeableness vs antagonism, which is an attitude towards other people, positive or negative, which manifests itself in altruism versus antagonism.

- Earnestness vs. lack of direction - reflects the degree of organization, perseverance and motivation of individuals in result-oriented activities (Siuta, 2009).

Outcome of the research

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of personality variables in surveyed group (N = 60)

| | Minimum | Maximum | Average | Standard deviation | Test K-SZ |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------------------|-----------|
| Neuroticism | 34 | 127 | 88.88 | 21.39 | 0.633 |
| Extroversion | 42 | 151 | 104.87 | 21.81 | 0.523 |
| Openness to experiences | 65 | 143 | 97.67 | 17.47 | 0.569 |
| Agreeableness | 55 | 155 | 109.42 | 18.44 | 0.544 |
| Earnestness | 66 | 159 | 116.08 | 20.22 | 0.663 |

Table 1 presents the basic descriptive statistics (minima and maxima, average and standard deviations) of the following variables: neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and earnestness in the test sample. In addition, all analyzed personality traits possess a close to normal distribution in the whole sample and in two groups, which was verified with the Kolomogorov-Smirnov test ($p > 0.05$).

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of fear of death variables (N = 60)

| | Minimum | Maximum | Average | Standard deviation | Test K-SZ |
|--------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------------------|---------------|
| Fear of facing death | 0 | 16 | 8.80 | 4.52 | 0.802 |
| Fear of mortality | 0 | 16 | 10.45 | 4.10 | 0.754 |
| Fear of ending one's existence | 0 | 15 | 7.77 | 4.43 | 1.052 |
| Fear of physical destruction | 0 | 16 | 7.25 | 4.43 | 0.991 |
| Fear of life after death | 0 | 16 | 6.87 | 4.37 | 0.779 |
| Fear of dying process | 2 | 16 | 13.23 | 3.14 | 1.463* |

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2 presents the basic descriptive statistics (minima and maxima, average and standard deviations) of the following variables: fear of facing death, fear of mortality, fear of ending one's existence, fear of physical destruction, fear of life after death and fear of dying process in the test sample. Also in this case, virtually all anxiety features analyzed (except for fear of dying process in the whole sample) have a close to normal distribution in the whole sample and in two groups ($p > 0.05$). Consequently, in the further part of research parametric statistical tests such as Pearson correlation and t-Student test for independent samples were used.

Table 3

Differences in the level of fear of death in the group of early adulthood (N = 30) and late adulthood (N=30)

| | t-test of equal averages | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----|-----------|-----------------|------------|------|
| | T | df | Relevance | Group | Statistics | |
| | | | | | M | SD |
| Fear of facing death | 1.264 | 58 | 0.211 | Early adulthood | 9.53 | 4.52 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 8.07 | 4.46 |
| Fear of mortality | 1.629 | 58 | 0.109 | Early adulthood | 11.30 | 4.52 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 9.60 | 3.50 |
| Fear of ending one's existence | 1.290 | 58 | 0.202 | Early adulthood | 8.50 | 4.22 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 7.03 | 4.58 |
| Fear of physical destruction | 0.435 | 58 | 0.665 | Early adulthood | 7.50 | 4.64 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 7.00 | 4.26 |
| Fear of life after death | 0.825 | 58 | 0.413 | Early adulthood | 7.33 | 4.42 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 6.40 | 4.34 |
| Fear of dying process | 0.655 | 58 | 0.515 | Early adulthood | 12.97 | 3.26 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 13.50 | 3.04 |

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

There were no statistically significant differences between early and late adulthood groups in terms of the average level of anxiety about fear of facing death, fear of mortality, fear of ending one's existence, fear of physical destruction, fear of life after death and fear of dying process ($p > 0.05$).

