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UDK 159.922.7

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CHILDREN'S BELIFES ABOUTH DEATH²

Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore children's fear and understanding of death and the relations between these concepts. The research included 60 children (30 boys and 30 girls), aged 5, 6 and 7 years and their parents. Information about children's previous experiences with death and type of family (split or non-split) were also gathered. In order to collect data we applied Death interview for children and Death Anxiety Scale for Children.

According to the results, children's understanding of death is in correlation with age - the seven year olds, in generally, have more mature understanding of death, compared to five and six year olds. There weren't age and gender differences in the intensity of fear of death. The fear of death is not in correlation with children's understanding of death.

Results are partially in line with theoretical and empirical assumptions about children's fear and understanding of death.

Key words: *understanding death, fear of death, children (aged 5, 6 and 7 years)*

Theoretical framework

For a long time, dying and fear of death in adults were in the focus of interest of philosophers, theoreticians of religion, writers and psychologists. "In everyone of us, death is snuggled somewhere. In its snugness, it is deeply inside us... While life is awake, death sleeps. When death awakes and when it is released, life itself vanishes", says Jevremović (2015, p. 7.). However, when it comes to children, it seems that for years, children's fear of death represents almost a taboo topic, both on theoretical and research levels. We can assume that one of the reasons for that could be the denial mechanism that is often present when we are facing mortality. What will become a source of child's fear is in close relation with characteristics of thinking and imagination of a preschool child (Kondić & Vidanović, 2011). Animistic thinking, according to which things and animals have characteristics of

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² This research was supported by Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological developed within the project "Indicators and Models of Harmonization of Professional and Family Roles" No. 179002.

humans, such as feeling and intensions, can represent fertile soil for appearance of many fears, both realistic and unrealistic. Child's thinking is concrete and gives words literal meaning, independent from the obvious and the logical.

Children of different ages are afraid of different things. Usually, younger children are afraid of concrete things, such as a dog or a mouse (Kondić, 1992). With the development of intellectual capabilities, first and foremost, imagination and abstract thought, children start to be afraid of imaginary things - punishment, sickness, death. Maria Nagy's research (1948), presented in the article "Children's theory of death", 1948, shows that understanding of death is in correlation with age. She noticed that the development of concept of death goes through three stages. The first stage starts at age 3 and lasts to age 5, and for children of this age the death represents continuation of life, although some "paler version" of it. The second stage lasts between ages 5 and 9, when children realize that death is final. Some children of this age show personification of death. The third stage begins around the age of nine, when children understand that death is not only final, but also inevitable, universal and also personal.

Kane (1979) thought that the development of children's concept of death is in accordance to Piaget's (1960) phases of cognitive development. Relying on that, she formed her own theoretical representation of children's development of the concept of death. During the first phase, that corresponds to the preoperational stage, thinking of children is egocentric and magical, and children perceive death as form of separation. In the second phase (that correlates to the concrete operational stage) children perceive death as concrete and caused by external factors. In the last phase, that corresponds to the formal operational stage, children can now think about death on the abstract level, that allows them to speculate and form hypothesis in relation to general concept of existence.

Results of Slaughter and Griffiths' research (2007), show that there is positive correlation between child's age and their understanding of death, so that older children have a more mature concept of death. It is also showed that children with more mature concept of death manifest less fear of death. General anxiety in children was in negative correlation with the understanding of death, indicating that the children with lesser general anxiety have more mature concept of death.

We would also like to point to the research done by Bonoti et al. (2013). According to the results, children who had experience with death, had more mature concept of death. The authors also found that at different ages different components of death are comprehended.

Method

Problem and the objectives of the research

Children's understanding of death, as well as the manifestation of fear related to the inevitable fact of dying, represent not only a very complex, but also a very

emotionally induced field of children's experience, that is not easy to research. Perhaps that could be one of the reasons why only a few research has been done in this field, not only in our surroundings. Undoubtedly, various factors, both in the inter-psychological and intra-psychological space of a child, can play a certain role in this specific experience. Thus, in the effort to understand this phenomenon, besides examining children's understanding of death and intensity of fear of death, we decided to examine whether child's age, previous experience with death, and completeness/incompleteness of the child's family have any role in comprehension of death.

Specific objectives of the research

- Examine whether there is statistically significant correlation between children's understanding of death and children's fear of death.
- Examine differences in understanding and fear of death between boys and girls, children of different ages, children that have previous experience with death and the one that didn't, children that come from complete and incomplete family.

