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Confrontation with inevitability of one's death. The perspective of senior learners

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Abstract

The paper is the first of three publications which will address the problem of existential concerns explored from the perspective of seniors. The common feature of these papers is the attempt to investigate this phenomenon by means of qualitative research conducted among seniors. We believe that seniors in their late adulthood or old age are more deeply aware of the approaching death, what motivates them to reflect on the fragile and finite nature of human existence and the meaning of their lives. As they face challenging thoughts and sense that these thoughts focus on the most fundamental existential problem, they try to respond to it and formulate individual solutions. This is very interesting for researchers because the reality studied is in this case recognized as it is being formed, *in statu nascendi*. The dynamics of this process is connected with the way seniors experience themselves as they cope with their existential concerns on daily basis. With every new experience, they may arrive at different conclusions or confirm that their present way of thinking and evaluating life is the right one. The purpose of presenting diverse research reflections in the papers is not to verify again and again the results obtained previously in other samples but rather to grasp the complex picture which shows the ways seniors approach life and death, understand their existential concerns and their importance in life as well as the mechanisms they use to buffer existential fear in different circumstances. The publications present different research strategies including analyses of materials obtained as short written statements, unstructured interviews and survey questionnaires.

As part of theoretical introduction to the research problem, this paper presents reflections on the main aspects of finiteness of human existence, set in the interdisciplinary sci-

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entific discourse. A special emphasis in the discussion is put on the self-reflective context of confrontation with the anticipated, inevitable death in the light of the essence of human existence recognized as an autotelic value. The research section focuses on exploring how do seniors approach the phenomenon of transience of life and inevitability of death. The research material was obtained in the form of short statements written by seniors as answers to open ended questions. As a result of the analysis, a quite complex catalogue was created of responses of seniors to the inevitability of death – from acceptance of one's own death to suppression of the death-related thoughts. The analysis also resulted in the typology of five approaches towards death, presented by the seniors. The names of these categories are, in our opinion, symbolic and include: stoic, worldview-based, existential, anxiety-based and avoidance approach.

Introduction

The awareness of the inevitability of death, viewed as anticipating the end of life, is the awareness that everything what constitutes each dimension of human existence will eventually cease to be. Philosophical anthropology treats it as dramatic announcement of helplessness in the face of the end of one's own existence (Marcel 2005; Tischner 2002; Buber 2000). Human helplessness against the mystery of death causes existential fear of that what is unknown and at the same time unchangeable.

The awareness of death evokes fear of the end of one's life, which not only means loosing everything what constitutes the material world and every person forming the world of social relationships of an individual. It also means loosing oneself in biological, psychical and spiritual dimension. In this context, death awareness is the source of drama of human existence. It leads to a belief that death cuts off all possibilities to act and prevents all forms of agency in one's life (Wąsiński, Górniok-Naglik 2018).

Thus, this drama is recognized in helplessness against both the course of events in the social reality during and after death, and loosing self-awareness, the existence of *the self*. There is no way to fix anything, apologize or change one's thinking or behavior. Everything is impossible because all self-creative activities which lead to personal transformation assume the presence of another person (Tischner 2012). But death deprives of possibility to interact with anyone (Fabiś 2018).

The source death anxiety is associated with even deeper dimension of the human existence drama. It is not only fear of the void identified with idle existence in the infinity as then there is still the awareness of own being. It is the fear of extermination which means a definite end of individual existence, an actual and final non-existence. The only way to respond to this drama constructively is with individual conviction of how much one has been able to realize their humanity through personal self-creation (Wąsiński 2016a). The power of self-creation in the face of the realized drama of own existence is revealed in intentional agency towards oneself, identified with reaching personal maturity.

Existential drama experienced on the grounds of the realized inevitability of one's own death takes place in at least three layers of human inner struggles: a) meaningless-

ness of life in the perspective of approaching death, b) meaninglessness of own death understood as stepping into the void of non-existence (non-being), c) meaninglessness of hope for continued existing after death (Marcel 2005; Frankl 2014; Tischner 2000).

