Published in final edited form as:

Death Stud. 2012 ; 36(10): 932–948.

Contact with the Dead, Religion, and Death Anxiety Among Older Mexican Americans

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to see if contact with the dead is associated with lower death anxiety among older Mexican Americans. The data come from a nationwide survey of older Mexican Americans (N = 1,005). The study model specifies that: (a) older Mexican Americans who have experienced contact with the dead are more likely to see the connectedness that exists among all people; (b) seeing that all people are one promotes feelings of grateful to God; (c) gratitude toward God is, in turn, associated with lower death anxiety. The findings support each of these relationships.

Keywords

contact with dead; death anxiety; Mexican Americans

One of the most popular Mexican American festivals, Dias de Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) (Fernandez, 2007), is a time when people remember dead loved ones in a number of ways. They often construct altars in the home and place pictures of the deceased on them along with flowers, candles, and even their favorite food or drink. Family members also go to the cemetery to decorate and clean the graves of a loved one who has passed away. Sometimes these graveside visits turn into all night vigils. The Day of the Dead is an important cultural practice to study because, as Brandes (2006) points out, “The Day of the Dead, from colonial times to the present day, has been first and foremost a religious holiday” (p. 117). Although there is a solemn side to Dias de Los Muertos, it is a festive time, as well. Parades are held and the individuals who participate in them dress in costumes that reflect some aspect of death. For example, some costumes may have full body length skeletons painted on them. Special candies and breads in the shape of a skull or crossbones are also prepared (e.g., pan de muertos - dead bread). But beneath the gaiety and celebration lies an important social function, “... the living and dead family members and friends are

joined together in an atmosphere of communion and spiritual regeneration” (Leon, 2004, p. 124). Or, as Fernandez (2007) puts it, “... Dia de los Muertos ... celebrations demonstrate a deep sense of the strong connection with all those who have gone before them” (p. 62).

Cultural practices, such as the Dias de Los Muertos celebration, have shaped Mexican American views of death: “The deceased person is *really* present and participating in every aspect of our daily lives” (Goizueta, 2002, p. 14, emphasis in the original). However, the notion that the dead may actually contact the living is not unique to Mexican American culture. In fact, a small cluster of studies suggests that people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds have also had some sort of contact with a loved one who has died. For example, 62.6% of the participants in Klugman's (2006) study of the general population indicated they had been in contact with the dead, Greeley (1987) reports that over 40% of the participants in his study had some sort of contact with people who died, and 35.6% MacDonald's (1992) participants said they had contact with a dead family member or friend. More recently, Krause (2010) found that 48.7% of older whites and older African Americans felt the presence of a dead loved on in the same room and 20.7% reported that they had actually seen a family member or friend who had died.

Although having contact with the dead may initially seem unsettling, there is some evidence that it may be a pleasant experience (Bennett, Hughes, & Smith, 2005) that may reduce feelings of death anxiety (Krause, 2010). But none of these studies have focused specifically on Mexican Americans. Even so, as the discussion provided above reveals, this experience may enhance the psychological well-being of Mexican Americans, specifically.

Having contact with the dead is hypothesized to be associated with a diminished sense of death anxiety among older Mexican Americans. This hypothesis is based on the notion that when a loved one dies, those who are left behind may worry about what has happened to them: they may worry about whether they continue to exist at all, and if they do, whether they are safe, cared for, and content. Moreover, having a loved one die may raise unsettling feelings about one's own eventual demise. However, if Mexican Americans experience direct contact with the dead, and if they value this type of encounter, then perhaps it will go a long way toward allaying any concerns they may have about death.

Unfortunately, there are no empirical studies that examine the relationship between having contact with the dead and death anxiety among Mexican Americans. However, a recent qualitative study provides some evidence that contact with the dead is a pleasant experience that may enhance the well-being of older Mexican Americans (Krause & Bastida, 2009a).