Research variables

- *Understanding of death* - death is understood as a fundamental biological event which inevitably happens to all living beings and is caused by irreversible cessation of organism functions (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007); operationally is defined applying the *Death interview for children* (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).
- *Fear of death* - fear of death represents irrational fear of a person that he/she or someone close to him/her would die; operationally is defined using the *Death Anxiety Scale for Children* (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).

Control variables:

- *Gender*
- *Age*: 5, 6, 7 years old
- *Experience with death* – experience of losing a person close to the child or a pet
- *Completeness/Incompleteness of the family*

Control variables are operationally defined by applying the questionnaire that is given to the parents and based on the interview with the child.

Research instruments

Death interview for children (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). Interview consists of 7 questions on which children can give open answers. These seven questions cover five subcomponents of death: Inevitability, Universality, Irreversibility, Non-functionality (Cessation of functioning) and Causality. For each answer, a child can get from 0 to 2 points, depending on the characteristics of the answer. Questions 1 and 2 are related to subcomponent inevitability and questions 4 and

5 to subcomponent irreversibility (example of questions are given in Appendix 1). This way, the maximum score a child can achieve is 10 points and the minimal is 0 points. Using method of internal consistency, we tested the reliability of the instrument. Reliability measured on this sample was $\alpha = 0.55$, that is below the limit of acceptable reliability. One possible reason for a low level of reliability could be a small number of items that this scale is consisted of.

Death Anxiety Scale for Children (Schell & Seefeldt, 1991, according to Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007) was applied in order to measure the level of anxiety as a reaction to words associated to the concept of death. In our research we applied extended version of the original questionnaire, in line with research of Slaughter & Griffiths (2007). Questionnaire consists of 18 words that represent the items, out of which 6 relate to death, and 12 are neutral words. Examples of items: dead, boy, eyes, alive, etc. Children were asked to rate how much the following word scared them. Questions are rated on three-point Likert scale (0 = the word doesn't scare them; 2 = they are very much afraid). Maximal score that children could achieve is 36 and minimal is 0. Reliability for this sample was $\alpha = 0.83$ for words related to the concept of death, and $\alpha = 0.88$ for neutral words.

Questionnaire for parents – we applied questionnaire filled in by parents, in order to obtain information about children's previous experience with death and completeness/incompleteness of the family that the child is coming from; format of the answers is binary, meaning that the parents can answer with YES or NO.

Sample

Research has been conducted on the sample of 60 children and their parents. Children have been divided according to their gender, so the half were boys and half girls. Subjects were also divided according to their age (5, 6 and 7 years old), and each age group consisted of 20 children. In this sample, 23.3% out of 60 children had experience with death. There were three children that are coming from the incomplete families, which is 5% of the total sample. In these three cases, divorce of parents was the reason for the incompleteness of the family.

Research procedure

The research has been conducted in one kindergarten and one primary school in a mid-sized town in southern Serbia. Interviews with children were individual. Parents received the questionnaires in person and filled them in at home. Besides the questionnaires, parents signed the permission to approve the participation of their children in the research.

The following statistical analyses were used in this research: T test, ANOVA and Pearson correlation coefficient.

Control variable *incompleteness/completeness of the family* was excluded from further analyses since a small number of children (3) were in category *incomplete family*.

Results

We applied a repeated-measures analysis of variance, where death subcomponent scores were the dependent variable, in order to compute whether there were differences in children's scores across the five subcomponents of the death concept. There was a significant effect of subcomponent ($F(4,58) = 27.287$, $p = 0.000$), indicating differences in children's 0–2 scores across the various subcomponents of death.

Table 1. Descriptive - statistical data on the subscales of the instrument Death interview for children

Subscale	Nr.	M	SD
Inevitability	60	1.71	0.64
Universality	60	1.36	0.86
Irreversibility	60	1.68	0.56
Non-functionality	60	1.13	0.72
Causality	60	0.78	0.55
Comprehension of death	60	6.68	2.03

Follow-up paired *t*-tests showed that there are not statistically significant difference in understanding between following aspects of death - inevitability (AM=1,72, SD= 0,64) and irreversibility (AM=1,68, SD=0,07) $t(59)=0,33$, $p=0.742$, neither between universality (AM=1,37, SD=0,86) and non-functionality (AM=1,13, SD=0,74), $t(59)=1.78$, $p=0.08$). Between all other aspects there are statistically significant differences ($t(59)>3.3$, $p<0.05$), and between universality and irreversibility ($t(59) = -2.64$, $p <0.05$). Causality is a subcomponent of death where children achieved the lowest scores. The Mean for each of the subcomponents of death are presented in the Table 1.

