

# Older Adults' Acceptance of Death: A Grounded Theory Approach

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***Abstract***—The issue of death anxiety and fear of death has been a great concern of health care providers due to its emotional and behavioral outcomes among the recipients of care. Theoretical propositions and observed findings on death concept have not been thoroughly examined in nursing researches specifically those coming from the elderly's point-of-view. This theory generation utilized the grounded theory methodology via inductive approach to theory development that would explain the death experience, consciousness and acceptance towards death in an individual's lifetime. Data were gathered from the older population using purposive sampling. Interviews were semi-structured and based on the death perception and experiences of the older participants. Both memo writing and comparative analysis were used during the course of the study, aided by the method of open, axial and selective coding. Theoretical categories were generated to derive the following propositions: Overcoming death experiences results to death acceptance; death consciousness influence death acceptance; death acceptance lead to the process of death preparation; and spirituality is an essential element of death experience, death consciousness, death acceptance and death preparation. The theory generated is that death acceptance is an accumulation of death experiences and one's spiritual beliefs which translate to death consciousness that results to the acceptance of one's mortality gearing towards death preparation.

**Keywords**— Older Adults, Death Experiences, Acceptance, Grounded theory

## I. Introduction

Every individual speculates one fact of life that unifies mankind: What is death? What comes after this life?

Death is defined as the cessation of all life functions that are deemed important for any living organism to live and survive. The phenomena of death and dying involve genetic aging, being eaten by other species, starvation/ hunger, disease, killing of oneself or suicide, being killed or murdered, dehydration, and accidents or trauma that will eventually result in the end of one's life [25]. Whether for human beings or animals, death has always been feared, dreaded and misunderstood due to the complex emotions attached to it. From the normal reaction like sadness, loneliness, anger, anxiety, depression to severe conditions like mental disorders eventually lead to social isolation and suicide [12]. Several theories and discussions about death

and dying vary across cultures, and the very nature of death and human cognizance of its own mortality ever since time immemorial has been a cause of mystery and concern of the world's religions, cultural traditions and of theoretical inquiry [2]. This fear towards death is defined as "death anxiety or *thanatophobia*" [20]. In recent years, a number of literary works and scientific studies have been written on this concern, and though most people choose not to think about death, it remains inevitable. Every living thing especially humans, without exception, is subject to death, and this actuality provoke fear to many [1].

Regarding death, my personal talks with Filipino older adults have often times led to fascination into their outlook regarding death and how they define, perceive and prepare for it. Unlike western counterparts, some Filipino elderly are more or less practical in their views about aging, death and dying. This observed phenomenon, though manifesting, needed to be validated as a lived experience.

I would like to explore the relationship between an individual's death perception across life span and the evolution of either death concept or acceptance to it. Although death comes to any age at any given time, this research would like to develop a theory regarding the elderly's perception of death leading to its acceptance. Since the elderly is considered to be in their twilight years, it is during this time that the ides of death become prominent in their thoughts. This study sought to determine if this phenomenon regarding death concept would lead to the sense of acceptance of a life either well-spent or not, discover if this positive emotion could make a graceful transition towards death and dying.

## II. Process of Theory Generation

This theory generation utilized the grounded theory methodology via inductive approach to theory development in order to create a theory that would explain the development towards fear of death and/or its acceptance in one's life [5].

This was a preliminary study in the Philippines that delved on the older adults' narratives regarding experiences about death. This study generally: (1) Explored the individual's personal definition of death, (2) Evaluated the presence of death anxiety, (3) Discovered personal meanings of death (4) Investigated death experiences that might have impact

on one's perceptions about death, and (5) Discovered the individual's coping mechanisms when dealing with death anxiety or fear of death.

**III. Methodology**

Data were gathered from the older population using purposive sampling methods. The participants were seniors/elderly within Iligan City area who had been identified as coherent and mentally stable without severe or profound intellectual disabilities. Aside from the participant's profile, an Initial Dementia Assessment was done to ascertain their mental status in answering via interview [14].

Before ascertaining ethical considerations and approval, initial approval was obtained from the Federation of Senior Citizen Association of the Philippines (FSCAP) - Iligan Chapter President and Board of Directors. Ensuring that the participant's participation of the study was held voluntarily and that the participants could withdraw at any time, along with confidentiality and anonymity clauses, investigations were conducted with utmost confidentiality. Schedule were set through the convenience and approval of the volunteer senior citizens. Interviews were done to the 5 elderly participants within a time-frame of 30 to 60 minutes, based on informant's area of comfort and convenience. Participants were not exposed to any physical or emotional threat as they were given freedom to refuse answering any question that would make them feel uncomfortable, that they may pull-out from the study at any time.