Contact With the Dead and Death Anxiety Among Older Mexican Americans

The latent variable model that was developed for this study is presented in Figure 1. The key linkages in this conceptual scheme are discussed below.

Contact With the Dead and Connectedness with Others

Researchers have developed a number of models to explain the grieving process. For example, the Continuing Bonds Model (e.g., Field, Oz, & Bonnano, 2003) posits that

bereaved individuals often find comfort when they sense the presence of the deceased because it provides evidence that the attachment bond to the deceased loved one does not end with death but continues on (Field & Friedrichs, 2004). Consequently, it is hypothesized that having contact with the dead helps a grieving person retain a sense of connectedness (i.e., bonding) with the individual who has passed away. Further support for this hypothesis may be found in the foundational work of Ross (1896) and James (1898).

Ross (1896) maintained that a sense of connectedness lies at the very heart of religion. He then went on to discuss the special role the dead play in the creation of these bonds: “The dead are the cement that unites men. To have the same gods, to be watched, loved, and protected by the same deities, to be destined to join the same unseen company at death - these created fellowship” (Ross, 1896, p.437). William James (1898) elaborated on this issue when he delivered the Ingersoll Lectureship on the nature of immortality. He began by arguing that everyone lives on after death. James (1898) then went on to discuss how awareness of immortality shapes the way people view their relationships with others: “And how inessential in the eyes of God must be that small surplus of the individual's merit Not our differences and distinctions, - we feel - no, but our common animal essence of patience under suffering and enduring effort must be what redeems us in the Deity's sight. An immense compassion and kinship fill the heart” (p. 34).

In effect, James (1898) is saying that when people become aware of their own immortality they begin to realize that individual achievement is not what matters most in life. Instead, awareness of immortality helps people develop a greater appreciation for the common suffering and enduring struggles that everyone must grapple with, regardless of their status in life. And individuals who are able to grasp these insights are overwhelmed with an immense feeling of kinship with all people. However, James (1898) never specifies precisely how a person develops an awareness of their own immortality. A central premise in the current study is that having contact with a deceased loved one provides convincing evidence of one's own immortality. Moreover, having contact with a dead loved one mitigates the fears associated with death because, as James (1898) argues, this type of emotionally-charged encounter helps the living develop a greater appreciation for the connectedness among all people that extends beyond the grave.

Connectedness with Others and Feelings of Gratitude Toward God

Seeing that all people are connected is, at least initially, a cognitive process. But it is difficult to see how the realization that all people are connected could arise without eventually evoking a strong emotional response, as well. In fact, as discussed in the previous section, James (1898) argues that seeing the connectivity among all people has significant emotional implications: “An immense compassion and kinship fill the heart” (p. 34). Although feelings of compassion are indeed likely to arise, this may not be the only, or even the most important, emotional reaction.

As hypothesized in Figure 1, seeing the connectivity among all people (i.e., kinship) promotes feelings of gratitude toward God, which is typically defined as a pleasant feeling that arises from receiving some sort of benefit (Emmons, 2004). So if people feel grateful to God, then it means they feel He has given something to them or taken some beneficial action

on their behalf. If a sense of connectedness with others lies at the very heart of religion as Ross (1898) claims, and if people are provided with vivid evidence of this purpose, then it follows that the opportunity to grasp this fundamental truth may be seen as a gift that has been provided by God. And as a result, people are likely to feel grateful to Him.

There is reason to believe that older Mexican Americans are especially likely to feel grateful to God for helping them see the connectedness among all people. Turning to the effects of U. S. colonization helps show why this may be so. As Matovina (2010) observes, “Tragically, the multiple ways a conquering or dominant group seeks to impose its own self-image as the standard of the good, the beautiful, and the human often rob the defeated of their fundamental sense that they too are sons and daughters made in God's own image” (p. 23). So if the historical experiences of Mexican Americans make them feel they are different from and not equal to others, then the ability to expose the true nature of this fallacy by seeing that all people truly are one, should make them feel especially grateful to God. And if the theoretical perspective that has been developed up to this point is valid, then perhaps having contact with a dead loved one is an important catalyst for developing these insights and emotions.

