

Attitudes Toward Death and Dying in Old Age: High Perceived Control, Low Metaphysical Beliefs

Anja K. Leist & Martine Hoffmann
University of Luxembourg

Gerontologist, 51(S2), 2011, 356-357.

AUTHOR PRE-PRINT

http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/content/51/suppl_2.toc

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the *Gerontological Society of America*, Boston, MA, November 2011.

Abstract

Objectives. The awareness of the inevitability of death might constitute a major source of fear and influence behavior and psychosocial well-being directly or indirectly. Attitudes toward death and dying in old age were explored in the context of legal alterations in Luxembourg allowing for medically assisted suicide in case of fatal illness.

Method. A sample of 62 community-dwelling individuals aged between 65 and 89 years participated in an interview exploring attitudes towards death and dying in general and the salience of this topic for their own lives in particular. Reports were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Results. Three overarching themes were identified: (1) *Concreteness of thoughts concerning death and dying*, suggesting that a significant part of the respondents has already prepared for death with pragmatic organizational decisions in order to counteract fears of a long and painful dying process. (2) *The role of metaphysical and religious beliefs*, demonstrating perceptions of death as a mainly corporal phenomenon that seems postponable by high-tech medicine. Few persons stated to believe in heaven, the soul, or the reunion with deceased relatives. (3) *Perceived control in the dying process and death*, the “right time” to die being evaluated within life review with a general tendency to regard death and dying as controllable by norms and traditions, and, now more than ever, self-determined by testament and living will.

Discussion. The new law on euthanasia has apparently increased perceived autonomy and decision-making ability regarding one’s own end-of-life issues, and, simultaneously, raised normative expectations to prepare for death.