THE DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT OF DEATH AMONG BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN LEARNERS FROM THE EASTERN CAPE, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Thirty-one learners aged 6–16 were selected using purposive sampling, with the aim of investigating their understanding of death. Data were collected using drawings and semi-structured tape-recorded interviews from a modified version of the Smilansky Death Questionnaire. Drawings were analysed following Marton's phenomenographic method. Interview transcripts were analysed using pattern coding. Specific responses regarding the components of death were analysed using Smilansky's scoring method. Nine descriptive categories were gathered from the drawings: personification, colours, physical features, gender, age, method of death, position of the dead, funeralisation, life symbols. Drawings reflected more similarities than differences between age groups. The 6-8 year-olds had a better understanding of human death than of animal death, whereas the older groups were more advanced in conceptualising animal death. This finding demonstrates the influence of cultural practices. The conceptualisation of old age developed before the other components of death, followed by inevitability, irreversibility, finality, and causality respectively. Gender differences were noted in the explanations of causes of death. Conclusions demonstrate that the understanding of death is affected by age, cognition, and familial and cultural factors depending on the context within which such development takes place. Future research should consider context when examining children's conceptions of death.

OPSOMMING

Een-en-dertig leerders tussen 6 en 16 jaar is geselekteer met die doel om hulle begrip van dood te ondersoek. Data is ingesamel deur tekeninge en semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude gebaseer op 'n aangepaste weergawe van die Smilansky Doodsvraelys. Tekeninge is ontleed volgens Marton se fenomenografiese metode. Data vanuit die onderhoude is ontleed deur gebruik te maak van patroonkodering en spesifieke response in verband met die komponente van dood is ontleed volgens Smilansky se metode. Nege beskrywende kategorieë in verband met die konsep van dood is ingesamel vanaf die tekeninge: personifikasie, kleure, fisiese eienskappe, geslag, ouderdom, sterfmetode, doodsposisie, begrafniskenmerke en lewensimbole. Die tekeninge het meer ooreenkomste as verskille tussen die ouderdomsgroepe getoon. Die ses-tot-agtjariges het 'n beter begrip van menslike dood as van dierlike dood getoon. Die ouer groepe het egter beter gevaar ten opsigte van die konseptualisering van dierlike dood. Hierdie bevinding illustreer die invloed van kulturele praktyke. Die konseptualisasie van bejaardheid ontwikkel voor die ander komponente van dood gevolg deur onvermydelikheid, onomkeerbaarheid, finaliteit en oorsaaklikheid

onderskeidelik. Geslagsverskille is geïdentifiseer in die verklarings van die oorsake van dood. Die bevindinge toon dat die begrip van dood beïnvloed word deur ouderdom, kognisie en ander gesins- en kulturele faktore afhangend van die konteks waarbinne hierdie ontwikkeling geskied. Toekomstige navorsing behoort die konteks in ag te neem wanneer kinders se idees oor dood ondersoek word.

INTRODUCTION

Research on the development of children's conceptions of death can trace its earliest roots to the 1930's and 1940's, with most cited studies in the death literature (Anthony, 1939:276; Nagy, 1948:3; Schilders & Wechsler, 1934:409). Since then there have been numerous studies and three literature reviews (Kastenbaum & Costa, 1977:227; Kenyon, 2001:65; Speece & Brent, 1984:1671). Earlier studies have focused on spontaneous characterisation of death in story completion exercises (Anthony, 1940:12), descriptions of death-related pictures (Schilders & Wechsler, 1934:430), drawings and play (Nagy, 1948:12). Later studies emphasised components of death, including irreversibility, finality, inevitability, causality, and old age (Smilansky, 1987:23; Speece & Brent, 1984:1677). These components have mostly been related to cognitive development by integrating these into a Piagetian framework for formulating and interpreting findings.

