

**IDENTITY AND DEATH:  
AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

Marcia's (1966) identity status approach was employed in the examination of an existential domain of identity—conceptualized as a component of ideological identity, and operationalized as a multidimensional set of death orientations. Paralleling the identity status constructs of exploration and commitment, the underlying constructs of this domain were proposed to be death contemplation and acceptance. A sample of 149 university undergraduates under the age of 30 completed a questionnaire comprising scales representing the proposed dimensions of contemplation and acceptance, as well as a measure of identity status. A series of multiple regressions indicated that interpersonal achievement status was associated with neutral acceptance (the acceptance of death as a natural part of life); ideological moratorium status was associated with death contemplation, fear, and avoidance; ideological foreclosure status was associated with both approach acceptance (the acceptance of death as a gateway to an afterlife) and escape acceptance (the acceptance of death as a release from pain); ideological diffusion status was negatively associated with both escape and approach acceptance and a view of death as purposeful. These results suggest that existential contemplation occurs but is not resolved in the context of ideological identity development during adolescence and young adulthood. Death acceptance in this population seems more related to either a sense of self that extends to others (an achieved interpersonal identity) or the adoption of a traditional religious belief in an afterlife.

## INTRODUCTION

Identity development has been explored in a number of different content domains, including politics, religion, vocation, and relationships (Adams, Bennion, & Huh, 1989). One domain that has, however, been relatively neglected is that of existence itself. Existence is implicit in identity. To understand one's existence, however, requires awareness both of one's existence and nonexistence. One possible approach to the study of this existential domain of identity could thus be to explore the relationship between identity, in a global sense, and death orientations. Utilizing Erikson's (1980) psychosocial framework, and Marcia's (1966) operationalization of this approach, the current study explores this relationship, and empirically examines it in a population of adolescent and young adult university students.

While the issue of death may be more salient for older individuals, it does have relevance for adolescents and young adults given the conceptual link between identity and death, and the centrality of the issue of identity during adolescence. Erikson's concept of interstage relationships (Erikson, 1980) implies that issues central to old age, such as death, manifest in the context of other stages including identity development in adolescence (although in a different form), and that their resolution during this stage is an "important precursor to their resolution in later adulthood" (Sterling & Van Horn, 1989, p. 321). The combination of adolescents' new ability to view the world abstractly, and their experiences of change and loss associated with the transition to adulthood underlie a developing awareness of the dialectical themes of life and death (Noppe & Noppe, 1991). Empirically, adolescents appear to be vulnerable to existential uncertainty: reporting greater death anxiety than older individuals, as well as lower levels of acceptance (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). Although many adolescents and young adults likely contemplate death in the context of their developing religious identity—a domain that has been empirically demonstrated to be relevant in adolescence and young adulthood (Marcia & Archer, 1993)—identity development researchers have nevertheless not seemed to consider death as a sufficiently relevant topic for this age group to examine it as a separate domain of interest.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most research on identity and death has been grounded in one of three theoretical perspectives: existentialist/humanist; constructivist; or psychosocial. While there is some overlap in these approaches, each of the three represents a unique perspective on this topic.

Existentialist (e.g., Frankl, 1963; May, 1953; May & Yalom, 1989) and humanist (e.g., Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1959) psychological perspectives emphasize openness to experience, personal freedom and responsibility, and the search for meaning. Perhaps more than any other perspective, these theories stress the

role of death awareness in the construction of self. According to Maslow (1968), one cannot achieve self-actualization if one does not have an openness of perception, and a fear of death distorts such a perception. Most empirical studies from an existential and/or humanist perspective on identity and death have focused on the relationship between self-actualization and fear of death. These studies represent a variety of different existential viewpoints, utilizing measures of self-actualization based on the writings of Maslow (e.g., Lester & Colvin, 1977; Vargo & Batsel, 1981), measures of self-ideal self discrepancy based on Sartre's perspective (Neimeyer & Chapman, 1980), or measures of meaningfulness, based on Frankl's contentions (Aronow, Rauchway, Peller, & DeVitto, 1980; Bolt, 1978; Durlak, 1972). Such studies have consistently shown a negative association between self-actualization or its equivalent and death anxiety.

