

“Lahat Po Tayo ay may Katapusan”: The 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 involved 30 children, ages 7–11. Findings show that the development of concept of death among Filipino children is not a single construct and requires understanding of the different concepts of irreversibility, universality, finality and causality of death. Grasping these concepts requires understanding of non-corporeal continuation, dys-functionality, all-inclusiveness, unpredictability, inevitability, immobility, and insensitivity. Children understand that sickness, tragedy, 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 (*pagpapasa-Diyos*) 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: Causality, Finality, Irreversibility, Universality

Introduction

Children are usually associated or visualized with positive images that would most likely be a picture of youth. In our society, adults try so hard to avoid creating links between children and negative things because of such positive ideas associated with children. On the contrary, the usual picture whenever people think of death is a vision of drought, destruction, and decay filled with sobs and moans, or tears, 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. 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 regard 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 researchers believe 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 student's problems affecting their total development, specifically children who experience grief due to the loss of their significant others, or even loss of their 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 researchers 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 sought to shed light on the following questions: (1) What concepts of irreversibility of death do Filipino children hold?; (2) What are their concepts of universality of death?; (3) How do they conceptualize the finality of death?; (4) What are their concepts of causality of death?; and (5) What are their other concepts of death that 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 (a) 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.

The conceptual framework used in collecting and analyzing data 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.

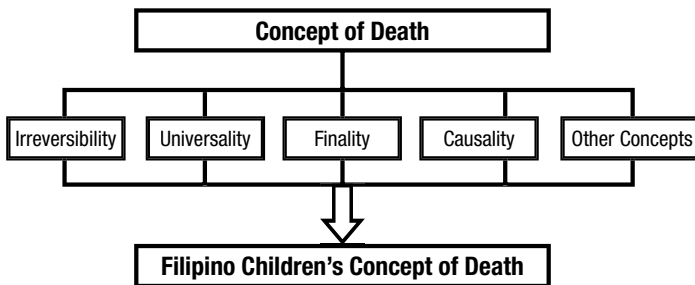


Figure 1. A schematic diagram showing the relationship of the research variables

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. Moreover, 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. 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.

Methodology

Utilizing qualitative research method in assessing the concepts of death of selected Filipino children, the research 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 involved thirty (30) children, ages 7–11 years, and living in the cities of Tanauan, Lipa

and the Municipality of Balete in Batangas. 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 in more than two (2) months, but less than a year previous; and (3) those who have seen it 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: "*Anu ano ang mga maari mong ilarawan sa tuwing naiisip mo ang salitang kamatayan?*" (What images can you 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 of the participants (i.e., "*Bakit kapag namatay na, nawawalan nang kakayahang mag-isip o masaktan?*"). 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 features in assessing different concepts of death under universality, irreversibility, finality and causality.

Results and Discussion

Concepts of Irreversibility of Death among Filipino Children

All participants described their understanding of irreversibility of death, even 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.

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).

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.

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.

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.

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.

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; that we cannot escape aging; and that people are created equally by the Divine Creator. Equally, 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 of death; 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.

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.

Immobility

Children hold 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 spirits having control of the motoric movement among humans. Such spirit would leave the body after death, thus disabling the motoric function of the living thing.

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.

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 also 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 conscious 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 (*pagpapasa-Diyos*), 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.

Divine Providence (*Pagpapasa-Diyos*)

Children's belief in the divine providence (*pagpapasa-Diyos*) 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.

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 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.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the study 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 (*pagpapasa-Diyos*) 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. Future studies may assess and compare the concept of death among age levels and cognitive levels, particularly among the pre-operational stage, and formal operations. Finally, researcher-made instrument in assessing the children's concepts of death may further be improved considering religion and case illnesses, such as terminally ill children as significant variable in understanding Filipino children's concept of death.

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