Interviews were recorded via audio-visual equipment and consequently transcribed. Coding and memo writing were utilized for data analysis, and for any clarification regarding ambiguous data, the investigator made sure that outright verification of responses were clarified with that particular participant. When interviews were completed, memo-writing finalization was done for the data analysis [4].

After the in-depth interview with participant, debriefing was done through a registered guidance counselor. It is important to take into account all of the risks involved through the informed consent process among all informants.

**IV. Results and Discussions**

Table 1. Cross case matrix of the older adults' demographic profile as they overcome death experiences.

	<b>Case 1. Older adult with painful death experience her child.</b>	<b>Case 2. Older adult with a traumatic death experience of her father at a young age.</b>	<b>Case 3. Older adult with death experience of parents' just months apart from each death.</b>	<b>Case 4. Older adult with death experience of her husband.</b>	<b>Case 5. Older adult traumatic death experience of his mother at a young age.</b>
Age	72	78	77	73	78
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Civil Status	Married	Married	Married	Widow	Married
Memorable death Experience	Death of her Eldest child due to Cancer	Death of her father at a young age (10) due to cardiac arrest	Death of both parents' months apart	Death of husband due to complications of Stroke	Death of his mother at a young age (7) due to premature delivery
Relationship with the Deceased	Offspring	Father	Parents	Husband	Mother
Nature of Death	cancer	Cardiac Arrest	Old age	Complication of major stroke	Premature delivery (hemorrhage)
Impact of death Experience	Very sad, Painful, depressed	Very sad, Painful, depressed	Sad	Sad	Extremely sad, Trauma, Anger, Pain
Time-frame of Bereavement	A year	Beyond years	3-6 months	3-6 months	Beyond years
Resolution/Outcome	Overcome due to faith	Overcome due to faith	Overcome due to faith	Overcome due to faith	Overcome due to faith

Based on the interview results, the following profile was derived from the five (5) elderly participants via descriptive data analyses in Table 1.

Participants was between 75-80 years old at 80% (Table 1); female (80%); married (60%); college level as educational attainment (40%); current living condition: with husband/wife alongside children (60%); Roman Catholic (40%) and Protestant (40%) religion; and the Initial Dementia Assessment for these participants were no cause of concern (100%).

To guarantee accuracy of the transcriptions, interview audios were repeated while re-reading the transcribed interviews. This method assisted the investigator to be

completely immersed in all data. Both memo writing and comparative analysis were used during the course of the study, aided by the method of open, axial and selective coding as recommended by Strauss [22] and Corbin [4].

After the interviews, the conceptual memo was written with initial codes and focused codes were developed. These were records of thoughts about the responses on death and death experiences, then meanings of codes were further recorded on what, why and how processes occurred, noticing variation of responses, and what their significance would be [3]. The transcribed memo was assessed for comparison from cases and similar codes, from here a tentative model of the process on the implementation of the theory development was discussed from the perspective of participants. As outcomes, a set of main focused sub-theme, resulting to thematic codes were illustrated [8], these relationships among concepts were shown in Table 2.

According to the participant’s interview results, death of the immediate family members like the father, mother, siblings and grandparents were more memorable and the experience of profound sadness and pain were distinctively remembered during their passing. The closer the relationship, the more intense the emotions and the length of grieving more likely imprinted in long-term memory. Sudden and painful death was hardest to forget and the unexpected and traumatic way of death. Death by accident, murder and cardiac arrest were among the most memorable death occurrence [19].

Table 2. Coding transcripts resulting to Sub-themes and theme.

Sub- Theme	Theme
Death experiences vary among older adults	<b>Overcoming death experiences results to death acceptance</b>
Exposure to death has its impact on one’s awareness and consciousness	<b>Death consciousness influences death acceptance</b>
Acknowledging death and preparing for it	<b>Death acceptance leads to the process of death preparation</b>
Pervasive role of spirituality in the course of death experiences results to death acceptance	<b>Spirituality is an essential element in death experience, death consciousness, death acceptance and death preparation</b>

During the interview, participants openly recalled how they felt and reacted after every death. The natural grieving process was manifested. The combination of how young or old when the memorable death experience happened, the relationship they have with the deceased, plus the nature in which that person passed-away resulted to psychosomatic manifestation, physical sickness [10] and emotional turmoil

(denial, anger, bargaining, depression and with time, acceptance). In Kubler Ross’s theory on the grieving process explains that a person will have to undergo five stages of psychological emotions, namely, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and then eventually acceptance [11]. But many people do not experience the stages of grief in the same way. Every individual grieves differently as each person will experience death of a loved one or significant other in their lives. Hence, *death experiences vary among older adults (Sub -theme 1)*.