Constructivist approaches examine the structure and content of the diverse ways in which one creates one's world. From this perspective, identity is viewed not as something that is discovered, but rather, as something that one constantly creates (Berzonsky, 1993). The same is true for death. From a constructivist viewpoint, there is no single, correct view of death. The many ways it is interpreted "can be seen as equally valid on the part of individuals and cultures to infuse death with significance and to develop a construction of death that supports and extends people's construction of their lives" (Neimeyer, 1994b, p. 266). This is part of the language of symbolic interactionism (e.g., Mead, 1962) and researchers within this perspective have engaged this theory in their attempts to link together the constructs of death, grief, and identity (e.g., Locont, 1998).

The constructivist theory that has generated the most research on identity and death, however, is George Kelley's (1955) theory of Personal Constructs—particularly his concept of threat. In the context of Kelley's theory, threat refers to the extent to which a system must change in order to accommodate new information. A greater degree of threat implies a need for a more fundamental systemic change—a change in the way one construes who one is. A prime example of something that can threaten one's construction of self is death. The construct of death threat is relevant to identity because the inverse of threat can be conceived as integration (Wood & Robinson, 1982), a construct reflecting the similarity of one's constructions of death with those of self. While the variable of death integration, as represented by the Threat Index (TI) (Krieger, Epting, & Hays, 1979; Krieger, Epting, & Leitner, 1974), does not account for the complexity of one's constructions of death, nor is it necessarily indicative of death acceptance, it is unique as a death orientation variable in its focus on the relationship between self and death. The many studies utilizing the TI have been informative in identifying some of its demographic and experiential determinants: traditional religious beliefs (Tobacyk, 1984); experience with planning one's funeral (Rainey & Epting, 1977); experiences with illness (Hendon & Epting, 1989); near death experiences (Greyson, 1994); and bereavement

(Meshot & Leitner, 1994). Threat has also frequently been found to be associated with death anxiety (Neimeyer, 1994a).

Another study from a different constructivist perspective relevant to the topic of identity and death is worthy of mention here. This study (Ball & Chandler, 1989) explored the relationship between diachronic identity (a sense of self-continuity through time) and suicidal tendencies. Referring to Chandler, Boyes, Ball, and Hala's (1987) developmental sequence of increasingly sophisticated arguments in favor of self-continuity, the authors suggested that individuals too mature to accept one argument, but not yet ready for the next in succession, could be more prone to self-destructive behaviors. In support of this, they found that a group of high-risk suicidal adolescents were less able than a group of low-risk suicidal adolescents and a group of matched controls to justify their existence over time.

Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory focuses on the evolution of the ego over the lifespan, as the individual adapts to new roles determined by both biological development and age-graded social norms. His theory links identity and death in two general ways. It suggests, for one, that identity protects individuals against experiences that could result in a sense of discontinuity (Erikson, 1968; Sterling & Van Horn, 1989). It also links identity and death through the interstage relationship between identity (adolescence) and integrity (old age) (Sterling & Van Horn, 1989). As stated above, this concept implies that the issues of old age, such as death, are relevant in the context of identity development in adolescence. This interstage relationship can also, however, be applied to older individuals. Erikson briefly explored this in his discussion of existential identity, defined as the sense of "I" in the totality of life (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986).

Only a few studies have examined identity and death orientations from an Eriksonian perspective. One such study by Woods and Witte (1981) found a negative correlation between ego identity and death anxiety in a population of older individuals. A more frequently cited study (Sterling & Van Horn, 1989) explored the relationship between identity status, as operationalized by Marcia (1966), and death anxiety. Marcia's approach identifies four possible statuses an individual can occupy, based on the interaction of two independent underlying dimensions: exploration and commitment. Exploration refers to the extent that one has actively questioned one's beliefs and roles in life. Commitment refers to the extent to which one has made a definite decision to adopt a particular social role. The four statuses that emerge from the interaction of these dimensions are: diffusion (low exploration; low commitment); foreclosure (low exploration; high commitment); moratorium (high exploration; low commitment); and achievement (high exploration; high achievement). Sterling and Van Horn (1989) found that moratorium status undergraduate males reported higher levels of death anxiety than did the other statuses. The authors suggested that moratorium individuals may have had greater death anxiety because of their high level of uncertainty and (unlike identity-diffused individuals) their increased awareness and concern about this fact. In support of this finding, a more recent study (Dunkel, 2002) found that

individuals who were primed to contemplate death experienced more anxiety if they were exploring their identity than if they were not.

