



## Generativity affects fear of death through ego integrity in German, Czech, and Cameroonian older adults



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### ABSTRACT

This cross-cultural study examined a potential direct effect of generativity and indirect effect through ego integrity on fear of death. In sum, 617 adults aged 60–86 from Germany, the Czech Republic, and Cameroon provided self-report information on their generative concern, ego integrity, and fear of death. Whereas it had no direct effect, generativity had an indirect effect on fear of death: It was associated with increased ego integrity which, in turn, was associated with reduced fear of death. This pattern was verified for the three cultural groups via structural equation modeling. Results suggest that generativity is not sufficient in coming to terms with one's mortality. Instead, generativity contributes to ego integrity which then helps to face death relatively unafraid.

### 1. Introduction

According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, adulthood is mainly characterized by two central developmental tasks: achieving generativity vs. stagnation in middle adulthood and achieving ego integrity vs. despair in old age (Erikson, 1963). Erikson himself but also other writers in his wake have connected both developmental tasks to orientations towards death in that their successful resolution reduces fear of death. The present study pursues this idea by examining the interplay of generativity and ego integrity on fear of death in the elderly in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Cameroon. That is, the present study tests a direct effect of generativity on fear of death as well as an indirect effect of generativity on fear of death through ego integrity.

That an adult's awareness of one's mortality is a source of anxiety and stress has been acknowledged by various psychological writers (e.g., Becker, 1973; Yalom, 2008). Indeed, Terror Management Theory has spawned plenty research on how increased mortality salience motivates people to defend against the fear of death (for an overview see, e.g., Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). Besides, another line of

research has focused on the correlates and lifespan development of dispositional fear of death (see, e.g., Neimeyer, Wittkowski, & Moser, 2004, for an overview). Within this latter line of research, fear of the state of death is discriminated from the fear of the process of dying (Collett & Lester, 1969). Moreover, some authors have pointed out that more accepting orientations towards death have to be considered as well (e.g., Gesser, Wong, & Reker, 1987–1988; Neimeyer et al., 2004) to account for individuals that have come to terms with their life's finitude or even see death as a preferable alternative to health states perceived as worse than death (see, e.g., Ditto, Druley, Moore, Danks, & Smucker, 1996). That said, the present study examines fear of death, which is to be understood as a negative emotion elicited by the anticipation of one's own death (Tomer & Eliason, 2000) rather than the anxiety caused by an actual threat to one's life (Wittkowski, 2001).

A variety of predictors of fear of death in older adults have been examined. Variables that have consistently been found to relate to fear of death in older adults are institutionalization, impaired health, and increased psychological problems (Fortner & Neimeyer, 1999). For other variables, such as gender and religiosity, the relationship to fear of death is disputed (see, for example, Cicirelli, 1999; Russac, Gatliff,

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Reece, & Spottswood, 2007; Varga & Paletti, 2013; Wink & Scott, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1. Generativity and how it relates to fear of death

But what arguments and findings have been forwarded that associate Erikson's stages of adult development, i.e., generativity and ego integrity, with fear of death? Defined as the desire for "establishing and guiding the next generation" (Erikson, 1963, p. 240), generativity has repeatedly been considered a means of leaving behind an ego-transcending legacy (Kotre, 1996) that alleviates the fear of death (e.g., McCoy, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2000; Yalom, 2008). Making such a contribution that will outlive the self has been termed symbolic immortality, a sense of continuity beyond death. In their seminal model of generativity, McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) call the need for symbolic immortality a source of motivation for generativity, stating that "adults desire to defy death by constructing legacies that live on" (p. 1005). Indeed, generative action is associated with a sense of symbolic immortality (Huta & Zuroff, 2007). Similarly, generativity relates to the amount of references to making a lasting contribution in people's life-stories (Newton, Herr, Pollack, & McAdams, 2014).

Thus, a connection between generativity and fear of death has been established theoretically, but empirical evidence of this claim has been rather indirect: Inasmuch as symbolic immortality includes generative aspects – lasting contributions such as progeny or ideational contributions – it correlated negatively with fear of death (Drolet, 1990; Florian & Mikulincer, 1998). The most direct test of the assumed association of generativity and fear of death has been presented by Richardson and Sands (1986–1987) who found generativity to be negatively associated with fear of death. However, the scope of this study is limited because generativity was measured with a single item and participants were exclusively middle-aged women so that it is not clear whether these results generalize to wider populations. In sum, the little evidence available supports the theoretical notion that generativity decreases fear of death. However, a test of the notion that generativity might have both direct and indirect effects on fear of death is still lacking. Moreover, none of the studies reported above featured a sample of elderlies.