Feeling Grateful to God and Death Anxiety

There do not appear to be any studies in the literature that empirically examine the relationship between feelings of gratitude toward God and death anxiety. Even so, there are two closely-related reasons why this may be so.

First, if people feel grateful to God because He has given something to them, then receiving this benefit provides clear evidence that God must love and care for them. Moreover, if people believe that God loves them and has provided for them in this life, then they should feel less anxious about dying because they have reason to believe that God will continue to love and provide for them in the next life, as well. This perspective is consistent with the longstanding principle that, “... the best predictor of what a person *will* do in the future is what he/she *has done* in the past” (Owens & Schoenfeldt, 1979, p. 571, emphasis in the original).

The second reason why feelings of gratitude toward God may reduce feelings of death anxiety may in the work of Georg Simmel, who was a classic social theorist. He argued that feelings of gratitude are essential because they make social life possible: “...if every grateful action ... were suddenly eliminated, society (at least as we know it) would break apart” (1950, p. 388). Simmel (1950) meant that people will only continue to bestow benefits on each other if the recipient expresses gratitude for what the provider has given them. It is obviously not possible to determine the extent to which this principle holds in a person's relationship with God, but it still might be relevant if attention is focused solely on the perspective of the individual. If Simmel (1950) is correct, then a person is likely to feel it is important to express gratitude toward God so they will continue to receive benefits from Him in the future. And if beliefs about the continued assistance from God are extended into the afterlife, then they should serve as a significant buffer against developing feelings of death anxiety.

Further Theoretical Specifications

Before turning to the mechanics of this study, it is important to briefly discuss the role that is played in the analyses by the frequency of church attendance. There is some evidence that attendance at worship services is associated with two of the core variables contained in Figure 1. More specifically, a study by Krause and Bastida (2009b) suggests that individuals who attend church services on a regular basis are more likely to feel a deep sense of connectedness with all people. Moreover, as research by Krause and Ellison (2003) reveals, more frequent church attendance is associated with lower levels of death anxiety. The effect of church attendance on these key study measures is controlled statistically in the current study to insure that the relationship between feelings of connectedness with others and death anxiety is not spurious (i.e., it is not a reflection of the common dependence of these two measures on church attendance).

Method

Sample

The population for this study was defined as all Mexican Americans age 66 and over who were retired, not institutionalized, who speak either English or Spanish, and who were living in the following five-state area: Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The sampling strategy that was used for the Hispanic Established Population for Epidemiological Study (HEPESE) was adopted for the current study (see Markides, 2003, for a detailed discussion of this sampling design). All interviews were conducted by Harris Interactive (New York). The interviews were administered face-to-face in the homes of the participants. Participants could choose whether they wanted to be interviewed in English or Spanish. The majority of interviews (84%) were conducted entirely in Spanish.

A total of 1,005 interviews were completed successful. The average age of the older Mexican Americans in this sample was 73.9 years ($SD = 6.6$ years), approximately 44% were older men, the average number of years of schooling was 6.7 ($SD = 3.8$ years), and approximately 79% were affiliated with the Catholic Church. The response rate was 52%. The full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation procedure was used to impute missing values in the data (Enders, 2001).

Measures

All the religion measures (except church attendance) were developed by conducting open-ended in-depth interviews with 52 older Mexican Americans who lived in South Texas (see Krause & Bastida, 2009a). New closed-ended items to assess religion were devised from these interviews. The new items, as well as all the other items in the questionnaire, were then translated and back-translated from English into Spanish by a team of bilingual investigators. Following this, the quality of the newly devised closed ended items was evaluated with 51 cognitive interviews that were conducted with a new sample of older Mexican Americans. Cognitive interviews involve presenting study participants with the newly devised closed ended items followed by a series of open-ended questions to see if they understand the questions in the intended manner. The core study measures are provided in Table 1.