A more complex study from this perspective, conducted by Egli, Peake, Borduin, and Fleck (1994), explored the relationship between identity status and a number of different death orientations in older individuals. Based on the findings, the authors created death orientation profiles for older people in each of the four identity statuses (e.g., diffusions experiencing fear and sensitivity; foreclosures experiencing feelings of guilt; moratoriums feeling indifference; and achievers feeling a lack of fear and more hope).

The findings were not, however, predicted, but rather, supplied with post hoc explanations.

### **Limitations of Past Research**

Research on identity and death conducted to date has had a number of limitations. One such limitation has been an overly narrow focus on the relationship between identity and death anxiety. Studies on identity and death have neglected to explore the diversity of death constructs and orientations that people have. Another limitation is that studies have frequently relied on inadequately constructed death orientation measures. A number of commonly used death anxiety scales have lacked theoretical grounding (Tomer, 1994), and have not clearly and concisely defined this orientation (Durlak, 1982; Neimeyer, 1994b). Most studies on identity and death have, furthermore, neglected to incorporate demographic and/or control variables into their analyses. Lastly, hypotheses have tended to be quite general and/or vague and have done little to extend theory. Most pertinent to the current study, no research has been conducted that incorporates death orientations into a developmental theory of identity.

### **THE APPROACH OF THE CURRENT STUDY**

The main goal of the current study was to explore the possibility of incorporating death orientations into Marcia's (1966) identity status approach to Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development in adolescence. This was facilitated by the conceptual similarity of Marcia's identity constructs of exploration and commitment and the death orientations of contemplation and acceptance. The similarity between these terms suggests that the two death orientations could be explored as possible components of an independent ideological domain of identity—a domain focusing more on one's conception of self in relation to one's existence rather than one's various social roles.

If death contemplation and acceptance represent an independent domain of identity, an empirical association between each of these death orientations and its corresponding identity construct would be expected. A relationship between exploration and death contemplation is predicted simply because individuals

high in global exploration should be more inclined to explore specific content areas that are relevant to them. For adolescents and young adults, there is, as has been discussed, theoretical and empirical evidence that death is an important issue.

The empirical relationship between identity commitment and death acceptance is less apparent. Commitment, referring to one's intentional identification with a particular social role, is the particular ego strength acquired from the resolution of the crisis of identity in adolescence (Erikson, 1980), and is also Marcia's (1966) operationalization of one's sense of identity. Self-certainty, a theme generated from the interstage relationship between the psychosocial stages of identity and autonomy, represents the basis of the domain of existential identity: a clear sense of differentiation between one's existence (self) and nonexistence (death). A sense of self-certainty, based on one's commitments in any relevant identity domain, implies the extension or transcendence of one's existential boundaries and, consequently, should be associated with at least an implicit acceptance of death as a part of one's life (existential acceptance). The depth of this acceptance depends on the extent to which one has integrated one's conceptions of existence and nonexistence through a process of contemplation. To the extent that one has done this, acceptance may reflect the development of a complex personal ideology of existence.

If the above predictions are accurate, it would also follow that low levels of identity exploration and/or commitment would be associated with measures representing different manifestations of low death contemplation and/or acceptance. Examples of such measures could include death avoidance and death anxiety, respectively.

Further, Marcia's identity status typology could be utilized to describe different combinations of death contemplation and acceptance in an existential domain of identity. Existential identity achievement, reflecting the development of an integrated understanding of existence and nonexistence, could be represented by high levels of both death contemplation and acceptance. Existential moratorium status, reflecting a process of exploring the meaning of one's existence (and nonexistence), could be represented by high levels of contemplation but low acceptance. Existential foreclosure status, reflecting the adoption of parental or normative beliefs regarding the meaning of death, could be represented by a combination of low contemplation and high acceptance. This status could manifest as a blind belief in an afterlife or an implicit (unquestioning) acceptance of death as a part of life. Lastly, existential diffusion status, reflecting a lack of awareness and understanding of one's existence, could be represented by low levels of both contemplation and acceptance. Each of these statuses would be expected to be associated with its corresponding global or ideological identity status.