Evidently in the scripts from the one-on-one interview, it is apparent that from the initial death experience, the more negative the emotions will be manifested like fear, anger, pity, extreme sadness and anxiety were predominant emotions [10]. This usually increase intensity depending on the relationship the participant has to the deceased, the nature of death, and the participants’ age. Each individual death experiences are stored in what is referred to as retained factual memory. This memory comprised of death experiences remembered, created by one’s own perception of the events, reactions and emotions felt during that particular memory [16]. This source of memories is compiled from personal experiences.

Although the emotions and behaviors were diminished as the years rolled-by, the memory still lingers but with maturity and faith, tolerance and acceptance were verbalized. Thus, *overcoming death experiences results to death acceptance (Theme 1)*.

The understanding of death and its reality somehow translates to intellectual and psychological death recognition. It was evident in the interviews’ with the elderly participants’ that their level of understanding and appreciation from their rich death experience has resulted to the development of consciousness towards death. By being aware of death’s reality and outcome, they have created the ability to pull through any death experience with understanding and respect to the reality of it [9].

The minimum or the severity of such reactions and attitudes concerning death will evolve into a pattern of consciousness or awareness to the reality of it happening in ones’ life and to the people they’ve met. Other times their ideas about death were influenced from the views of other people who had experienced it first [15]. By understanding these perceptions before their actual death, experience is an indicator of their death consciousness or how they perceived death to be, minus the actual experience [23]. These ideas may stem from biological understanding of death, existential understanding of death, and spiritual relateness of death. Biological understanding of death refers to the genetic predisposition of humans to die in a given time. To the elderly participants this is a natural occurrence to all living things. It is an undeniable fact that the genetic make-up of man, due to his cellular nature will eventually stop thriving and that death will eventually occur [2]. Existential understanding of death pertains to the elderly participants’ awareness of one’s mortality and that

death is a part of living. Apart from being a genetic/cellular being, the perception of death is believed to have stemmed from the fact that no man is immortal. In their life journey, they have witnessed death upon death, may it be from strangers to their significant persons, thus, solidifying the belief that man cannot live forever [21].

On the other hand, spiritual readiness of death indicated that an instilled spiritual upbringing created a tendency of death acceptance as participant's unconscious grasp to immortality. This perception has evolved to pacify their anxious thoughts about death through the belief of an afterlife. This somehow created a buffer towards deaths' negative image [24].

Support systems are important factor in each exposure to death that will result to either one's resolution, awareness or consciousness in moving forward from the negative experience regarding death. Because of this, *exposure to death has its impact on one's awareness and consciousness (Sub -theme 2)*.

During the death experience, the participants' admitted that they went through the grieving process and this resulted to their reinforced understanding about death. Having to undergo the emotional turmoil enable them to acknowledge the inevitability and unexpectedness of death in their lives [11]. This consciousness pertains to the understanding by the mind and the world around. Death consciousness occurs when awareness and understanding on the process of death happens. With death understanding comes the acceptance on the reality of death. Hence, **death consciousness influences death acceptance (Theme 2)**.

When the interviewed participants appreciate the knowledge they had when it comes to death and dying, it empowered them to do something in their final days, when they could no longer make an active decision [18]. This is to pre-empt future concerns and at the same time, lessen the burden of those they will leave behind. Thus, resulting to *acknowledging death and preparing for it (Sub- theme 3)*.

They understood the importance and need for such preparation for their loved ones thus, assuring them that everything will be in order in the event of their death. Hence, **death acceptance leads to the process of death preparation (Theme 3)**. Death preparation is described as 'coming clean' with all the guilt and faults that weigh heavily emotionally. The elderly participants believed that peaceful death requires conditioning the self to admit faults and render forgiveness in order to be prepared 'to go' without regrets or hang-ups.

This is where one's spirituality plays an important role in death preparation. The deep-seated belief of a higher source of life creates comfort and assurance in the outcome of death [7]. The inherent belief in God and afterlife was evident with the narratives of the elderly participants. The belief that there is a much better place to go when they die and that God has a hand in their lives proves to be

interrelated in life and death perception [13]. This intangible faith reassures them that death is not the end for everything. Hence, the *pervasive role of spirituality in the course of death experiences results to death acceptance (Sub -theme 4)*.

This spirituality holds together the perception from the death experiences, consciousness, the eventual acceptance and subsequent result to death preparation. One human being has always been in sync with spirituality. By being spiritual, does not refer to one's preferred religion or any organizational practices, but spirituality pertains to the inner most being, the soul, of knowing one's purpose of existence and belief in a higher power [24].