Although death is regarded as a significant and intensely felt event, both for the individual and the social group, it is the least talked about (Huntington & Metcalf, 1981:15). The silence reflects death as a taboo subject in everyday conversation, particularly with children (Warnecke, 1994:3). Apart from the need for adults to answer children's questions, death talk is a necessary exercise in the skill of conversation (Frommer, 1969:45). By denying children the chance to think and reflect on death, or engaging in a conversation with them, parents and social scientists might have unwittingly cut out their voices in the literature on death, especially in reputable psychological journals (Lazar, 1985:11). Different cultures tend to provide their members with a way of thinking about, and responding to death. Within this context it then becomes necessary to understand the status of the empirical evidence that is available regarding the concept of death. It becomes necessary to gain an understanding of the nature and source of this knowledge and its limitations.

Reiterating Freud's assertion about death as a non-problem, Wittgenstein (1967:52) and Walton (1979:12) state that a) individuals cannot truly understand or accept their own mortality, b) it is not possible to know anything about death because no individual has direct experience of their own while still alive, and c) death is an epistemically inaccessible state. While there is this important element of the latter that characterises death, Kastenbaum and Costa (1977:230) suggest that the task of the new psychology of death lies in the conversion of these long-held assumptions into questions that can be answered through empirical observation.

Existing studies on children's development of the death concept (Kenyon, 2001:68; Speece & Brent, 1984:1678; Webb, 1993:23) adhere to methodological differences and provide various conclusions. Many flaws related to the design and methodology have been identified. Kastenbaum and Costa (1977:241) criticised the over-emphasis on cross-sectional designs to investigate a research problem that would benefit more from the utilisation of longitudinal designs. Speece and Brent (1984:1682) highlighted the problem of under-reporting demographic information. These studies reveal the difficulties encountered in the development of the concept of death, as well as the difficulties in attempting to use a general theory of cognitive development like Piaget's as the basis for understanding the development of an abstract concept like death.

The available literature on the development of children's concepts of death reflects research conducted outside of Africa. Furthermore, there is limited data reporting African children's death concept development. Despite this scarcity, the majority of accessible information (outside Africa) on the topic of children appears to represent primarily white, urban, middle-class children of average or above intelligence. A review of the few available studies done in Africa focuses primarily on adult conceptualisations of death and the hereafter (Lamla, 1981:21; Lawuyi, 1991:235; Mbiti, 1969:40; Ngubane, 1977:47). Attention has not been given to children's

conceptualisation of death. This obvious lack of interest is somewhat surprising, considering the importance of children's conceptual development. Some studies focus on grief and bereavement counselling directed at parents of deceased children (Du Toit, 1991:5; Fourie, 1997:2; Greyling, 1997:2). Other studies have focused on the therapeutic and practical value of traditional funerals in the mourning process (Solomon, 1995:12; Van Dyk, 1993:10). Maloka (1998:23) observed that available literature on death excludes how death and grief have been experienced and dealt with by African mineworkers. This also highlights the impact that death might have had on the children of mineworkers. Studies conducted in central Africa and in South Africa reveal the following information:

- Adults' views of death are paradoxical. While death is viewed as an inevitable and destructive phenomenon, the disturbing effects of this experience are denied by the postulation of a life after death.
- Death is seen as a continuation of ties between the living and the departed.
- An umbrella of silence surrounds death. When there is talk about death it is in whispers, especially in the presence of children.
- Adults show a preference for using symbolic expressions when referring to death. This is reflected in many African languages, whereby it is believed that one should never refer to a person as being "dead" ("*ufile*" in isiXhosa) unless one holds such a person in absolute contempt ("*ifile le nj*" meaning "this dog is dead").
- It is considered distasteful and ill-mannered to speak of anything connected with death. As a result children are cautioned not to mention the name of someone who has recently died.

The above review demonstrates the framework within which most Africans get their orientation towards a conceptualisation of death. This also shows how such an orientation and conceptualisation may influence the way children think and feel about death. This framework poses serious concern as it is unclear what the assumptions are on which marginalisation of children are based. The following questions are therefore raised to familiarise readers with the problems in death research:

- Does the marginalisation of children in death-related issues mean that children do not ex-

perience death as a life crisis in the same way as parents do?
- Does the adults' postulation of a "life after death" amount to a subtle wish that death should be reversible?
- If so, what are the implications of the fact that death is irreversible?
- What are the implications of this for the children's inability to comprehend the irreversibility of events, especially for younger children?
- Can one see adults as colluding with what Piaget proposes that children's cognitive structures are not ready to conceptualise this type of information. For instance, children under the age of eight years can only deal with objects that are physically present and not abstract concepts like death.
- If parents or adults have a way of coping with such a crisis (for example, dead people continue to exist in another world or form) what harm, if any, are they doing to their children by not educating them in this world-view?
- What are the implications of the silence about death for children's cognitive development, and confusion regarding the meaning assigned by society to death-related issues?