To address the multidimensionality of identity and death orientations, the interstage relationships in Erikson's (1968) psychosocial matrix can be examined. From an existential perspective, for example, each interstage theme of identity

generated in such an examination can reflect a different nuance of the dialectic of existence and nonexistence. Existence can, for example, be defined in terms of one's sense of self and death as: continuous (the product of identity and trust); personal (the product of identity and initiative); transitional (the product of identity and generativity); and purposeful (the product of identity and integrity). These themes are relevant in the development of a personal ideology of death, and can represent different content dimensions in the assessment of death contemplation and/or acceptance.

### **Predictions**

Based on these proposals, a number of hypotheses were generated regarding the relationships between each of Marcia's (1966) four identity statuses and the death orientations of contemplation and acceptance. Statuses reflecting high levels of exploration (i.e., moratorium and achievement statuses) were, for example, predicted to be associated with measures of high death contemplation. Statuses reflecting high levels of commitment (i.e., foreclosure and achievement statuses) were predicted to be associated with high levels of death acceptance. Statuses reflecting low levels of exploration (i.e., diffusion and foreclosure statuses) were predicted to be associated with variables, such as death avoidance, reflecting low contemplation. Statuses reflecting low levels of commitment (i.e., diffusion and moratorium statuses) were predicted to be associated with variables, such as death anxiety or fear, reflecting low acceptance. Because existential identity is conceptualized as an ideological domain, these predictions are most applicable to relationships between ideological identity and death contemplation and acceptance.

### **Control Variables**

The use of control variables increases the confidence with which a global identity construct can be said to predict existential identity constructs. Variables that have been empirically shown to be associated with both identity status and death orientations should, therefore, be included in a quantitative analysis of identity and death. Age is a clear example of such a variable; it has been found to be associated with identity status (Adams, Bennion, & Huh, 1989) and several relevant death attitudes (Kalish, 1977; Nelson, 1979; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). Gender has also been found to be associated with identity status—women tend to occupy higher statuses than men in interpersonal domains (Marcia, 1993b; Matteson, 1993)—and a number of different death constructs and orientations (Holcomb, Neimeyer, & Moore, 1993; Klenow & Bolin, 1989; Neimeyer, 1988; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). Other variables worthy of consideration have been less clearly linked with both constructs. Bereavement has, for example, been found to be associated with: lower levels of identity diffusion (Beer, 1999), a greater orientation toward religion (Balk, 1991), and a greater

sense of interpersonal self-death integration (Meshot & Leitner, 1994). The relationship between bereavement and identity is, however, likely dependent on a number of different factors. For some individuals, the experience of bereavement appears to have a negative effect on identity and/or self concept (Balk, 1990; Welch & Bergen, 1999-2000). Ethnic identity, which has been shown to be associated with identity status (Marcia, 1993b) and may be relevant to death orientations (McMordie & Kumar, 1984), is another example of a potentially worthy control variable.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Adolescents and young adults under age 30 ( $M = 21.69$ ;  $SD = 1.98$ ) were recruited from undergraduate psychology and family studies classes at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Approximately 200 questionnaires were distributed and 155 returned. Six respondents were not included in the subsequent analyses because they did not meet the age criterion of 30 years and younger. The majority of the sample (79.9%) was women. Other sample characteristics are listed in Table 1.

### Measures

An objective of the current study was to represent identity status constructs and the various death orientations proposed in the introduction with available measures appropriate for adolescent and young adult respondents. The questionnaire package consisted of a section assessing background information, and a section including measures of identity status and death contemplation and acceptance.

Marcia's (1966) identity status approach was represented by the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status 2 (Adams, Bennion, & Huh, 1989), a scale assessing Marcia's four statuses of identity independently in the ideological and interpersonal domains. This measure is the most highly developed and validated questionnaire assessing identity status (Marcia, 1993a).

Death orientations were assessed by several different measures. One of these was an eight-item scale that included items from the contemplation factor (Klug & Boss, 1976) of Dickstein's (1972) Death Concern scale. This scale was utilized as a direct measure of death contemplation. Another scale, the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994), was utilized to assess two of the proposed dimensions of acceptance: existential acceptance (represented by neutral acceptance, the acceptance of death as a natural part of life) and transition acceptance (represented by approach acceptance, the acceptance of death as a gateway to a happy afterlife). It was also used to assess death orientations reflecting a low level of acceptance and/or contemplation: fear and avoidance,