Table 4

Differences in the range of personal characteristics in the group of early adulthood (N = 30) and late adulthood (N=30)

| t-test of equal averages | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-------|--------|---------------|-----------------|------------|-------|
| | T | df | Relevance | Group | Statistics | |
| | | | | | M | SD |
| Neuroticism | 0.150 | 58 | 0.882 | Early adulthood | 88.47 | 23.49 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 89.30 | 19.46 |
| Extroversion | 1.925 | 50.212 | 0.060 | Early adulthood | 110.17 | 16.60 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 99.57 | 25.17 |
| Openness to experiences | 2.048 | 48.810 | 0.046* | Early adulthood | 102.17 | 12.80 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 93.17 | 20.38 |
| Agreeableness | 0.803 | 58 | 0.426 | Early adulthood | 107.50 | 15.72 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 111.33 | 20.91 |
| Earnestness | 1.423 | 58 | 0.160 | Early adulthood | 112.40 | 19.08 |
| | | | | Late adulthood | 119.77 | 20.97 |

* p<0.05

** p<0.01

*** p<0.001

Statistically significant differences between early and late adulthood groups in terms of the average level of openness to experience - $t(49) = 2.05$; $p < 0.05$ and at the level of the trend regarding extroversion - $t(50) = 1.92$; $p < 0.06$ were identified. These differences are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

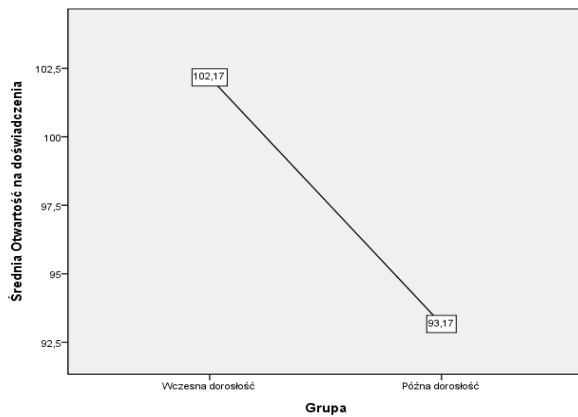


Figure 1. Average openness to experience in early and late adulthood groups.

Male population in early adulthood is characterized by a higher level of openness to experience ($M = 102.17$) than male population in late adulthood ($M = 93.17$).

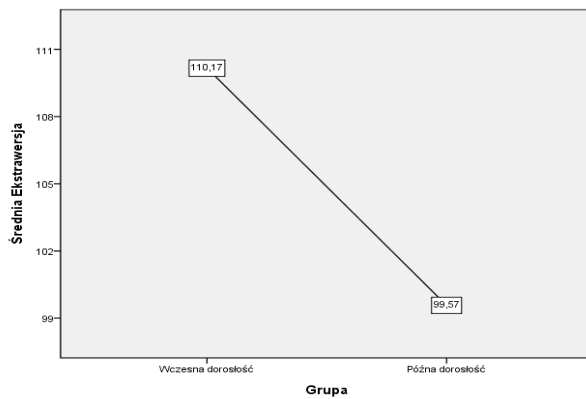


Figure 2. Average extroversion in early and late adulthood groups.

Male population in early adulthood is likely to have a higher level ($p = 0.060$) of extroversion ($M = 110.17$) than male population in late adulthood ($M = 99.57$).

Table 5

Correlation of personal characteristics and fear of death in the surveyed group (N = 60)

| | | Fear facing death | of Fear mortality | of Fear ending one's existence | of Fear physical destruction | of Fear after death | of life Fear of dying process |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| Neuroticism | Pearson correlation | 0.040 | -0.113 | -0.092 | -0.150 | -0.232 | -0.147 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.760 | 0.390 | 0.487 | 0.253 | 0.074 | 0.262 |
| Extroversion | Pearson correlation | 0.033 | 0.159 | 0.133 | 0.029 | 0.123 | 0.048 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.801 | 0.224 | 0.312 | 0.828 | 0.348 | 0.714 |
| Openness to experiences | Pearson correlation | -0.399** | -0.129 | -0.132 | -0.182 | -0.156 | -0.098 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.002 | 0.324 | 0.315 | 0.165 | 0.234 | 0.457 |
| Agreeableness | Pearson correlation | 0.196 | 0.019 | 0.019 | -0.278* | -0.194 | 0.119 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.134 | 0.888 | 0.888 | 0.032 | 0.137 | 0.366 |
| Earnestness | Pearson correlation | -0.132 | 0.118 | -0.009 | 0.292* | 0.181 | 0.177 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.316 | 0.369 | 0.946 | 0.024 | 0.167 | 0.176 |