Table 2. Differences between fear of death and fear of neutral words (T test)

	T test	M	Statistical significance
Fear of death	3.28	5.73	0.002
Fear of neutral words		3.53	

In order to examine difference in the intensity of fear from neutral words and fear of death, T test for the dependent samples was applied. Based on Table 2, it could be seen that the fear of words related to death is more intensive, compared to the words that are not related to death.

Table 3. Correlations between children's understanding of death with fear of death and fear of neutral words

	Fear of death	Neutral words
Comprehension of death	-0.22	-0.26
Statistical significance	0.083	0.043*

* $p < .05$

Pearson correlation coefficient was used in order to examine the correlation between children's understanding of death and intensity of the death anxiety. Based on the results presented in Table 3, we can see that there is no statistically significant correlation between children's understanding of death and the level of death anxiety. There is a negative correlation between children's understanding of death and words that are not related to death.

Table 4. Age differences in understanding of death (ANOVA)

	F statistic	Difference M	Statistical significance
5 years old 7 years old		-1.65	0.008
5 years old 6 years old	5.19	0.05	0.93
6 years old 7 years old		-1.7	0.006

The results show that there is statistically significant difference in understanding of death between children of different ages ($F(2, 57)=5.19$, $p=0.008$). Based on Table 4 we can see that there are differences between children ages five and seven, as well as between children six and seven years old. In other words, children who are seven years old have more mature understanding of death than children who are five and six. There is no statistically significant difference in understanding of death between children five and six years old.

According to the results there are no statistically significant differences in understanding of death between boys and girls ($t(58)=0.316$, $p=0.753$), nor between children that had experience with death and the one that had no such experience ($t(58)=0.967$, $p=0.338$).

The results showed that there are no statistically significant difference in fear of death between children of different ages ($F(2, 57)=0.014$, $p=0.986$), between boys and girls ($t(58)=-0.458$, $p=0.649$), nor between children that had experience with death and the one that had no such experience ($t(58)=0.175$, $p=0.862$).

Children's beliefs about death

Table 5. Age differences in levels of neutral words anxiety (ANOVA)

	F statistic	Difference M	Statistical significance
5 years old		3.6	0.02
7 years old			
5 years old	2.55	1.85	0.25
6 years old			
6 years old		1.75	0.27
7 years old			

Based on the results presented in Table 5, we can see that there is a statistically significant difference in level of neutral words anxiety between children who are five and seven years old. The results showed that there are no statistically significant differences in fear of neutral words between boys and girls ($t(58)=0.050$, $p=0.961$), nor between children that had experience with death and the one that had no such experience ($t(58)=0.968$, $p=0.886$).

Discussion

Children's understanding of death represent very important aspect of their lives. Therefore, we wanted to examine children's beliefs about it and what role age, gender, previous experience with death and completeness of family have in their understanding and fear of death.

According to the results, children's understanding of death is in correlation with their age, thus the seven years olds have more mature comprehension of death, compared to five and six years olds. This result is in line with previous research (Nagy, 1948; Orbach et al., 1985; Speece & Brent, 1992). Furthermore, it is found that the understanding of particular aspects of death has not been easy for children. Namely, inevitability and irreversibility were the aspects of death that were the easiest ones for children to understand and accept first, followed by universality and non-functionality. The most difficult aspect of death to understand was the causality of death. Hence, we could say that children generally understand that death is not possible to avoid, that people inevitably die, and that once a person is dead, he/she cannot be alive again. Even though the six year old P. Dj. is sure that the person cannot become alive again, he expresses an interesting opinion and says: "Heart can live again, it can go where other souls are, it can enter in other person and start beating again". Perhaps, we can recognize ideas about reincarnation in this statement.

Understanding the universality of death was a problem for the majority of children from this sample. Based on their responses it can be concluded that children are aware that people die. However, it seems that for them, the only population that dies are older and sick people. The seven years old D. K. assures us that younger people do not die: "Young Moms don't die, old ones die" and her peer B. T.: "Very,

very old people die”. Graham (2013) wrote about this, specifying that children between ages five and nine, even though know that death is inevitable and permanent, still believe that it concerns only older people.

Interesting answers were provided about the cessation of vital organs functions: *Does the person who died eat, drink water, dream, walk or go to toilet?* Often, younger children think that a person when died still needs air, food and water and that they dream (“Person who died dreams an eternal dream” - I.A., 7 years old). This way of understanding death is in accordance to the findings of Nagy (1948) and Kane (1979). It can be assumed that lack of knowledge about biological functions of the organism contributes to this kind of understanding of death. It seems, only when children learn and understand what the vital functions are, they will understand that this functions cease after death (Schonfeld & Quackenbush, 2010).