Table 1. Selected Demographic Characteristics of Sample

| Variable                   | <i>n</i> | Percent |
|----------------------------|----------|---------|
| Gender                     |          |         |
| Men                        | 30       | 20.1    |
| Women                      | 119      | 79.9    |
| Ethnic Identification      |          |         |
| Asian                      | 81       | 54.4    |
| European                   | 14       | 9.4     |
| Canadian                   | 27       | 18.1    |
| Other                      | 26       | 17.4    |
| Missing                    | 1        | 0.7     |
| Religious Involvement      |          |         |
| Never                      | 61       | 40.9    |
| Less than once a month     | 44       | 29.5    |
| About once a month         | 4        | 2.7     |
| Two or three times a month | 9        | 6.0     |
| Once a week                | 14       | 9.4     |
| More than once a week      | 17       | 11.4    |
| Death of a Friend          |          |         |
| No                         | 121      | 81.2    |
| Yes                        | 27       | 18.1    |
| Missing                    | 1        | 0.7     |
| Death of a Pet             |          |         |
| No                         | 63       | 42.3    |
| Yes                        | 85       | 57.0    |
| Missing                    | 1        | 0.7     |
| Death of a Family Member   |          |         |
| No                         | 31       | 20.8    |
| Yes                        | 118      | 79.2    |

respectively. This scale also included an additional measure of acceptance—escape acceptance, the acceptance of death as an escape from a painful existence—which does not correspond with the type of death acceptance discussed in the introduction. Unlike the other measures of acceptance, escape acceptance was predicted to be associated with low identity commitment because it may, for adolescents and young adults, reflect a desire to escape an uncertain existence.

Lastly, a semantic differential was created based on death constructs, taken from Neimeyer, Fontana, and Gold's (1984) Manual for Content Analysis, corresponding to: personal contemplation (represented by personal involvement, the view of death as personal), continuity acceptance (represented by temporal expectation, the view of death as foreseeable), and purposeful acceptance (represented by purposefulness, the view of death as having a purpose). A principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation conducted on 15 items yielded four factors. Four items were eliminated: one did not load on to its predicted factor; one loaded on to more than one factor; two loaded on to a factor that appeared to be more representative of concern than of personal involvement. The remaining items represented three distinct factors. Alpha levels were acceptable for purpose (.82) and temporal expectation (.72), but low for personal involvement (.50). The items are summarized in Table 2.

### Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed during classtime to interested students after a preliminary explanation of the general objectives of the study. In two classes, students completed the questionnaires during classtime. Other students completed the questionnaires on their own time. Questionnaires were anonymous and were coded numerically.

## RESULTS

The four ideological identity statuses and selected control (x) variables were entered simultaneously in multiple regression equations for each death orientation (y) variable. The statuses of interpersonal identity and the same control (x) variables were also entered simultaneously in regression equations for relevant (more implicit) death orientation (y) variables (temporal expectation, personal involvement, purposefulness, and neutral acceptance). All assumptions associated with the multiple regression procedure appear to have been met, with the exception of multivariate normality in the cases of avoidance and temporal expectation. Both of these distributions were skewed and had to be transformed into normal distributions.

The independent variable of age was selected for inclusion in the regression analyses based on its empirical association, as indicated in the literature (discussed above), with both identity status and the death orientations of fear and acceptance. Other relevant variables (discussed above) were eligible for inclusion if they were found to be significantly correlated (in the predicted direction) with one or more death orientation variables representing existential identity utilized in this study, and they were nonredundant (not highly correlated) with each other. Two of these variables (education and death of a friend) were found to be correlated ( $p < .01$ ) with one or more death orientations. Education was not, however, included in the

Table 2. Principal Components analysis (with Varimax Rotation) of Death Construct Items

| Item  | Loading                         |                                     |                                     |          |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------|
|   | Factor 1<br>Purpose-<br>fulness | Factor 2<br>Temporal<br>expectation | Factor 3<br>Personal<br>involvement | Factor 4 |
| Purposeful/<br>Purposeless                      | .81                             | .10                                 | .14                                 | -.08     |
| Necessary/<br>Unnecessary                       | .73                             | -.08                                | -.06                                | -.13     |
| Useful/<br>Useless                              | .87                             | .05                                 | -.01                                | .02      |
| Having a reason/<br>Having no reason            | .74                             | .11                                 | .15                                 | -.09     |
| Sudden/<br>Not sudden                           | -.04                            | .63                                 | .04                                 | -.08     |
| Predictable/<br>Unpredictable                   | .04                             | .72                                 | -.18                                | .11      |
| Has warning/<br>Has no warning                  | .10                             | .74                                 | -.10                                | .05      |
| Foreseeable/<br>Unforeseeable                   | .06                             | .81                                 | .03                                 | .06      |
| Can see myself dying/<br>Can't see myself dying | .19                             | -.06                                | .68                                 | .04      |
| Personal/<br>Impersonal                         | .09                             | -.12                                | .53                                 | .10      |
| Close to me/<br>Distant from me                 | -.02                            | .01                                 | .78                                 | .04      |