The above review has provided the context for informing processes involved in death concept development. It has laid the groundwork for understanding that children's knowledge or comprehension does not happen in a vacuum, but within contexts. These contexts need to be highlighted when trying to describe or explain human development. The questions raised could serve an additive function in complementing the field's present emphasis on the development of death conception. To undergo an investigation into culturally specific experience would prove beneficial as this shapes the content of children's understanding of death. Therefore, it becomes valuable to describe and understand what learners know about death against the background of the context within which death occurs. Webb (1993:42) offers further insight, that the taboo contradicts the reality of contemporary children's lives, since through television they are able to observe real and fictionalised deaths. Furthermore, it is unknown how these children make sense of the pictures of death that become imprinted on their minds. The present paper has reviewed the findings of studies conducted outside Africa, be-

cause there is no published material from Africa that has been found on how children develop an understanding of the concept of death.

The objectives of the study are:
- To gather new empirical data in order to examine the development in the understanding of the concept of death by learners through their own words and drawings.
- To determine the baseline in gauging the understanding of the concept of death by learners.
- To investigate the extent of learners' understanding of the specific components of death.
- To establish what informs the knowledge that they have on death.
- To advance the principles of the neo-Piagetian theory to explain the developmental progression of children's understanding of the concept of death.

TERMINOLOGY

Irreversibility of death: The deceased is in a state from which there is no return.

Finality of death: A state in which all bodily functions and sensations cease.

Causality of death: This relates to the physical-biological factors that lead to death.

Inevitability of death: This involves treating death as a natural phenomenon, which is inherently unavoidable.

Old age: Understanding old age involves understanding the biological sequence of life; death is part of the normal life cycle.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE NEO-PIAGETAN THEORY

The present study uses the principles of the neo-Piagetian framework proposed by Case (1991:27) in order to accommodate some of the concerns raised in the paper. Case (1991:30) operates within what Vuyk (1981:19) calls the "intraparadigmatic critique" that aims at building on Piaget's core-concept of cognitive development and simultaneously going beyond by including the role of context in explaining child development. The neo-Piagetian theory is rooted in attempts to account for the many exceptions in the pattern of development described by Piaget, without losing the power to ac-

count for the pattern itself (Case, 1991:35; Demetriou, Shayer & Efklides, 1992:62).

Case (1991:47) proposes a sequence of changes *within* the four developmental stages, thereby retaining the universality of stages. These four stages are the sensorimotor stage, the interrelational stage, the dimensional stage and the vectorial stage. At the first substage, children assemble a new class of operations, by coordinating two well-established executive structures that are already in their repertoire. As their working memory grows, and as they practice these new operations, children enter a second substage in which they become capable of executing two such operations in sequence. Finally, with further growth in working memory, and with further practice, they enter a third substage in which they become capable of executing two or more operations of the new sort in parallel, and integrating the products of these operations into a coherent system. Once consolidated, these integrated systems then function as the basic units from which the structures of the next stage are assembled.

Case (1991:52) regards variability in the rate of development as a function of cultural context that facilitates the development process. Case (1991:62) concludes that as children grow older, culture is increasingly seen not just as presenting children with the *opportunity* for development, but also as providing direct *assistance* in the developmental process by facilitating the construction of tools necessary to solve higher order problems later encountered.

The above provides the groundwork for investigating a variety of issues without being limited to children's understanding of logic, mathematics, and the physical world, but includes tasks that children encounter in their everyday lives – in this instance their understanding of death. The dynamics of developmental change are dependent on the need to preserve the normative framework, as well as on the variability that is enhanced by the contextual social dynamics when children are exposed to the concept of death.