In line with earlier research (Demuthova, 2012; Kenuon, 2001; Koocher, 1973; Lazar & Torneu-Purta, 1991; Orbach et al., 1986; Slaughter & Lynos, 2002; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007), results show that children, especially the younger ones, have difficulties to understand why people die. We may say that, sometimes, even adults have a difficult time to understand why somebody had to die. However, contrary to children, adults know that death comes as a consequence of the cessation of vital organ functions. Children suspect that when bullet hit a person, when he/she falls down, injure him/herself or get sick - he/she could die. Children’s common answers about the cause of death, besides old age and illness, were: “If they take lots of medicines, and the medicines are poisonous”, “Get hit by a car”, “Get hit in the head by a rock”, “Falls from great height, hit by a bullet”. Hence, besides old age as a cause of death, other external factors are also named, what has been an important characteristic of the second phase of development of the concept of death, according to Kana (1979). Besides naming external factors, children cannot provide more precise reasons why death happens when a person falls or gets sick. According to Graham (2013), children have difficulties in understanding cause of death because they still don’t think in abstract terms.

Younger children have great difficulties comprehending death as inevitable, final and universal. A very interesting way to confirm this is through spontaneous statement given by J. M. (5 years old), during the interview: “Death is the same as life, only then you sleep and dream”. This five year olds understanding is in accordance with thinking of Maria Nagy (1948) that for children of age 3 to 5, death represents continuation of life, though its “paler version”. It is also interesting that the same boy when asked: “What doesn’t die?”, answered: “The one who is young”. In contrary to this statement, the same boy comes to a understanding, probably quite intuitive, that everybody dies, including him: “I am afraid that I will die”. This sentence of the five year old boy gives the impression that he reckons that everybody dies, no matter their age. Still, taking into consideration previous answers, we may assume that he is still not ready to accept and comprehend fully the universality and inevitability of death. Maybe one of the reasons for this is still immature thinking that overrules everything else and does not allow him to understand the two aspects

of death. Another reason could be a denial mechanism - fear of losing a person close to him (most probably a parent).

The level of achieved cognitive development of a five year old creates limitation to full understanding of complex concepts such as death, dying, existence. We may assume that an ample "battle" is taking place inside children between the things they want, what they fear of, what they glean and what is realistic, associated with complex relationship with death. The concept of death allows us to comprehend better, at least partially, the complexity of the children's thinking and the world where everything exist simultaneously and where everything is possible. The best illustration for this was given by five year old J.M. who said: "Liars die, wolfs, old people, bad people. Young people do not die. I am afraid to die". (J. M., 5 years old).

In some answers we could notice influences of religion, e.g.: "People die because God created people as such" (B. S., 7 years old). Often, the answer was that the person goes to heaven and becomes an angel, or that the person is very old and when they die, they find themselves in heaven.

Kondić and Vidanović (2011) underline that the concern for parents' lives and all-present fear that parents could die derive from death anxiety, in fact, from the projection of aggressive instinct in a person, whom made the child anxious, and who is the primer source of aggression directed to the child. Maybe we can notice that in an answer given by the girl when asked: "Why do some people die?". Dj. Dj. (6 years old) answered: "Because children upset Mom and dad, that is why they die".

There are no statistically significant differences between boys and girls in understanding of death, in accordance with the results of some previous research (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). There is also no association between children's experience with death and their concept of death. Similar findings were reported in the research done by Townley and Thornburg (1980).

There were no gender or age differences in intensity of fear of death. Further, children who had experience with death didn't differ from children who didn't have such experience, in intensity of fear of death. Though, fear of death was more intensive than the fear from neutral words. We can find similar findings in Slaughter and Griffiths (2007), Gullone (2000) and Muris et al. (2000). Although, we assumed that the intensity of fear of death will be correlated with children's understanding of death, this was not confirmed and is not in accordance with the results found by some previous research (Orbach et al., 1985; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007). Our assumption is that some other factors (that were not controlled in this research), such as education and level of religiousness of parents, some emotional challenges in children, whether death is a taboo topic in the family, etc. are more important predictors for death anxiety in children.

Interestingly enough, there is a negative correlation between the way children understand death and fear of neutral words. If we approach the fear of neutral words as a fear of regular, everyday occurrences, situations and events, this means that the children with more mature understanding of death have a lower intensity of general anxiety, and vice versa. We can assume that children with lower general anxiety

are more ready to accept and understand death, in comparison to the children with higher level of general anxiety. This result is in accordance with the research done by Slaughter and Griffiths (2007). They found that the general anxiety in children is in negative correlation to the understanding of death, indicating that the children with lower general anxiety have more mature concept of death.