Church Attendance—The participants in this study were asked how often they attended worship services in the past year. Scores ranged from 1 to 9 with a high score indicating frequent church attendance. The mean was 5.3 ($SD = 2.8$).

Contact with the Dead—This construct was measured by asking how often participants felt a dead loved one was looking over them, was in the same room with them, spoke to them, or appeared to them. Scores ranged from 4 to 16 with a high score indicating more frequent contact. The mean was 6.4 ($SD = 2.3$). No attempt was made to determine the time that had elapsed between the death of the loved one and subsequent contact with this individual.

Connectedness with Others—Three items were used to assess whether participants feel their faith helps them see the common bond among all people, whether they see how much people need each other, and whether they appreciate the strength that can come from others. Scores ranged from 3 to 12 with a high score indicating a greater sense of connectedness with others. The mean was 9.8 ($SD = 1.6$).

Gratitude Toward God—Four items that were developed by Emmons and his colleagues to assess a general sense of gratitude were modified so they specifically reflect gratitude toward God (Emmons et al., 2003). Scores could range from 4 to 16 with a high score representing more gratitude ($M = 14.7$; $SD = 1.7$).

Death Anxiety—The items that assess death anxiety were taken from the literature (see Neimeyer 1994, for a discussion of these measures). These indicators ask participants whether thinking about death makes them uneasy, whether they are prepared to face their own death, whether they are disturbed by the shortness of life, and whether it is hard for them to face up to the fact that they will die. Scores ranged from 4 to 16, with a high score indicating greater anxiety about dying. The mean was 8.3 ($SD = 2.6$).

Demographic Control Variables—The relationships among the constructs in Figure 1 were evaluated after the effects of age, sex, education, and affiliation with the Catholic faith tradition were controlled statistically. Age is scored in a continuous format and education reflects the number of years of schooling that were completed successfully by participants. In contrast, sex (1 = men; 0 = women) and affiliating with the Catholic Church (1 = Catholic; 0 = otherwise) are scored in a binary format.

Results

Because data on the frequency of contact with the dead among older Mexican Americans is not available in the literature, some preliminary analyses were conducted to determine the extent of this experience. Approximately 76.7% of participants reported they felt a deceased loved one was looking over them at least once in a while, 41.8% indicated they felt a dead loved one was in the same room with them at least once in a while, 20.8% reported they heard the voice of a dead loved one at least once in a while, and 13.8% stated they had actually seen a dead loved one at least once in a while.

The model depicted in Figure 1 was estimated with maximum likelihood procedure that is available in Version 8.80 of the LISREL statistical software program (du Toit & du Toit, 2001). Departures from multivariate normality were handled by converting raw scores on the observed indicators to normal scores prior to estimating the model (du Toit & du Toit, 2001, p. 43). The fit of the model to the data, as revealed by the root mean error of approximation (RMSEA), was .058. As Kelloway (1998) reports, this RMSEA value indicates that the fit of the model to the data appears to be adequate.

The standardized factor loadings that are derived by estimating the study model are important because they provide preliminary information about the reliability of the multiple item measures. Kline (2005) recommends that observed indicators with standardized factor loadings in excess of .600 tend to have good reliability. The standardized factor loadings range from .476 to .948. Only one was factor loading (.476) was below the recommended target value of .600, but it was nevertheless retained because it represents an important way in which people may have contact with the dead (i.e., whether subjects feel that the dead are looking over them).

Based on the procedures described by DeShon (1998), the following reliability estimates for the multiple item constructs in Figure 1: contact with the dead (.762), connectedness with others (.940), feelings of gratitude toward God (.874), and death anxiety (.820). This suggests that the items used in the current study have an acceptable level of reliability.

The data in Table 2 indicate that older Mexican Americans who have more frequent contact with the dead are more likely to report that they see the connectedness among all people (Beta = .150; $p < .001$). Moreover, participants who see the connectedness among all people are likely to feel especially grateful to God (Beta = .483; $p < .001$). Finally, participants who feel more grateful to God tend to experience lower levels of death anxiety (Beta = -.268; $p < .001$).