When tracing the development of the concept of death through the four stages proposed by Case (1991:35), the child's level of operation seems to be on the basis of intuition. This involves an assemblance of a new class of operations when first exposed to death. Children form

social scripts regarding death-related behaviours, and this marks the beginning of an awareness of death. Even though these scripts may be fragmented at first, these nevertheless indicate progress in the development of intuitive representations. When children grow older they continue to perceive particular death-related behaviours in terms of what they can remember. As the capacity of the working memory increases, and the chances of exposure to death-related settings increase, and more assemblance of new operations occurs, children enter into a new stage of development where they will be able to integrate understanding of information into a coherent system.

For example, when presented with new scripts that conflict with what children already have in their repertoire, their interactions tend to draw both on cultural scenarios and on their own personal desires, fantasies, and intentions. During these interactions children will develop strategies for fulfilling their own wishes and plans on how to fit in. Mitchell (1999:175) has observed that often behaviours are prescribed not because of their consequences, but because of their perceived value. However, death scripts that are available to most African children do not recognise children's desires to talk and to participate in death-related activities. Children come to know about death vicariously by observing others. However, they may be kept away from participating and observing death-related activities. Furthermore, the parents' efforts to promote the development of their children's new skills should be based upon both their understanding of what the child can already accomplish, and what they think the child can learn with parental help. But then, how are parents going to ascertain the level of the child's understanding of death if they never talk about it in the first place? Using Piaget and Vygotsky as frames of reference, Valsiner (1987:58) reports that the development of internal cognitive processes starts from external acting of the child within its environment, and proceeds towards internalisation of the external experience. This then calls for the external experience to be well structured and properly communicated to the child.

Given the kinds of constraints that regulate and direct the development of the child's thinking about death-related issues, the following section stands to demonstrate methods that are able to capture the context-bound experience that children are exposed to. The

knowledge that the environment imparts to children, together with the properties of the whole cultural milieu, form an essential aspect in the regulation of development, and therefore needs to be acknowledged. Consequently, research should consider the context-based setting as a basis for explaining cognitive development, as well as the conceptualisation of death.

METHOD

In taking cognisance of the nature of methodological problems highlighted, the present paper has adopted a qualitative approach that demonstrates a contextualist research strategy that aims to describe and understand what participants know, using a range of methods to achieve its goal of producing a research product with credibility and dependability.

Participants

Participants were 31 learners grouped into three age groups (6-8, 9-12 and 13-16 years) from the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The purposive sampling technique was used, whereby the school was chosen on the basis of the researcher's knowledge of the population in the village, and her familiarity with the social systems employed by the residents. The village has not been affected much by information technology, such as television. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: a) the learner had not been exposed to television, b) the learner had to be nominated by the class teacher as being of at least average intellectual capability. There were ten learners from each age range except for the 13-16 year range, where 11 learners participated. An equal number of boys and girls were included.

Procedure

Data were collected using drawings and semi-structured tape-recorded interviews from a modified version of the Smilansky Death Questionnaire (Smilansky, 1987). Learners were asked to make three drawings (death, a dead person and a dead dog). Some learners requested further clarification and were subsequently given the following instruction: "Do it whatever way you think is best. Be sure to draw everything you know about what death/ a dead person/ a dead animal looks like." An effort was made to ensure that all the learners

drew their pictures independently to avoid the possibility of copying from other drawings. Learners were asked questions about the features of the drawings. Over and above the questions pertaining to the specific features of the drawings, the interviewer asked questions about the five components of the concept of death: irreversibility, finality, causality, inevitability, and old age. According to Robertson (1994:25) a valid measure of understanding a concept should involve eliciting the full set of elements a person might have in memory about it. For analytical purposes the responses to the five components of death were isolated from questions directed at the drawings. The investigation covered the following areas:

- Categories of description expressed in the drawings.
- Themes on the definition of death.
- What happens to people/animals when they are dead?
- The extent of understanding regarding the specific components of death.

Some of the questions were as follows:

- What does "to die" mean? What is death?
- Have you ever seen a dead person?
- What happens to people when they are dead?
- If a person dies and has been buried, can he or she become a living person again? Why?
- Can a dead person see/hear/move? Why?
- Can a dead person come out of his/her grave? Why?
- How do people die?
- Does everyone die?

