THE EFFECT OF THE FILM *IKIRU* ON DEATH ANXIETY AND ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH

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Templer (1976) conceptualized death anxiety as an entity subject to environmental events and hypothesized that high death anxiety may be treated with behavioral procedures. A variety of research efforts have dealt with the impact of death education on death anxiety and attitudes toward death. Conflicting findings have been reported concerning the effect on death anxiety (Murray, 1974; Bugen, 1978; Whelan, 1980). The education interventions used didactic, experiential, or a combination of approaches in settings ranging from one-day workshops to semester courses. Greater death anxiety reduction was noted by Bugen (1974) several weeks after the completed six 1½-hour sessions, possibly due to additional time for reflection. In a study employing group systematic desensitization and group implosive therapy to reduce death anxiety, Testa (1981) obtained a lack of change four weeks after the sessions. He cites five other studies with negative results (Bell, 1975; Knott & Prull, 1976; McClam, 1980; Mueller, 1976; Pettigrew & Dawson, 1979). Lonetto and Templer (1986) in their book, *Death Anxiety*, present a recent review on this topic.

Although films on death and dying were used in some of the educational interventions in the studies cited, no studies have reported specifically on the effect of a fictional film on the film audience's death anxiety and attitudes toward death (Austin, 1987).

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In that exhaustive review, Austin reported on 51 studies of the psychological effects of films ranging from impact on self-esteem to attitudes toward violence and sex to cultural identity formation.

The present study will report on the positive effect of the fictional film *Ikiru* on a film audience's death anxiety and attitudes toward death, as compared to the same measures used with control groups who did not see the film. Lu (1986) showed how this 1952 film by Akira Kurosawa exemplified the theme of death as a personal and universal experience with the potential of awakening consciousness. The film depicts compassionately the story of an elderly Japanese civil servant who, near retirement, learns that he will die of cancer in six months. Faced with despair, he finally chooses a project which brings meaning to his life; namely, he pushes through the government bureaucracy a neglected plan to build a children's playground. Before he dies, he achieves the tranquility of a transpersonal level of consciousness. The film is in black and white and is 135 minutes in length.

### METHOD

**Participants.** Seventy-one respondents, 29 men and 42 women, participated in this research. The participants were recruited into the study while attending the 14th Annual Conference of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology held in Pacific Grove, California, in August of 1986.

**Procedure.** Each respondent participated in one of three conditions. The intervention group (Condition I) consisted of 25 individuals who self-selected to attend a workshop in which the film *Ikiru* was shown. Before viewing the film, these participants completed a demographic information sheet and two questionnaires which assessed current attitudes toward death (Pre-test). The same questionnaires were readministered four weeks later (Post-test).

The 37 respondents in the main comparison group (Condition II) completed identical Pre-test and Post-test questionnaires; they did not, however, view the film. Inclusion of this control group assured that any change found in the intervention group's attitudes toward death would not be an artifact of time alone or of attending the conference. A smaller (n=9) control group (Condition III) completed the questionnaires only once, four weeks after the conference. This group represented a "post-test" only condition and allowed us to assess the effects, if any, of the questionnaires themselves.
Instruments. All participants completed a demographic information sheet which surveyed age, sex, marital status, education, occupation as well as each respondent's past experiences with death and with life-threatening situations. Two widely used and previously validated measures (Durlak, 1972; Kurlychek, 1978) of one's subjective experience of death were administered at each assessment.

First, each participant's general attitude toward death was assessed by the Lester Attitude Toward Death Scale (LA Scale). The LA Scale consists of 21 statements about death that are arranged on a continuum from most favorable (e.g., "What we call death is only the birth of the soul into a new and delightful life") to most unfavorable (e.g., "Death is the worst thing that could possibly happen to me"). Respondents are asked to either agree or disagree with each of the 21 statements. A numerical weight has been developed for each of the items (Lester, 1974) with the most favorable view of death receiving the lowest scores and the most unfavorable receiving the highest. The LA scale yields two measures of potential interest, both of which were used in this study:

1. A general attitude toward death can be assessed by either the median or the mean of the items to which the respondent agrees.

2. The inconsistency of a person's attitude toward death can be measured by subtracting the scale weight for the most favorable statement from the scale weight for the least favorable statement.

Death anxiety was measured by the Templer/Mordie Death Anxiety Scale (T/M Scale), a fifteen-item questionnaire which samples a range of death-related fears such as "I am very much afraid to die" and "I often think about how short life is." Each item is rated on a seven-point Likert scale which extends from "Very strongly agree" through "Neutral" to "Very strongly disagree." The items are coded so that a high score represents the most intense fear of death. A respondent's overall death anxiety is calculated by summing across all the items.