subsequent analyses because of its high correlation with age ( $r = .58, p < .00$ ), and the fact that there is more evidence in the literature that age is associated with death orientations relevant to the current study. Gender was also included as a control variable in the current study because of the disparity in the number of male and female respondents ( $n = 30$  males;  $n = 119$  females), and because of its empirical relationship with a number of relevant death attitudes (Holcomb, Neimeyer, & Moore, 1993; Klenow & Bolin, 1989; Neimeyer, 1988; Neimeyer & Moore, 1994; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994).

All death orientations except the constructs of personal involvement (representing personal contemplation) and temporal expectation (representing continuity acceptance) were found to be predicted by identity variables. Table 3 summarizes the results.

The hypothesis of an association between high exploration identity statuses and variables of death contemplation was supported in one analysis: contemplation was found to be associated with ideological moratorium status ( $B = .19, p < .05$ ).

The hypothesis of an association between high commitment statuses and variables of death acceptance was supported in the following analyses: neutral acceptance (representing existential acceptance) was found to be associated with *interpersonal* identity achievement ( $B = .22, p < .02$ , not shown on Table 3); and approach acceptance (representing transition acceptance) was found to be associated with ideological foreclosure status ( $B = .27, p < .00$ ).

The hypothesis of an association between low commitment statuses and death orientation variables representing low acceptance was supported in three analyses: fear was found to be associated with ideological moratorium status ( $B = .29, p < .01$ ); and both purposefulness ( $B = -.32, p < .01$ ) and approach acceptance ( $B = -.33, p < .01$ ) were found to be negatively associated with ideological diffusion status.

Escape acceptance, also predicted to be associated with low commitment statuses, was found, unexpectedly, to be associated with ideological foreclosure status ( $B = .23, p < .01$ ), and negatively associated with ideological diffusion status ( $B = -.27, p < .01$ ). Escape acceptance was also found to be negatively associated with ideological achievement status ( $B = -.21, p < .05$ ).

Avoidance, hypothesized to be associated with low exploration statuses, was in fact found to be associated with moratorium status ( $B = .23, p < .05$ )—a high exploration status.

Lastly, the three control variables were each found to be associated with at least one death orientation. Being female was found to be associated with contemplation ( $B = .26, p < .01$ ) and personal involvement ( $B = .20, p < .01$ ), and negatively associated with avoidance ( $B = -.21, p < .01$ ). Age was found to be associated with neutral acceptance ( $B = .25, p < .01$ ). Death of a friend was found to be associated with personal involvement ( $B = .30, p < .01$ ).

Table 3. Multiple Regression of Ideological Identity Status Variables on Death Orientations

|                 | Death Orientations   |                    |                      |               |                     |             |             |             |            |
|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
|                 | Temporal expectation | Neutral acceptance | Personal involvement | Contemplation | Approach acceptance | Purpose     | Fear        | Avoidance   | Escape     |
| Diffusion       | B = .15              | B = -.18           | B = .00              | B = -.02      | B = -.33***         | B = -.32*** | B = .17     | B = .08     | B = -.27** |
| Foreclosure     | B = .14              | B = .04            | B = -.02             | B = .04       | B = .27***          | B = .03     | B = .03     | B = .13     | B = .23**  |
| Moratorium      | B = -.15             | B = -.06           | B = -.11             | B = .19*      | B = -.22**          | B = -.12    | B = .29***  | B = .23*    | B = .07    |
| Achievement     | B = .05              | B = .04            | B = -.02             | B = .17       | B = .00             | B = -.02    | B = -.03    | B = .01     | B = -.21*  |
| Age             | B = .03              | B = .25**          | B = .04              | B = .05       | B = -.04            | B = .04     | B = .05     | B = -.12    | B = -.02   |
| Gender          | B = .07              | B = -.14           | B = .20**            | B = .26**     | B = .12             | B = -.04    | B = -.01    | B = -.21**  | B = .06    |
| Death of friend | B = .07              | B = -.20**         | B = .30***           | B = .12       | B = -.04            | B = -.06    | B = -.01    | B = -.11    | B = .04    |
| Multivariate    | F = .84              | F = 3.58***        | F = 4.08***          | F = 3.08***   | F = 8.14***         | F = 3.54*** | F = 4.32*** | F = 4.83*** | F = 2.93** |