Participants were included in the study on a voluntary basis and with provision of informed consent from the school principal and the parents of learners. Participants were ensured anonymity and confidentiality regarding the information associated with the drawings and questionnaires. At the end of the interviews, all learners were asked how they felt about the exercise and were subsequently debriefed. Because of the potentially stressful nature of the exercise, the researcher made prior arrangements with psychological services in the area to provide therapeutic assistance should the need arise. The telephonic follow-ups, as well as the two visits to the school conducted after completion of the study did not indicate a need for further intervention.

Data analysis: Drawings

The analysis and interpretation solely focused on the descriptive level of participant understanding. The drawings were analysed following Marton's (1981:179) phenomenographic method, where similarities and differences in the pictures were noted. Identified categories of description formed an abstract tool that was used to characterise learners' understanding of the concept.

Data analysis: Interviews

Learners were asked to define "death". The various definitions illuminated interesting terminology that would not have been captured if reliance on eliciting understanding were based purely on the drawings. Learners were asked specific questions related to the five components of death while controlling for the referent object. The questions were designed to encourage the learners to think about the phenomenon. Questions mostly touched on particular aspects of the drawing, but also aimed at capturing the children's overall understanding. The children were encouraged to talk freely and spontaneously, rather than to adhere rigidly to questions in the questionnaire. Questions were formulated in a clear and precise manner, and aimed at eliciting information pertaining to each child's understanding of the concept of death.

Pattern coding, suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994:98) was used to pull the paraphrased segments of data together into a number of more meaningful themes. Glaser (1992:120) refers to creating a system of grounding these patterns in the data. This required constant comparison of the learners' responses and codes within and across age groups, and further checking these patterns for their core relevance. Beginning with the data for the 6-8 year-olds, the task was accomplished by jotting down the codes in the text and also writing notes as the codes emerged. The procedure was repeated with the data from the other two age groups until there were three sets of themes from three sets of data.

These three sets of themes were compared with each other to determine any similarities or differences. Common meanings from both the categories of descriptions from the drawings and the interview data were further compared and grouped to represent a collective under-

standing of the concept of death. The responses specific to the five components of death were grouped together for each learner according to the pre-selected themes, and the scoring thereof was based on Smilansky's (1987:421) scoring procedure.

Validity and Reliability

Smilansky (1987:56) examined the construct validity of the standardised questionnaire by using factor analysis. The four factors were a) irreversibility in human and animal death, b) finality in human and animal death, c) causality in human and animal death, and d) inevitability (including old age) of human and animal death. The results of the analysis indicated that the questionnaire examines one general characteristic, namely conceptualisation of death. The coefficients of congruence for the four factors were .962, .960, .860 and .963 (Smilansky, 1987:56).

The criterion related validity was examined by means of the correlation between the children's scores and a) their IQ (intelligence quotient) scores and b) their age. Correlation between conceptualisation of death and IQ showed a significant Pearson correlation of .43 (P .001). A correlation of .56 (.001) was found between the children's scores on the questionnaire and their age. The reliability of the questionnaire was examined by means of test-retest reliability and inter-item reliability. The coefficient of correlation for the test-retest scores was 0.84. For inter-item reliability Kronbach Alpha was used to obtain a correlation of 0.77.

Triangulation is considered to enhance reliability and validity in studies using a qualitative framework (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:19; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:42; Lincoln & Guba, 1985:85). It forces the observer to combine multiple data sources, research methods, and theoretical schemes in the inspection and analysis of behavioural specimens (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:45). Triangulation should then be seen as the best way to elicit various constructions of reality that exist within the context of the study. The overlap methods used in this study represent a form of triangulation. This allowed the researcher to view the drawings as one source of information and the interviews as another source for checking the meanings assigned to those drawings. In the process of gathering the data, consistency of responses across techniques was noted to further increase dependability of the study.

FINDINGS

The development in the understanding of the concept of death was arranged in the following themes:

Categories of description expressed in the drawings

From the phenomenographic method used in the analysis, nine categories of illustration emerged:

Personification
With the exception of two boys, all the learners in the 6-8 year group represented death as being a dead person. The two older groups revealed more similarities than differences with the younger group. In other words, death still retained its human form.