Everything people use to express themselves, what is their somehow implemented potentialities is connected with the fact of their existence in a given place and time and their engagement in the self-creative work on self (Wąsiński 2018). And while it is possible to picture what dying is, using the categories offered by different sciences like biology, medicine, psychology, sociology, andragogy or even what death itself is from the philosophical or theological perspective, it is impossible to approach non-existence empirically. The lack of rational justification of existence after death causes fear of entering the greatest mystery of human life – the mystery of non-existence. For people in their early and late old age, this fact generates a dominant attitude of avoiding thinking about passing and situations which stimulate reflections on their own death, of suppressing thoughts which lead to deep reflections. The courage to confront one's own finiteness is a rare treat (Fabiś 2018).

Reflection upon one's own mortality is about grasping the meanings assigned to life recognized in the perspective of increasingly more likely moment of death and the meaning of life in the context of the imagined non-existence. From the geragogy perspective, confrontation with the inevitable death in the old age is an important area of scientific investigations and reflections. Individual preparation to intellectual and spiritual confrontation with the inevitability of one's own death may provide the grounds to accept own mortality in the late old age (Erikson 1982) and stimulate gerotranscendence (Tornstam 2005). Finally, such attitude fits into the concepts of wisdom (Kunzman, Baltes 2005; Sternberg 2003).

In this context, distribution of opinions of Poles regarding their attitude towards faith in God and religiousness is not without significance. Faith in God who can breathe the eternal life into a person is something that may help to overcome fear of death and give it timeless, metaphysical sense. According to data by the Central Statistical Office, the majority of adult Poles shape their attitude towards death based on religion. At present, as much as 81% of Poles aged 16 and more declare they believe in God and are members of mainly Catholic church but also other christian denominations (GUS 2018). This translates into the perception of death phenomenon – two thirds of Poles are convinced that death is not the end of everything in human life but rather a transition to another dimension (CBOS 2005). A report by the Central Statistical Office also confirms the known regularity that of all age groups, seniors aged 75 and more are the most engaged in thinking about death (CBOS 2019).

Existential aspect of confrontation with inevitability of one's death

Reflection on the fragile and finite nature of human existence revolves around the inevitability of death. At first, it is a distanced confrontation with the death of other, a stranger, then the experience of death involves the loss of the loved ones and finally, one has to face one's own finiteness. Being powerless against own passing is connected with realizing that death is inevitable and probably the only certain element in the biography of every person and, therefore, it seems it should be the object of reflection. Regardless of the whole spectrum of individual and socio-cultural factors which differentiate the conditions and the quality of life of every human, one thing does not change and is undeniable – at some point their life will end. People experience the fragility and finiteness of their existence by participating in the inevitable: death of others – total strangers and loved ones and experiencing own ageing, gradual loss of vital powers and fitness, struggles with illnesses and anxiety about the ultimate end of life.

Transience of life is what gives it its dynamics and uniqueness (Yalom 1980). As they experience their own transience, individuals feel inner tension between the need of agency in their life and helplessness in the face of the finiteness of their existence (Fabiś 2018). This tension reveals two poles in experiencing life. On the one hand, people strive to become more and more aware agents who manage their lives and feel responsible for the quality of personal self-creation (Wąsiński 2016b). Life is then treated as existential challenge which is constantly renewed at different stages of adulthood. This challenge is voluntarily tackled through self-actualization and self-transcendence (Maslow 1999; Frankl 2014; Manenti 2003; Tarnowski 2007; Tornstam 1994). On the other hand, in their self-actualization efforts people experience that their agency is limited. They realize this when confronted with their helplessness against the uncertainty of their fate. Despite the strive to identify existentially important values and give meaning to their own choices, decisions and actions, confronted with death, individuals become convinced about their insufficiency (Frankl 2009; Yalom 1980).