The belief in the higher being and in a divine purpose in a person's life is an intangible factor by which the participants put full and unconditional trust, believing that there is God and afterlife. Due to this, many elderly participants' perceptions of death were positively verbalized. Although death is considered to be a painful, dark and a sad event, the elderly openly stated that they have learned to accept death and its inevitable reality [20].

The belief in life after death offers a positive outlook in the afterlife to be a better, happy place, peaceful, pain-free and reunion with loved ones who passed-away. Thus, **spirituality is an essential element in death experience, death consciousness, death acceptance and death preparation (Theme 4)**.

### **Death Acceptance Theory in Older Adults**

The basic assumption of **Death Acceptance Theory** states that one's death acceptance comes when death is experienced which leads to consciousness resulting to death acceptance and subsequent death preparation.

Figure 1 presents the schematic diagram of the theory. These categories play an important role in older person's death acceptance namely death experiences, one's death consciousness, death acceptance, death preparation and innate spiritual belief on the afterlife comprised the death acceptance theory. Grounding into narrative analysis resulted to generate the following theoretical categories as a contextual condition that arise upon the older persons understanding towards death to determine how they think of death (death experiences) and at the same time, death awareness and consciousness, death acceptance will lead to death preparedness and in all these categories spirituality (faith in God and belief in the afterlife) affects one's death acceptance [22].



**Figure 1. Schematic diagram of Death Acceptance Theory**

It is revealed that the older person's death acceptance is influenced by factors concerning the death processes one has undergone in their life.

The concept of death experiences defines their perception about death and dying. These factors include; one's age during the memorable death experience; the kind of relationship to the deceased; and the nature of the said death affects the point of view of the individual. But as one ages, the number of death experiences along with maturity and strong faith resulted to one's overcome death experiences.

The said maturity translated to one's 'conscious' death recognition, being referred to in this study as death consciousness. Death consciousness creates a sense of understanding regarding death with the elderly participants' level of understanding and appreciation from their vast death experiences. By being aware of deaths' reality and outcome, they have created the ability to pull through any death experience with acceptance to its existence [12]. Death consciousness resulted from the following factors; the number of death experiences, death concept before and after death experiences [6], biological understanding of death (the genetic predisposition of humans to die in a given time), existential understanding of death (pertaining to the elderly participants' awareness of one's mortality and that death is a part of living [21]; spiritual awareness of death (an instilled spiritual upbringing); grieving patterns; and availability of support system. All these construct created one's death consciousness that leads to one's death acceptance.

Death acceptance on the other hand evolved through their series of death experiences observed from the others creating their death consciousness. The participants' appreciated the knowledge they had when it comes to death and dying (consciousness) and coming to terms with it (acceptance). It empowered them to do something in their final days, when they could no longer make an active decision. This is where death preparation commences when individuals prepare for the inevitability of death and the consequences if not planned. In understanding the importance and need for such preparation means having security for family/loved ones and peace of mind for the individual for a future demise [19].

In all these variables, it is revealed that there is a strong influence of man's spirituality in one's concept about death. It is evident that participants believed in a 'higher power' or

God and that there is more to this life, thus the hope in the afterlife. Due to spirituality, there is a sense of trust and hope in life after death believing that somehow, the stark reality of death is not the ultimate end but in another life to a much peaceful, pain free, and happier place.

The interaction of these four categories namely death experiences, death consciousness, death acceptance, death preparation and spirituality led to the determination of the theory that is presented in this study. These findings have led to the emergence of the **Death Acceptance Theory**.

## Conclusion

The study of the older adult's death acceptance showed that there is already death acceptance among the interviewed older participant's. Due to this acceptance, the individual has come to terms with one's mortality and end. This appreciation has somehow translated into their proactive stand in their own death preparation. These preparations that is deemed important by the participants includes: acknowledging the importance in personal preparation for death; understanding the need of succession plans and material wealth preparation; and spiritual preparation for family and self is considered important for death preparation. There is a need for a holistic preparation (for self, family and spirituality) for one's end in order to ascertain the security for the future of significant others who will be left behind, at the same time having peace of mind for the individual should death happens to him.

## Recommendations

The study output presented here does present many considerations and factors that resulted to death acceptance resulting to one's death preparation or readiness amongst older adults. However, the need for more in-depth study regarding death acceptance and preparedness and it's contributing factors and perceived barriers are needed in order to shed more light as to identifying patterns of the evolvement of one's death acceptance and subsequent preparation. Further recommendation for a large sample population with different group dynamics may be considered to expand the data results found in this study.

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