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

## DISCUSSION

### Death Contemplation

It was hypothesized that high ideological identity exploration statuses (i.e., moratorium and achievement statuses) would be associated with death orientation variables representing contemplation. Ideological moratorium status was, in fact, found to be associated with the variable of conscious contemplation. This result could suggest that existential identity contemplation is part of the process of ideological identity development. More research must be done, however, to confirm this possibility. The variable of contemplation used in the current study focuses on the frequency of one's thoughts about death. Whether frequency represents a constructive process of existential contemplation or a tendency toward a greater number of anxious thoughts about death needs to be explored. If the contemplation variable utilized in the current study is more reflective of the latter, the fact that achievement status was not found to be associated with contemplation could have been a consequence of this status' lower vulnerability to death anxiety.

### Death Acceptance

The second hypothesis proposed that high commitment ideological identity statuses (i.e., foreclosure and achievement statuses) would be associated with variables reflecting different dimensions of death acceptance. In the current study these included: neutral acceptance (representing existential acceptance); approach acceptance (representing transition acceptance); the construct "purposeful" (representing purposeful acceptance); and the construct "temporal expectation" (representing continuity acceptance). The results of the current study supported this hypothesis only in the case of approach acceptance, although neutral acceptance was found to be associated with interpersonal identity achievement.

Why neutral acceptance, the acceptance of death as a natural part of life, was associated with interpersonal rather than ideological achievement is not clear. It may be that achievement in the interpersonal domain, for adolescent and young adult university students, is associated with more tangible commitments (and, therefore, a greater sense of self-extension and/or validation) than is the case for achievement in the ideological domain. Neutral acceptance thus appears to be an implicit aspect of identity achievement for this population, rather than the product of an emerging death ideology.

The other significant result was that approach acceptance, the acceptance of death as a gateway to a happy afterlife, was found to be associated with ideological foreclosure status—a high commitment status. Foreclosure status has been said to represent a dogmatic, normative identity style (Berzonsky, 1993). Such an identity style is consistent with the traditional religious perspective reflected by

approach acceptance. Ideological achievement was not found to be associated with this variable. Considering the sample's low level of religiosity, a measure assessing a more symbolic view of transition—such as the extension of self through one's descendants (e.g., Drolet, 1990) may have been a more appropriate one for this population.

Two dependent death acceptance variables, purposefulness (representing purposeful acceptance) and temporal expectation (representing continuity acceptance), were not found to be associated with high commitment identity status variables. This could reflect adolescents' and young adults' lack of death acceptance on these dimensions. In the case of continuity acceptance, however, further exploration is warranted because the theme of continuity is not explicitly addressed in the measure of identity status used in the current study. Additionally, the measure of temporal expectation, devised for the current study, needs to be further developed.

### **Avoidance, Fear, and Escape Acceptance**

The current study also explored the relationship between identity and the death orientations of fear, avoidance, and escape acceptance. Because a lack of identity implies a more uncertain sense of existence and, consequently, a tendency to view one's nonexistence as either a threat or a means of escape, fear of death and escape acceptance were hypothesized to be associated with low commitment identity (diffusion and moratorium) statuses. A lack of identity exploration was also expected to extend to the existential domain; avoidance was predicted to be associated with low exploration (diffusion and moratorium) statuses.

In the case of fear, this hypothesis was supported. Ideological moratorium status was found to be associated with a fear of death. This result concurs with that of Sterling and Van Horn (1989). Fear may, indeed, be a consequence of the lack of a coherent identity and a heightened level of awareness of this fact. Diffusion status, although negatively associated with purposefulness, was not found to be associated with fear—a possible reflection of the lower awareness and/or concern linked with this status.