Analytic strategy

It was hypothesized that participants in Condition I and Condition II would not show significant Pre-test differences in their attitude toward death. However, as a result of viewing the film Ikiru, participants in the intervention group, in contrast to the Condition II control group, would display at the Post-test 1) a more positive shift in their attitude toward death (mean LA score), 2) less inconsistency in their attitude toward death (LA
Scale discrepancy score), and 3) less overall death anxiety (T/M Scale total score).

To test these main hypotheses, split-plot factorial Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted for each of these three dependent variables with Condition (I vs II) representing the between group factor, and Time (Pre-test vs, Post-test) representing the within group factor. If the intervention was effective, such analysis would yield only a significant Condition by Time interaction and not a main effect for either Condition or Time.

It was further hypothesized that respondents in Condition II and Condition III would not differ significantly on their Post-test scores but that those individuals who saw *Ikiru* would display more favorable views of death and dying than participants in either control group. A one-way Analysis of Variance was conducted on each of the three dependent variables to insure that there were no main effects due to the questionnaires themselves.

RESULTS

Demographics. The participants ranged in age from 23 to 74 years with the average age being 44.9 years (s.d.=10.87). The majority of the respondents were Caucasians (93%), 4% were Asians and 3% defined their ethnic background as either Latino or Hispanic. Most were married or living in a long-term relationship (28% and II %, respectively). Thirty-five percent were currently divorced or separated while 21% had never married. Four percent were widowed.

The sample was a highly educated one with all of the respondents reporting at least some college and the majority (69%) holding advanced degrees. This high level of education was also reflected in the fact that 69% of the participants described themselves as professionals.

A wide spectrum of religious orientations were represented with 17% (n=12) listing themselves as Agnostic/ Atheist/No Affiliation, 14% (n=10) as Protestant, 13% (n=9) as Buddhist, 11% (n=8) as Jewish. 11% Spiritualist, 8% (n=6) as Unitarian, 3% (n=2) as Taoist, 3% Goddess worshipper. The remaining 20% covered a variety of orientations such as Sufi and Native American.

The groups did not differ in age or any other important demographic factor. Nor did the groups differ at the Pre-testin
the number of experiences with death or near death, or how recently someone they knew had died. However, between the first and second assessment, more members of the intervention group experienced either a loss of a significant other or a near death experience involving the self than did members of the main comparison group ($\chi^2 = 4.35, df = 1; p < .04$). Since such experiences can influence one's attitudes toward death, the analysis was conducted in two waves. The first set of analyses involved all participants in Conditions I and II. The analyses were then repeated excluding those respondents who, between the Pre- and Post-test, had suffered a loss or near death experience. In the second wave of analyses, 10 people were eliminated from Condition I and 5 from Condition II, leaving a total of 15 participants in the intervention group and 32 in the main comparison group.

**Did the instruments have an effect?**

None of the comparisons involving the Post-tests scores for Conditions II and III yielded significant group effects indicating that the measures themselves did not have an impact on respondents' attitudes toward death.

**Was the intervention effective?**

**Wave 1.** The results of the first set of analyses using the full sample for all three of the dependent measures suggest that the film *Ikiru* can have a positive impact on one's subjective experience of death.

*TIM Scale—Death anxiety.* Both groups showed an improvement in their scores from the first to the second assessment as revealed by a significant main effect for Time on the *TIM* Scale ($F_1, 43 :::::4.887, p. < .05$). However only those respondents who viewed the film showed a marginally significant decrease in death anxiety ($F_1, 22 = 4.016, p < .06$); the decrease shown by the control group failed to reach significance ($F_1, 36 = 1.200, p < .28$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condition I</td>
<td>$x$ 59.792</td>
<td>58.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$sd$</td>
<td>9.546</td>
<td>7.942</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condition II</td>
<td>$t$ 60.027</td>
<td>58.838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$sd$</td>
<td>12.750</td>
<td>10.546</td>
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</table>
LA Scale-s-General attitude toward death. On the Lester Attitude Scale, there was a significant Group x Time interaction effect ($F_{1,60} = 3.56, p < .05$) with the intervention group showing a shift to a more positive attitude toward death while the control group stayed the same.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condition I</td>
<td>$\bar{x}$</td>
<td>37.125</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$sd$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condition II</td>
<td>$\bar{x}$</td>
<td>36.418</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$sd$</td>
<td>13.564</td>
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</table>

LA Scale-s-Inconsistency in attitude toward death. A marginally significant Group x Time interaction effect ($F_{1,60} = 3.646, p < .06$) was also found for the LA Scale inconsistency score with the intervention group becoming more consistent in their attitude toward death and the control group becoming less so.