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

*** p < 0.001

In the examined sample, statistically significant correlations were found between openness to experience and fear of facing death – $r = -0.40$; $p < 0.01$; agreeableness and fear of physical destruction – $r = -0.28$; $p < 0.05$; earnestness and fear of physical destruction – $r = 0.29$; $p < 0.05$. A clear statistical tendency regarding the relations between neuroticism and fear of life after death – $r = -0.23$; $p = 0.074$ was also observed.

The higher the level of openness to experience, the weaker the fear of facing death. The higher the level of earnestness and the lower the level of agreeableness, the greater the fear of physical destruction. In addition, probably the higher the level of neuroticism, the lower the level of fear of life after death.

Table 6

Correlation of personal characteristics and fear of death in the group of younger men (N=30)

| | | Fear of facing death | Fear of mortality | Fear of one's existence | Fear of ending physical destruction | Fear of life after death | Fear of dying process |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Neuroticism | Pearson correlation | -0.189 | -0.261 | -0.233 | -0.204 | -0.306 | -0.277 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.318 | 0.164 | 0.216 | 0.281 | 0.100 | 0.138 |
| Extroversion | Pearson correlation | 0.207 | 0.139 | 0.275 | 0.030 | 0.354 | 0.136 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.272 | 0.462 | 0.141 | 0.874 | 0.055 | 0.473 |
| Openness to experiences | Pearson correlation | -0.219 | -0.173 | -0.107 | -0.187 | 0.010 | 0.034 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.245 | 0.360 | 0.572 | 0.322 | 0.958 | 0.859 |
| Agreeableness | Pearson correlation | 0.118 | 0.124 | 0.283 | 0.107 | 0.091 | 0.356 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.535 | 0.512 | 0.130 | 0.572 | 0.633 | 0.053 |
| Earnestness | Pearson correlation | 0.272 | 0.427* | 0.470** | 0.428* | 0.303 | 0.387* |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.145 | 0.019 | 0.009 | 0.018 | 0.104 | 0.035 |

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

*** $p < 0.001$

Two significant statistical trends can be observed in the group of younger males - the higher the level of extroversion, the higher the level of fear of life after death – $r = 0.35$; $p = 0.055$ and the higher the level of agreeableness, the higher the fear of dying process – $r = 0.36$; $p = 0.053$.

Statistically significant correlations of earnestness with fear of mortality – $r = 0.43$; $p < 0.05$, fear of ending one's existence – $r = 0.47$; $p < 0.01$, fear of physical destruction – $r = 0.43$; $p < 0.05$ and fear of dying process – $r = 0.39$; $p < 0.05$ were also identified. The higher the level of earnestness, the higher the level of fear of ending one's existence, as well as the fear of physical destruction and the fear of dying process in the group of younger males. These are positive and moderately strong correlations.

Table 7

Correlation of personal characteristics and fear of death in the group of older men (N=30)