We would also like to underline the result which indicate that there is no correlation between child's age and the fear of death. This result can also be found in the research done by Slaughter and Griffiths (2007). A statistically significant difference in the fear of neutral words has been found between children aged five and seven. Perhaps, five year olds' misunderstanding of the meaning of some words, presented in the questionnaire *Death anxiety scale for children*, contributed to this results. Also, we could approach to the results from the aspect of comprehension of fear of neutral words as general anxiety in children, that is much more present in younger children than the older. It is also known that older they get, children start to hide their feelings (Kondić, 1992). It is clear that imaginary fears, as the fear of death, or ghosts, do not trigger the same kind of visible, straight reaction, as fears that are triggered by certain objects. We should also take into consideration the general developmental tendency of children to more control and more adequately hide the feeling of fear, during the process of maturation.

Conclusion

The results of the research are in accordance with the existent comprehension of children's experience of death. We could see that children of different ages have different understanding of death, and that for children was easier to understand inevitability and irreversibility as aspects of death than its non-functionality and universality. They have the most difficulties with understanding the causality of death. An interesting results is that the intensity of the fear of death is not correlated with children's understanding of death, regardless of their age or the previous experience with death.

There are some limitations of this research. In particular, the data obtained from the sample of 60 children do not allow any kind of generalization. The instruments *Death interview for children* and *Death anxiety scale for children* have also been translated from English for the purposes of this research. The scale *Death interview for children* has not shown satisfactory reliability and therefore should the analysis of the results be approached with more caution. Furthermore, we believe that control of some of the relevant variables was missing, such as information about the general emotional and social development of children and the psychodynamics of the family. We would like to add that, in order to get a more complete picture of the child's understanding of death and factors that influence it, the future research should balance the sample according to children's experience with death and type of their family (e.g. complete or single -parent family).

As mentioned before, this field of the child's development has not been researched enough, not only in our region, also globally. We hope that this paper will help in solving at least some dilemmas, even prejudices that not only parents, but also those working with children, have about children's understanding of death. This may provide some answers to the questions that parents often ask themselves and others such as: "Should a child be present at the funeral or not, should they be told about the death of a loved one or hide it from them, and would hiding a death of a loved one really protect a child?" We would like to stress that adaptation to fear is an important mechanism for acceptance of reality. Fear, that is phase-adequate, can become a strength that enhances development, if a parent helps a child to adapt it.

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DEČIJE SHVATANJE SMRTI

Cilj predstavljenog istraživanja bio je ispitati razumevanje i strah od smrti kod dece i ispitati odnos navedenih koncepata. Istraživanje je obuhvatilo 60-oro dece (30-oro dečaka i 30 devojčica), uzrasta 5, 6 i 7 godina i njihove roditelje. Prikupljeni su

podaci i o iskustvu deteta sa smrću i potpunosti porodice iz koje potiče. U postupku ispitivanja primenjeni su Intervju o smrti za decu i Skala straha od smrti za decu.

Rezultati su pokazali da je dečije razumevanje smrti povezano sa uzrastom, tako da sedmogodišnjaci imaju generalno zrelije razumevanje smrti, u odnosu na petogodišnjake i šestogodišnjake. Utvrđeno je da među decom ne postoji razlika u intezitetu straha od smrti i da intezitet straha od smrti nije povezan sa načinom na koji deca razumeju smrt.

Rezultati istraživanja se delimično poklapaju sa teorijskim i empirijskim pretpostavkama o strahu o smrti kod dece i načinu na koji deca poimaju smrt.

Ključne reči: poimanje smrti, strah od smrti, deca (uzrasta 5, 6 i 7 godina)

APPENDIX 1

Death interview for children (Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007)

1. 'Tell me some things that die' (if people are not named ask, 'Do people die?')
2. 'Do all (entities mentioned in answer to question 1) die'?
3. 'Tell me some things that don't die.'
4. 'Can a dead person ever become a living person?'
5. 'If a person dies and they haven't been buried in their grave for very long can they become a live person again?'
6. 'When a person is dead . . .
 - (a) Do they need food?
 - (b) Do they need to go to the toilet?
 - (c) Do they need air?
 - (d) Can they move around?
 - (e) Do they have dreams?
 - (f) Do they need water?
7. Can you tell me something that might happen that would make someone die? When _____ happens, why does that person really die?