In the case of escape acceptance, the above hypothesis was not supported. In fact, a high commitment status (ideological foreclosure status) was, unexpectedly, found to be associated with this death orientation. Since escape acceptance is moderately correlated with approach acceptance (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994), which was also found to be associated with ideological foreclosure status in the current study, it is conceivable that this result was a reflection of ideological foreclosures' belief in an afterlife. Such a belief could make the idea of escape more appealing. This result may also, however, reflect a sense of dissatisfaction with commitments that were made based on parental or normative expectations rather than personal interests. Whatever the explanation, escape acceptance for

adolescents and young adults appears to reflect a desire to escape from one's secular commitments rather than from an uncertain sense of one's existence. Interestingly, it was also found to be negatively associated with both ideological diffusion and achievement statuses.

The fact that avoidance was found to be associated with a high exploration (moratorium) status seems somewhat paradoxical, particularly considering that moratorium status was also associated with death contemplation. Perhaps the association with avoidance was a consequence, as in the case of fear, of the increased level of awareness associated with moratorium status. Moratorium individuals may be more aware of being avoidant than they are avoidant (of death) *per se*. This result also indicates that avoidance cannot be equated with low exploration; it is a more complex variable than that.

### **Control Variables**

The most noteworthy effect regarding the control variables concerns gender. Being female was found to be associated with death contemplation and a view of death as personal. Being male was associated with avoidance. These results suggest that women may have more of an emotional, personal view of death than men—a result supported by Holcomb, Neimeyer, and Moore (1993). Whether young women actually explore the personal meanings of death to a greater extent than young men needs, however, to be more systematically explored in future research.

## **STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, AND IMPLICATIONS**

The current study has a number of strengths in comparison to previous research on the topic of identity and death. For one, it was multidimensional in scope, exploring a diverse set of variables. Second, it relied on several established, psychometrically sound measures: the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status; the Death Attitude Profile-Revised; and the contemplation variable of Dickstein's Death Concern Scale (1972). Third, it included control variables in the analyses. Last, and perhaps most significantly, it explored hypotheses derived from a theoretically-based conceptual framework delineating the relationship between identity status and death orientations—something that previous research has lacked.

The two main limitations of this study concerned some of the constructs utilized and the population that was examined. The constructs selected, first of all, were, as discussed above, sometimes rather narrowly defined (e.g., approach acceptance and contemplation) for the purposes of the current study.

Unfortunately, there was also a lack of measures available to represent some constructs appropriate for the current study. Because of this, moreover, several death constructs (i.e., purposefulness, temporal expectation, and personal involvement) were represented by scales without established validity.

The population chosen was, furthermore, not an ideal one for a study focusing on death acceptance, a topic which is more peripheral to adolescents and young adults than older individuals. If death acceptance is implicit in identity, it should, however, be at least implicitly relevant to adolescents and young adults who, according to Erikson (1968), are in the midst of the psychosocial crisis of identity versus identity confusion. The extent to which this is the case thus seemed worthy of exploration.

In terms of social implications, one important finding in this study was that ideological moratorium status appears to be associated, in adolescence and young adulthood, with death orientations reflecting emotional distress; specifically, fear and avoidance. At the same time, this status seems more oriented than the other statuses toward death contemplation. This suggests a possible existential component to identity crises in young people one that could be addressed in the contexts of counseling and death education. Another finding of interest is foreclosure status' orientation toward escape acceptance. While escape acceptance might not be indicative of distress, further research could explore this possibility.

It would be interesting for future studies to explore the development of existential identity over the lifespan, or in bereaved versus nonbereaved groups, particularly regarding differences in integrative complexity and content in respondents' understanding of self and death. The conceptual framework created in the current study could be further utilized in such an endeavor. Future studies in this area could also explore the assessment of existential identity status, and the relationship between an existential domain and other domains of identity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of the current study represent evidence that existential contemplation is associated with ideological moratorium status during adolescence and young adulthood, but is not resolved at this point in the lifespan. The fact that neutral (existential) and approach (transition) acceptance were associated with interpersonal achievement and ideological foreclosure statuses, respectively, indicates that, for this population, death acceptance may be more a consequence of an extended sense of self, or a noncritical adoption of a traditional belief, than active contemplation. Whether these results are indicative of an emerging existential domain of identity needs to be further explored.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Drs. Dan Perlman, Sheila Marshall, Eleanor Vaines, and Michael Chandler for their helpful support in the development of this study.

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