Helplessness against one's own mortality is a common element in every historical era, cultural circle, socio-philosophical and religious system and every individual strategy of reaching personal maturity through self-creation (Becker 1974). In this context, it can be said that people live in the "shadow" of their own anticipated death. The transient nature of life is identified with entering the subsequent stages of individual development, identified during childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age (and later, old old age) and encourages self-reflection on the value and meaning of life lived in the light of one's own biography (Dubas 2013; Fabiś, Wąsiński, Tomczyk 2017; Wąsiński 2018). Biographical perspective is understood as an in-depth intellectual experience of the self, which brings one closer to the fact of the inevitability of death in the lifelong perspective. Thanks to self-reflective referring to one's finiteness, the vision of the inevitable death is lived through not only in the old age but also at earlier developmental stages. This makes death the integral element of life, important

for shaping the attitude towards self, other people, the world and one's own place in it, the choices made and acts that set the direction of individual biographical path.

The ability to reflect on the fragility and finiteness of existence deepens individual awareness of existential dilemmas which are irremovable and, at the same time, the awareness of the necessity of existing which involves overcoming the inner struggle between *have to exist* and *be able to exist* (Uchnast, 1987). In this context, the phenomenon of personal being is revealed. Pascal (1921) associated it with the noble character of human existence and V. Frankl with human ability to self-transcend (1971).

Human existence understood as consciously experienced existence is never automatic, it does not happen by itself. It requires lifelong efforts of personal self-creation during which this *being able to exist* is realized (Wąsiński 2018). It is likely the greatest challenge in human life. It should be emphasized that it is also the most poignant experience of existential loneliness as every individual has to face it alone. I. Yalom (1980) identifies existential loneliness with the experience that extends far wider than simple social loneliness. It is expressed in the fact that every individual gets to live their own life and experience their own death. No one can do it for them. Every individual sets their own unique path of becoming in their humanity, of reaching personal maturity and existential fulfilment.

Research into fear of death or studies that consider fear of death as one of the variables are not common in Poland (Makselon 1983; Matuszewski 2002; Sękowski 2019), and these which have focused on older people are extremely rare. The existing investigation in the senior population are focused on elderly using out-patient services (Łukomska, Wachowska 2008) and University of the Third Age students (Fabiś 2018; Deręgowska 2014).

The subject matter literature suggests that activity, including educational activity, may be a serious inhibitor of reflection on finiteness (Tornstam 2005). Therefore, it seems justified to investigate seniors who are active learners. In case of Poland, U3As are the places where educationally active seniors meet. The authors were interested what do active and educated individuals think about death or if they do think about it at all. How do they view death.

Methods

The study is part of a bigger research project the focus of which are buffers mitigating fear of death. The project has been implemented using mixed methods which include qualitative and quantitative data analyses. The exploratory sequential design was used (Creswell 2013). The paper presents only partial results from the first stage of the research which is the base for further investigations.

Respondents' statements regarding finiteness of their existence were investigated. The main purpose of the study was to identify thoughts, emotions and behaviors that referred to passing and death. The following research problems were identified: What thoughts, emotions and behaviors referring to the inevitability of one's own death are

present in the respondents' narratives? What thoughts, emotions and behaviors are stirred by the awareness of the inevitability of one's own death? What meaning do the respondents assign to them?

The research material was collected using the technique of studying personal documents which were treated as original source produced by seniors – active learners (Peräkylä, Ruusuvaori 2013; Kubinowski 2011; Łuczewski, Bednarz-Łuczewska 2012) who participated in a U3A lecture on existential aspects of finiteness and transience of human life in the light of existential concerns. The lecturer provided numerous references to biographical experiences of different publicly known persons from the world of culture, science and sport and showed how did they experience and deal with their existential concerns. It must be emphasized that the lecture was not, in any regard, experimental and was not delivered to stimulate any emotional states of existential fear among the participants. It was rather treated as the invitation to engage in reflections on life and death phenomenon. According to the assumptions, the lecture referred to the relevant experiences and reflections of seniors. It was to create a space for reflections on the issues addressed and active discussion with the seniors. After the lecture the participants were invited to take part in the study. Their participation involved writing short answers to open questions about different aspects of passing and inevitability of their own death. Participation in the study was completely voluntary (Silverman 2001). Written answers were synthetic responses to the questions posed. The sample consisted of older people who were active learners of the Universities of the Third Age. The individuals selected were 60 years old and older, were able to verbalize their thoughts, experiences and emotions easily and were open and authentic when sharing their reflections on the given topic. The intention was to form the sample with narrators representing the most diverse opinions and experiences to ensure diversity of experiences and perspectives of thinking and acting within the investigated area. There were 311 statements written by the seniors and analysed.