Wave 2

Wave 2. The reanalyses which eliminated those respondents who had an experience with death or near death between the Pre- and Post-test, replicated the results obtained with the full sample on two of the three dependent measures.

TJM Scale-Death anxiety. Again a significant main effect for Time was found ($F_{1,43} = 4.672, p < .04$) with both groups exhibiting lower anxiety toward death at the Post-test but only the intervention group showing a significant decrease ($F_{1,14} = 6.489, p < .02$).

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<tr>
<th>TABLE 3</th>
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<td>62.133</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$sd$</td>
<td>6.346</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condition II</td>
<td>$\bar{x}$</td>
<td>59.701</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$sd$</td>
<td>12.750</td>
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LA Scale-r-Attitudes toward death. No significant main effects or interaction effects were found for the general attitude toward death score. However, a significant Group x Time effect ($F_{1,43} = 4.185, p < .05$) was obtained for the inconsistency in attitude toward death score. Again those in the intervention
group shifted to a more consistent view of death while those in the comparison group became less consistent in their attitude toward death.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>X</td>
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<td>sd</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condition II</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>X</td>
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DISCUSSION

This paper reports on the first known research project using control groups and validated scales to determine the effect of a fictional film on death anxiety and attitudes toward death. We have found that the intervention group I and the control group II resembled each other prior to the intervention on the TIM and Lester scales. Both groups showed an improvement on the TIM scale over time, but only the intervention group I improved significantly. On the Lester Scale, when all subjects were included, the intervention group experienced a significant decrease in fear of death and became more consistent in their attitudes toward death, while the control group II became more inconsistent. Control group III results demonstrate that the questionnaires themselves or intervening events did not bias these results.

The reasons for this reduction in death anxiety in the intervention group remain speculative. Intuitively, one could argue that the audience identified with the hero and his change in consciousness about death from despair to final acceptance as the film progressed. This hypothesis would parallel the findings of Tannenbaum (1965) who demonstrated that a film audience's stress level was related to both the degree of identification with the protagonist and the type of ending. Although not empirically demonstrated, Kurosawa's cinematic methods as discussed by Lu (1986) parallel the methods of Noh drama as described by La Fleur (1983) in facilitating the audience's identification with the protagonist. For the audience of Noh drama, La Fleur (1983) believed that, as their view of the protagonist changed from a tragic to a just one (even though the character's fate remained the same), their feelings of initial tension were relieved. The authors believe the study group audience who viewed *Ikiru* underwent a similar experience so...
that death anxiety was reduced, even four weeks after seeing the film.

This study was limited by the demographics of the groups: a predominantly well-educated, Caucasian population attending a transpersonal psychology conference. It would be of interest to replicate the study with other groups: the general public, health-care providers, and those people with life-threatening illnesses such as cancer or AIDS.

The use of film to depict personal and transpersonal transformations of consciousness have been described by Hurley (1970) and Ferlitta (1976). In fact, Hurley’s last chapter, entitled "Teaching Theology Through Cinema," posits the use of film to confront audience attitudes toward ideals of freedom, grace and sacrificial love, conscience, and death. This study furthers the empirical research much needed to demonstrate that a fictional film can be successfully used in reducing death anxiety and altering attitudes toward death.

REFERENCES


Requests for reprints to Francis G. Lu, M.D., Dept. of Psychiatry, San Francisco General Hospital, 1001 Potrero Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94110.
The Death Anxiety Semantic Differential, Parts I and II, was used as the dependent variable. The results indicate that the small-group counseling and education experience did have an impact on attitudes toward death and dying patients of nurses who attended. The discussion of the findings and recommendations for further study are presented. Authors: M S Miles. Related Documents: 7839577 - Nursing attitudes towards charcoal administration--impact on patient care. 1041617 - Patient attitudes toward nursing interventions. 11226357 - Smoking cessation activities by general practitioners and pract Whether a unit of study dealing with death and dying caused changes in adolescents' death anxiety and attitudes toward older adults is investigated. Randomly selected students from high schools in North Carolina participated in the study. The experimental group numbered 323; there were 152 students in the control group. The experimental group participated in a series of ten 50-minute lessons on death and dying. The study employed a pretest, posttest, and follow-up posttest design. Pretests showed that adolescents had moderately high levels of death anxiety but positive attitudes toward older adults. Whether a unit of study dealing with death and dying caused changes in adolescents' death anxiety and attitudes toward older adults is investigated. Randomly selected students from high schools in North Carolina participated in the study. The experimental group numbered 323; there were 152 students in the control group. The experimental group participated in a series of ten 50-minute lessons on death and dying. The study employed a pretest, posttest, and follow-up posttest design. Pretests showed that adolescents had moderately high levels of death anxiety but positive attitudes toward older adults.

Attitudes toward suicide: the effect of suicide death

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