### 1.2. Ego integrity and how it relates to fear of death

Ego integrity is the final stage of development in Erikson's theory, directly following the generative stage of development (for evidence that generativity predicts ego integrity see, e.g., James & Zarrett, 2005; Torges, Stewart, & Duncan, 2008). According to Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986) (see also Butler, 1963), in old age people tend to increasingly review and reevaluate their lives. As a result of this life review, people either accept and find meaning in the way their lives have unfolded (cf. Erikson et al., 1986; Torges et al., 2008) or despair because they realize they cannot change what they have made out of their lives. Erikson (1963) sees ego integrity as achieved when old people have come to a positive view on the lives they have lived. Indeed,

<sup>1</sup> Given the continuing debate about religiosity and fear of death (e.g., Cicirelli, 1999; Fortner & Neimeyer, 1999; Varga & Paletti, 2013; Wink & Scott, 2005), *intrinsic religiosity* was assessed with the corresponding six items of the 'Age Universal' I-E scale – 12 (I-E; Maltby, 1999) (e.g., I try hard to live all my life according to my religious beliefs) and was planned to be included as a covariate in analyses. Statements were rated on a three-point Likert scale (0 = no through 2 = yes). High scores indicate that religious beliefs and practices are deeply endorsed by the individual. As, however, intrinsic religiosity turned out to be a constant in the Cameroonian sample ( $M = 1.93$ ;  $SD = 0.14$ ), analyses could be conducted only with the German and the Czech samples: Bias analyses indicated cross-cultural equivalence. Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s were 0.89 (Germany) and 0.90 (Czech Republic), respectively. There was no correlation of intrinsic religiosity with fear of death ( $r = -0.07$ , n.s.) in the overall sample and, including intrinsic religiosity as covariate, the indirect effect of generative concern on fear of death through ego integrity was still verified in the overall sample and in the two cultural samples.

Erikson postulates that only when ego integrity is achieved, "death's reality is integrated into human functioning" (Hoare, 2002, p. 193) instead of merely warded off as is the case with earlier developmental stages including the stage of generativity.

Given this clear theoretical link between ego integrity and fear of death (see also Boylin, Gordon, & Nehrke, 1976, and Tomer & Eliason, 2000), it is not surprising that studies have tried to empirically support this argument: In their review, Fortner and Neimeyer (1999) identified ego integrity as a consistently negative predictor of fear of death in older adults. However, this finding is hard to interpret as they summarized studies that operationalized ego integrity quite inconsistently, "including measures of life satisfaction, purpose in life, and measures of ego integrity, generativity, and despair" (p. 391; see Goebel & Boeck, 1987, and Hui & Coleman, 2013, as examples of studies that aggregate various measures to arrive at an ego integrity score). That is, Fortner and Neimeyer's (1999) procedure confounds theoretically distinct constructs such as generativity and meaning in life and equals them with ego integrity even though empirically, associations between these constructs found in previous studies do not suggest they are redundant (Phillips & Ferguson, 2013; Torges et al., 2008).

Thus, although a number of studies claim to find that ego integrity is associated with decreased fear of death, the majority of these studies do not use instruments specifically designed to assess ego integrity. Hence, a closer look at those studies that examine the relationship between fear of death and ego integrity with a specifically designed instrument is warranted. In fact, the results of those studies are less unequivocal than expected: Whereas Van Hiel and Vansteenkiste (2009) found ego integrity to be uncorrelated with fear of death, Parker (2013) and Walasky, Whitbourne, and Nehrke (1983–84) reported the predicted negative association between ego integrity and death anxiety. To sum up, despite strong theoretical arguments, the notion that ego integrity is predictive of fear of death is less clear empirically than suggested by Fortner and Neimeyer (1999) in that the instruments applied often do not specifically assess ego integrity but other related constructs.

### 1.3. The present study

Given the empirical findings presented so far, the present study aims at clarifying to which extent generativity and ego integrity predict fear of death. In light of the sequence of these developmental tasks and Erikson's view that ego integrity is associated with a mature treatment of one's own mortality whereas previous developmental stages are not (cf. Hoare, 2002), an indirect effect of generativity on fear of death through ego integrity is hypothesized: Generativity functions as a precursor to ego integrity in that a person's contribution to future generations increases that person's chances of achieving ego integrity. That is, the person imbues his/her generativity with meaning and coherently integrates it into his/her life story. In turn, ego integrity's conviction that one's life has been well-lived makes a less fearful view of death possible. That is, because one has led a full life and has left a lasting legacy that one can be content with, one can more easily come to terms with one's mortality.

This indirect effect hypothesis is tested in samples from three cultural contexts: Germany, the Czech Republic, and Cameroon. Despite the recent observation of an increasing internationalization of research in thanatology (Doka, Neimeyer, Wittkowski, Vallerga, & Currelley, 2016), cross-cultural research on fear of death is scarce. This is unfortunate given that, despite differences in how cultures conceptualize and deal with death (see Bryant, 2003), of course death and fear of death are pan-human issues. Cross-cultural research then offers the opportunity to test if psychological processes associated with fear of death are culture-specific or if they are comparable across cultural contexts. That is, it is likely that some mechanisms of how elderly people can reduce their fear of death are found only within a given cultural context, while others are found across a variety of cultures. We propose that generativity through ego integrity is such a shared

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