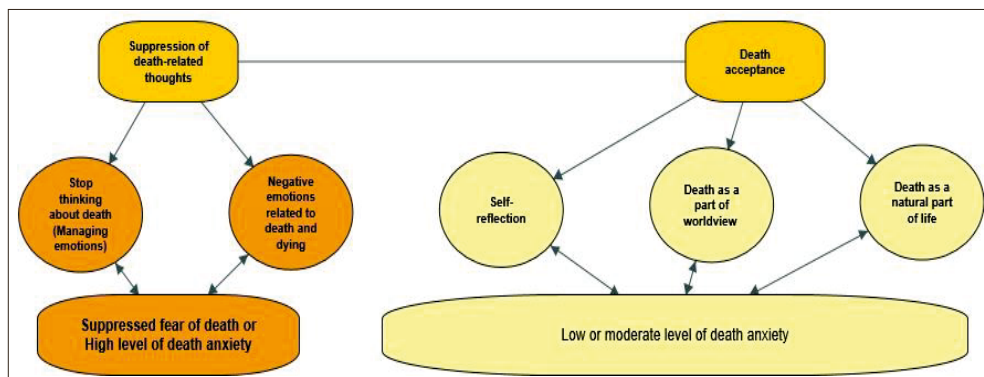
In the qualitative research data collection is strictly connected with the analysis. The next steps of the research procedure involved more and more theoretical and analytical explanation of the data collected. The NVivo software to support the qualitative data analysis was used to analyse the data and organize the large volume of empirical material obtained. It was also used for data visualization and helped better organize the research material.

Results

Figure 1 presents the model of thoughts, emotions and actions connected with the awareness of the inevitability of death, built on the basis of the main categories identified during coding. The analyses revealed that seniors emphasized the importance of the natural order part of which is death. Thoughts, emotions and behaviors generated as a response to death which is the inevitable, independent on the human will conse-

quence of life spread on the following continuum: from suppression of death-related thoughts to acceptance of the fact that it is the integral element of human life which someday has to happen. Between these poles were inner struggles with the awareness of death, identified as thanatic fear and self-reflection about life and death. Thanatic fear paralyzes seniors emotionally, intellectually and spiritually in every act of thinking about their own death. It is the inner struggle with something that has to happen. A radical form of dealing with the awareness of the inevitability of death is suppression of death-related thoughts. It involves excluding the experiences of the self in the context of anticipated death from the catalogue of important matters. Perhaps, it is an unaware effort to cancel the reality of death in one's own life. On the other side of this antinomy are inner struggles with the awareness of death, which bring constructive resolutions. Self-reflectiveness of the seniors involves fear-suppressing openness and curiosity regarding that what is inevitable, unknown and touches the mystery of human existence. Its most radical form is mental and spiritual acceptance of not only the fact of the inevitability of death which ends every human life but, first of all, the inevitability of one's own death. Permission to euthanasia is beyond this dichotomy as it assumes a relative attitude towards the value of life in the context of death. The value of life is acknowledged given the subjective criteria which, when unmet, make life pointless. Death is then a salvation from the unaccepted forms of living.

Figure 1 Thoughts, emotions and actions related to the awareness of the inevitability of one's own death.



Source: own study.

Between the two poles of the above mentioned continuum: suppression – acceptance, is a whole sphere of thoughts, emotions and actions with which seniors respond to the awareness of the inevitability of death. The analysis of the empirical material obtained allowed to identify and categorize the respondents' statements into several main categories. The first category refers to death as a natural part of life. Second refers to accepting one's own mortality as the consequence of the adopted worldview. The

third category refers to self-reflection and deeper confrontation with the problem of passing. These categories may be connected with the acceptance of one's own death and the tone of the narratives indicates low or moderate level of death anxiety. Other categories are formed from the statements focusing on the negative emotions related to death and dying, as well as behaviors suppressing thoughts about one's own finiteness. These categories show directly a high level of death anxiety or even suppressed fear of death.