The important part that having contact with the dead plays in helping older Mexican Americans see the connectivity among all people can be illustrated by comparing the size of this relationship with the size of the relationship between the frequency of church attendance and the ability to see the connectivity among all people. This is accomplished by making an additional pass through the model after the two coefficients have been constrained to be equal. Then, the significance of the difference between these estimates is determined by computing the change in the chi-square goodness-of-fit estimate from the initial analysis and the chi-square value that is obtained after the two coefficients are constrained to be equal. The results from this test reveal that the size of the two coefficients differ significantly (χ^2 change = 11.074; $p < .001$). Initially, this finding may be difficult to understand because the standardized regression coefficient for the relationship between church attendance and connectivity with others (Beta = .153) appears to be nearly identical to the corresponding effect of having contact with the dead (Beta = .150). However, researchers have known for some time that tests of the difference in the size of regression coefficients should only be computed with unstandardized estimates (Hennessy, 1985).¹ When the unstandardized effect of having contact with the dead ($b = .159$) is contrasted with the estimate of the effect of church attendance ($b = .028$), the tests results become easier to grasp. This additional

analysis suggests that having contact with the dead appears to play a greater role in shaping beliefs about the connectivity among all people than the frequency of church attendance.

Finally, the data in Table 2 indicate that men report having less contact with the dead than women (Beta = $-.144$; $p < .001$). In addition, Catholics have contact with the dead more often than non-Catholics (Beta = $.201$; $p < .001$).

Discussion

Having contact with the dead is a highly subjective experience. In fact, some researchers may question whether such encounters really take place at all. Even so, the goal of the current study was not to determine whether reports of having contact with the dead are valid. Instead, the intent was to assess the implications of these subjective experiences for older Mexican Americans. The data indicate that having contact with the dead has measureable consequences. Specifically, more contact with the dead was associated with the ability to see the connectedness among all people. Moreover, older Mexican Americans who felt deeply connected with others were more likely to feel grateful to God. This is important because the results further suggest that feeling grateful to God helps reduce feelings of death anxiety.

Developing a sense of connectedness with all people plays a key role in the study model. As noted earlier, many researchers, such as Ross (1896), believed that seeing the bond among all people constitutes the essence of religion. To the extent this is true, seeing the connectedness among people should be an integral part of worship services. The data from the current study provide support for this view by showing that more frequent attendance at worship services was associated with a greater likelihood of seeing that all people are one. But the data also reveal that having contact with the dead plays an even greater role in this respect. This underscores the importance of studying the implications of having contact with loved ones who have died.

There are two reasons why the findings from the current study are noteworthy. First, this appears to be the first time that the relationship between having contact with the dead and death anxiety has been evaluated among older Mexican Americans. This is somewhat surprising given the role that death plays in Mexican American culture. Second, this appears to be the first time that core facets of religion (e.g., gratitude toward God) have been used to explain the relationship between contact with the dead and death anxiety.

Although having contact with the dead appears to have a measurable impact on older Mexican Americans, a considerable amount of work remains to be done in this area. For example, it would be helpful to see how a religiously-based sense of connectedness with others influences the social relationships that older Mexican Americans maintain with others. More specifically, are older Mexican Americans who feel closely connected to others

¹It is not appropriate to compare standardized regression coefficients for the following reason. A standardized regression coefficient is computed by multiplying the unstandardized regression coefficient by the ratio of the standard deviation of the independent variable to the standard deviation of the outcome. Simply put, the size of standardized coefficients may be influenced by not one, but two factors: the effect (i.e., as captured by unstandardized coefficients) and the standard deviations of the variables involved in the relationship. As a result, differences in standardized estimates can arise solely because of differences in the standard deviations of the measures and not differences in the size of the relationship between the measures.

more likely to help people who are in need? Moreover, it would be helpful to see if contact with the dead affects other health-related outcomes, such as physical health status and other markers of well-being, such as depressive symptoms.