Method of achieving death
The groups revealed common themes, including accidents, sickness, old age, and AIDS. Suicide and murder were perceived as less common agents of death, as indicated among the two older groups. With dogs, the agent of death was defined as a man beating the animal to death, or it being killed by another dog. Some natural causes were also indicated.

Choice of colours
A variety of colours were used in all the drawings. The girls preferred mixed colours, while the boys preferred not to mix colours.

Physical features
All the groups showed the relevance of closed eyes. The absence of eyebrows was also revealed. Among the two younger groups, only two boys depicted clothing. The 13-16 year-olds drew figures that no longer resembled sticklike structures, revealing flesh and clothing.

Gender
With the 6-8 year-olds, girls depicted the dead person to be female, whereas most boys depicted both sexes, with a few showing undefined gender features. For the older groups, the gender of the dead was specified by most.

Age

In the younger group, human forms were undefined regarding age. The older groups tended to differentiate in most cases.

Positioning of the dead

All the groups revealed attempts at representing the dead figure as lying down. The younger group admitted that it was difficult to draw a person in such a position.

Rituals

The two younger groups were aware that the dead are placed in some kind of box, and buried in a hole or grave. The 13-16 year-olds showed more concern for what happens to the dead, compared to the younger learners. They also revealed more clarity regarding the function of the mortuary. Dead dogs are seen as being thrown away in the field.

Life symbols

Compared to the younger groups, the 13-16 year-olds showed a variety of connections between life and death through the use of symbols, including mourners, living animals, and trees.

Themes on definitions of death

In response to the question "What is death?", five major themes emerged: a) death as a dead person, b) death as involving an action – to be dead, c) death as a funeral, d) death associated with violence, and e) death as a spiritual continuation of after death existence. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that death is most frequently regarded as a result of violence and spiritual continuation (Morin & Welsh, 1996:4). The older group defined death as different from being dead. The former is a causal agent, which brings about the latter – death does not die (Lawuyi & Olupona, 1988:11).

What happens to people/dogs when they are dead?

The learners' interpretation of the question was uniform, and concerned the procedure associated with death. Procedures included burials, funerals, washing the body, lowering the box into a grave, and the presence of mourners. The older group included more detail in their explanation than the two younger groups.

These narrations contradict results of previous research on this question (Morin & Welsh, 1996:4). Previous research found that the children responded by describing not only the procedure of funeralisation, but also the process of decomposition of the body and the departure of the soul to heaven. These differences may highlight the importance of cultural factors. The results also demonstrated the lack of task specificity referred to by Speece and Brent (1984:1680) both in the present and the previous study. The question is a general one, which does not require the children to comment on any specific factor.

With regard to dogs, all learners seemed to agree that the procedure to follow when a dog dies is to throw it away. They did not know the reason for this procedure. One 14 year-old criticised this practised custom. This confirms past research stating that children at the formal operational stage are capable of questioning social customs (Gordon & Klass, 1979:53).

Understanding of the specific components of death

Irreversibility

The findings show that the younger learners were quite limited in terms of what their cognitive schemata would be able to accommodate. This confirms Piaget's presumption. The 9-12 year-olds were able to fully understand the concept of irreversibility as it relates to animal death. However, they were less able to comprehend the concept relating to human death. This contradicts past research suggesting that by age seven, children understand most of the components including irreversibility (Brent, Speece, Lin, Dong & Yang, 1996:81; Kenyon, 2001:89; Speece & Brent, 1992:227; Vianello & Lucamante, 1988:312).

Finality

No learners between the age of six and eight years understood the concept of finality. Four learners aged 9-12 years understood the concept. This supports the findings of Childers and Wimmer (1971:1300), who observed that the age of nine is the turning point for understanding the finality of death.

Causality

The majority of learners focused on external physical causes of death, such as stabbing, gunshots, and ac-

cidents, as well as internal explanations, such as sickness and old age.

Inevitability

The younger learners encountered difficulties in understanding this concept. This confirms the findings of Wass and Corr (1984:87). Learners between the ages of 10-16 were able to comprehend the inevitability of death for both animals and humans.