The detailed description of the above mentioned categories is presented below. They are presented starting from the ones connected with the acceptance of death to those which involve withdrawal and suppression of death-related thoughts.

The first category is connected with the statements showing the acceptance of one's own transience. The respondents declare that are at peace and have no difficulties to accept their own mortality. Apart from the simple statements like *I accept this; what will be, will be* or *there's life, it end with death*, there are also declarations which show death as some natural, indisputable order, impossible to comprehend and there is no need to investigate it any further – the phenomenon of one's own death should be rather accepted as something natural. These statements emphasize the necessity to accept death and do not suggest any vision of further existence. The thoughts and emotions are justified by the assumption that death of every living creature is natural and inevitable. One is helpless against it and the logical response is to accept it. The finiteness of existence is natural.

I think we are all mortals, therefore I think of death with a stoic calm.

For me, it (death) is a natural stage of life.

There is nothing to accept, everyone dies eventually.

The second category includes statements which refer to accepting one's own mortality as part of personal worldview. It means that for some respondents death is a transition to a better form of existence, guaranteed by faith, while others accept – according to their own concept or in some unspecified way – that they will continue to exist or simply cease to be. The religion-related declarations are dominated by the images of heaven, meeting with God and the loved ones, waiting for a reward for the life lived according to the given religion and even hope to do good on earth. What is more, this existence includes some relationships with the living ones: watching over them, helping them and observing them *from above*. The respondents who declared their religiousness, explain their peace with their hope for eternal life:

But I'm rather not afraid because of my faith.

These are not negative thoughts because I'm going to meet with God.

Hope that I'll be happy "there" and I'll help others who still live.

The third category should be connected with stimulated self-reflection on the essence of one's life and its finiteness. It includes statements regarding the balance of life, the present and the future. The dominating terms are *uncertainty* and *ignorance* but these words are followed with the desire to understand and confront the issue. Such attitude results in focusing on the present life which becomes more precious in the light of own mortality and the desire to live it to the full. These are the most diverse messages which prove the multitude of reflections stirred by the vision of one's own death:

My time in this world is limited so I should live my life as best as possible.

Life on earth is a fight for survival, we constantly make good or bad decisions.

The awareness of passing, the motivator to use the present time.

I work so I can remain in the memories of my loved ones.

The other group of categories is constituted by the narratives with dominating thanatic fear or suppressed death anxiety. The narrators used words like *anxiety*, *fear*, *concern*, *sense of distress* or even *terror*. Some respondents added explanations, mentioned the source and circumstances of their concerns. It is the very moment of leaving, fear of being left alone in the moment of death, of losing physical strength, patience or even dignity. The respondents fear the most that they will become a burden for others and are afraid of physical suffering. There is also anxiety regarding the unknown, that what will be after they die.

The first category in this group includes statements which reveal negative emotions. It is mainly sadness, depression, anger, helplessness regarding one's own death as well as the sense of losing worldly possessions, contact with others and even future events which the respondents will no longer witness. There is also concern about the loved ones, so that they do not worry and move on. The respondents wish their death to be sudden and free of suffering (including emotional suffering). They clearly mention that they are afraid to be dependent on others and might need the support of others in the very moment of passing into the other world. The thanatic fear is revealed as anxiety about one's own future after death. A special group are the statements expressing terror at the physical aspects of death, the carnal side of losing life. Negative emotions refer also to the very moment of dying, especially hope that it will happen quickly.

(...) I'm afraid that I can die and for long no one will know that I died.

(...) so that I am strong and accept death with humility and honor.

(...) that I'm not a burden for my family.