| | | Fear of facing death | Fear of mortality | Fear of ending one's existence | Fear of physical destruction | Fear of life after death | Fear of dying process |
|---|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Neurotyczność/ Neuroticism | Pearson corellation | 0.329 | 0.122 | 0.068 | -0.078 | -0.142 | 0.016 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.076 | 0.521 | 0.719 | 0.683 | 0.455 | 0.933 |
| Ekstrawersja/ Extroversion | Pearson corellation | -0.151 | 0.104 | -0.011 | 0.005 | -0.066 | 0.030 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.427 | 0.583 | 0.954 | 0.978 | 0.728 | 0.877 |
| Otwartość na Openess to experiences | Pearson corellation | -0.639*** | -0.235 | -0.234 | -0.228 | -0.329 | -0.159 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.000 | 0.211 | 0.214 | 0.225 | 0.076 | 0.401 |
| Agreeableness | Pearson corellation | 0.297 | -0.036 | -0.133 | -0.595** | -0.399* | -0.085 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.111 | 0.851 | 0.482 | 0.001 | 0.029 | 0.656 |
| Earnestness | Pearson corellation | -0.453* | -0.142 | -0.354 | 0.191 | 0.115 | -0.051 |
| | Relevance (bilateral) | 0.012 | 0.453 | 0.055 | 0.312 | 0.545 | 0.788 |

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

*** p < 0.001

The results show that the higher the level of neuroticism in the older males, the higher the level of their fear of facing death – $r = 0.33$; $p < 0.076$.

In addition, the higher the level of openness to experience, the lower the level of fear of facing death – $r = -0.64$; $p < 0.001$ and the lower the level of fear of life after death – $r = -0.33$; $p = 0.076$.

The analysis also proves that the higher the level of agreeableness, the lower the level of fear of physical destruction – $r = -0.60$; $p < 0.01$ and of life after death – $r = -0.40$; $p < 0.05$.

Correlations with earnestness are as follows: the higher the level of this personality trait, the less fear of facing death – $r = -0.45$; $p < 0.05$ and probably less fear of ending one's existence – $r = -0.35$; $p < 0.055$ in the group of late adulthood.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to analyze the phenomenon of fear of death in relation to age in male population (in early and late adulthood) and personality traits - neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, earnestness and agreeableness (Janowski et al., 2009).

Males in early and late adulthood experience fear of facing death, fear of mortality, fear of ending one's existence, fear of physical destruction, fear of life after death and fear of dying process in a similar way. Nevertheless, it was observed that human nature may have the defensive capabilities against fear, as described by psychodynamic theorists, (Freud, 1984). In addition, fear of death may be weaker in case all previous life crises were overcome and one's perspective on the past is positive (realization of life aspirations) (Erikson, 2000).

Personality traits combine with fear of death in a different way in groups of males in early and late adulthood. It can be concluded that the nature of correlation between personality factors and fear of death has a different dynamics in younger and older groups, especially in terms of the role of agreeableness and earnestness. Interestingly, in the group of males in early adulthood extroversion and agreeableness link to the fear of death positively. It may result from the fact that extrovert and agreeable people may be oriented at seeking out sensations and at maintaining satisfactory relationships with other people - death may take it away, so they are afraid of it. Additionally, unlike young adults, in males in late adulthood, earnestness and agreeableness seem to alleviate the experience of anxiety associated with one's existence. It can be concluded that good relationships with others, a sense of belonging to the loved ones and willingness to honest and earnest realization of the last task in life lower the fear of death in the elderly.

The academic literature proves that people with high levels of neuroticism in whom anxiety and depression as well as emotional disorders are psychopathological correlation (R. Polczyk 2009), and men with a high level of earnestness who are characterized by reliability, responsibility, accuracy, diligence, discipline and realization of goals in their life may feel a higher level of anxiety than people with a different personality profile (Hołda, 2009). On the other hand people with a higher level of extroversion, where the significant predictor is the presence of positive emotional states (M. Szpitalak, R. Polczyk 2009) and people with a higher level of openness to experience, are looking for stimulation and they feel good in situations which are new and connected with risk (Szpitalak, 2009) . Therefore it seems that they can treat death as a challenge or as the next - the last life experience. Agreeableness is a personality factor that determines relationships with other people. Agreeable people are empathic, altruistic, trustworthy, generous and oriented at building relationships. The sense of community and belonging can thus lower the level of fear of death. This was not confirmed, but suggested in the study.

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