In the process of examining these as well as other issues, it is important for researchers to keep the limitations of the current study in mind. One shortcoming is especially important in this respect. The data for the current study were gathered at a single point in time. As a result, the causal ordering among the constructs in the study model were based on theoretical considerations alone. As a result, it is possible to reverse some of the causal specifications by arguing, for example, that people who initially see a deep sense of connectivity among all individuals are more likely to subsequently believe they have made contact with the dead. Clearly, this as well as other causal issues can only be addressed with data that have been gathered at more than one point in time.

Research on contact with the dead and death anxiety has been conducted primarily with Anglos and African Americans. In contrast, much less attention has been paid to members of other racial groups and ethnic groups, such as Mexican Americans. This is unfortunate because older Hispanics represent one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the country, and older Mexican Americans are the largest Hispanic group (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging Related Statistics, 2008). Although there are shortcomings in the current study, it is hoped that the findings encourage further research on this largely overlooked ethnic group.

Acknowledgments

This research is supported by a grant from the National Institute on Aging (RO1 AG026259), a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, and a second grant from the John Templeton Foundation that was administered through the Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health at Duke University.

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Figure 1.

Table 1
Core Study Measures

1. Church Attendance
How often do you attend religious services? ^a
2. Contact with the Dead ^b
A. How often do you feel that a loved one who has died is looking over you to make sure things are OK?
B. How often do you feel that a loved one who has died is right there in the same room with you?
C. How often have you heard the voice of a loved one who has died?
D. How often have you seen a loved one who has died?
2. Connectedness with Others ^c
A. My faith helps me see the common bond among all people.
B. My faith helps me appreciate how much we need each other.
C. My faith helps me recognize the tremendous strength that can come from other people.
3. Gratitude Toward God ^c
A. I am grateful to God for all He has done for me.
B. If I were to make a list of all the things God has done for me, it would be a very long list.
C. As I look back on my life, I feel I have been richly blessed by God.
D. I am grateful to God for all He has done for my family members and close friends.
4. Death Anxiety ^c
A. I find it hard to face up to the fact that I will die.
B. Thinking about death makes me feel uneasy.
C. I do not feel prepared to face my own death.
D. I am disturbed by the shortness of life.

^aThis item is scored in the following manner (coding in parentheses): never (1), less than once a year (2), about once or twice a year (3), several times a year (4), about once a month (5), 2 to 3 times a month (6), nearly every week (7), every week (8), several times a week (9).

^bThese items are scored in the following manner: never (1), once in a while (2), fairly often (3), very often (4).

^cThese items are scored in the following manner: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), and strongly agree (4).

Table 2
The Relationship Between Contact with the Dead and Death Anxiety ($N = 1,005$)

Dependent Variables					
Independent Variables	Attend Church	Contact With Dead	Connectedness With Others	Gratitude To God	Death Anxiety
Age	-.109*** (-.047) ^b	.009 (.001)	.066* (.005)	.124*** (.007)	-.095** (-.010)
Sex	-.117*** (-.663)	-.144*** (-.142)	-.122*** (-.127)	-.019*** (-.085)	-.064 (-.087)
Education	.013 (.009)	-.018 (-.002)	.028 (.004)	.023 (.002)	-.196*** (-.033)
Catholic	-.168*** (-1.162)	.201*** (.241)	-.062 (-.079)	-.056 (-.053)	.006 (.011)
Attend Church			.153*** (.028)	.115*** (.016)	-.026 (-.006)
Contact with Dead			.150*** (.159)	-.054 (-.043)	.090* (.124)
Connectedness With Others				.483*** (.361)	-.032 (-.042)
Gratitude To God					-.268*** (-.470)
Multiple R ²	.057	.058	.077	.322	.147

^a Standardized regression coefficient

^b Metric (unstandardized) regression coefficient

* = $p < .05$;

** = $p < .01$;

*** = $p < .001$