The other group within this category are actions taken to suppress thoughts about own finiteness. The declaration: *I don't think about it* is common. It is a typical avoidance of confrontation with mortality. The narrators deny that they even have such

thoughts or admit that they do not allow themselves to think about death. It means that they have to make some effort to escape the topic of their own limited existence. They also admit, they do not always succeed. Their argument to support this attitude is that they are relatively young (young-olds) and that makes them believe that they do not need to confront the inevitable. Other argument they use is that such reflections are pointless. For them, it is more important to direct their thoughts to specific activities connected with everyday life of seniors.

It's best not to be aware that one is dying.

I try not to think about old age, I have a whole life before me, I'm far from dying.

I try to make different plans and not to think about it (death).

Declarations regarding the anticipated life after death are a separate group. They were divided into four main categories, depending on the worldview. The most statements clearly presented respondents' vision of life after death according to the religion represented. They emanated peace, certainty but sometimes also doubts intertwined with hope for a certain end.

I would like to deserve the eternal life in heaven.

I hope my soul – immortal will remain in heaven.

I think I will have to give account of my life before God.

Another group are the beliefs which suggest (not clearly, however) that one's vision of life after death is rooted in religious concepts but rather presents an alternative form of afterlife. Many of them picture meeting with the loved ones who have already passed away or contacts with those who have left on earth.

I will live in the other world with my late loved ones.

I hope I will meet my parents.

I will watch over my family.

Similar but not always easy to interpret clearly are the descriptions of a better life, other world or dimension, which are probably derived from a religious worldview but seem to present an undefined existential concept.

I will pass on to another world.

I will walk through a tunnel at the end of which there will be a light and then, a flowery meadow.

I will live in another dimension.

There is also the category of statements which express atheistic visions of death. The dominating motive are descriptions of one's own body as physical matter subject to decay or cremation. The key concept of these atheistic visions is non-existence. References to non-existence are common and usually limited to a short declaration that nothing awaits one after death.

I will turn into dust after death.

I think that death is a definite end of human existence. I simply cease to exist.

I will be eaten by worms.

There were also statements revealing lack of clear vision of self after death.

Discussion

Stoic approach. The statements from the first group – death acceptance – originate from a simple assumption that there is no point arguing with the natural course of life and eternal laws that govern the world. This approach is connected with life balance which allows to control one's emotions and is expressed in the attitude: "That what exists, has to die" (Tatarkiewicz 1999). This attitude reveals the naturalistic worldview which, however, does not originate from a deepened reflection and rational arguments explaining individual approach towards the independent rules of life and death.

Worldview-based approach. Referring to one's worldview which guarantees further existence after death seems to be a mechanism where good deeds are rewarded, individuals who meet expectations of their culture and religion feel peace which reassures them in their visions of afterlife – visions presented quite precisely in holy scriptures (religions) and less precisely when they are images of returning to the ecosystem or becoming part of the universe (Becker 1973; Greenberg et al. 1986).

Existential approach. The most engaging image of self in the perspective of one's own finiteness leads to the conclusion that there is no better attitude towards own death than full acceptance. This results in deeper involvement in the present life accompanied by the awareness of one's fragile nature (Yalom 1980; Comte-Sponville 2011) and reflections on one's biography and efforts made to balance life.

Anxiety-based approach. The first category within the anxiety-based approach are images of the physical aspects of dying and death, the whole process of passing away and what will happen with one's body, as well as suffering and being a burden for others described by A. A. Zych (2013). This fear, however, was observed mainly among terminally ill patients.

Avoidance approach. The other group of death-related visions marked with anxiety is closer to the concept of ontological fear of pointlessness according to the reflections by P. Tillich (2005). This is how the attempts to stop thinking or avoiding thinking about death can be explained (Fabiś 2018).

This picture of multi-aspect approaches to one's own mortality reveals a great deal of mechanisms to cope with the fear of death; the mechanisms which have been studied and described mainly by psychologists investigating the terror management theory. The results presented herein inspire further studies in the context of TMT. They can be the starting point for the qualitative analysis of data obtained from active senior learners to determine the buffers mitigating fear of death, generated by this social group.

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