Old age

The 6-8 year-olds only had an understanding of the concept as it relates to human death. Smilansky (1987:120) suggests that the reason for this may relate to the process of ageing being more visible in humans than it is in animals. The older groups showed a full understanding of old age.

DISCUSSION

Learners demonstrated differences in the understanding of death, and a difference in the pattern of component acquisition depending on the referent object. This confirms conclusions by Lazar and Torney-Purta (1991:1331), who found that the pattern of component acquisition appears to be different for animals and humans. Even though the gap between the responses given for human and animal death were narrower among the 6-8 year-olds, the overall conceptualisation and clarification of the components of human death was better than that for animal death. The reversal was true for the 9-12 year-olds, where the level of conceptualisation of animal death was more advanced than that of human death.

Observations were made regarding the age gap in the level of conceptualising death. This confirms results from past studies indicating that age is a significant predictor of the concept of death (Candy-Gibbs, Sharp & Petrun, 1984:345; Mahon, Goldberg & Washington, 1999:57). However, contrary to Smilansky's (1987:120) results, the present study found that learners first conceptualised old age, inevitability, and then irreversibility, followed by finality and causality.

Gender differences were noted in the explanations of the causes of death. Boys more often cited violent causes, while girls cited sickness and car accidents. Kenyon (2001:88) examined the effects of gender on children's death concepts, and found that differences exist only in the explanations that boys and girls provide.

Learners at the concrete-operational and formal-operational levels demonstrated the use of their newly acquired reciprocity skills through expressing the permanence of death, although some had never been directly in contact with death. Irreversibility of death may be difficult to comprehend when adults tend to use symbolic expressions in their language, such as identifying death with a sleep like state ("akafanga, ulele"). This might cause the child to associate death with waking up again.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

All learners proceeded from a stage where they gave a fragmented picture of the procedure followed when death occurred, to a stage where spontaneous responses were provided. There seems to be a need to understand psychological processes as always grounded in particular socio-historical contexts (Case, 1991:21). Within this framework, development of concepts like death can be understood as constituted by cultural meanings and practices, and by interactions with different cultural artefacts, rather than being formed independent of culture.

Although the learners seemed to have mastered the proper use of everyday concepts of death, these were mostly still lacking in concrete, personal knowledge. These are concepts that have been acquired outside of the context of explicit instruction. Veer and Valsiner (1991:54) state that concepts like these are mostly taken from adults, but are never introduced to children in a systematic fashion.

Vygotsky argues that symbolic expressions in learners' responses reflect both cultural knowledge and the characteristics of the child's mind (Veer & Valsiner, 1991:62). This may explain the observation that questions regarding the original scripts were initiated. One has to know the children's everyday thinking and use of concepts in order to determine the baseline in gauging their understanding of concepts like death. It seems crucial to consider the impact of cultural processes as both necessary and sufficient conditions for cognitive development. This study confirms Case's (1991:21)

emphasis on the context within which children grow, and in which development should be understood. The implication is that learners' responses are a function of the way in which language about death is modelled by culture in order for children to successfully manipulate information presented by those around them. Difficulties arise when children are denied access to certain areas surrounding death, but are exposed to the atmosphere related to it. Parents do not attempt to clarify the myth surrounding the atmosphere; whereby the blanket of silence may lead to confusion and anxiety.

The assumption that children are incapable of comprehending death-talk is unjustifiable. Children experience death as a life crisis in the same way as parents. Webb (1993:13) suggests, "grief does not focus on one's ability to understand, but instead upon one's ability to feel". Society is required to move from a situation where children's environment is constrained to a situation where a set of activities is in place to promote the direction of growth and development.

Parents' efforts to promote the development of their children's understanding must be based on two things: a) an understanding of what children already know, and b) what parents think children can learn in order to accomplish higher levels of understanding (with parental assistance). However, with the silence surrounding death, parents will never know their children's knowledge, and therefore the latter becomes a distant reality.

CONCLUSION

The present study is not exempt from the methodological problems associated with research on children's conceptions of death. However, its strength lies in the uniqueness of the methodology used, by combining non-standardised measures and standardised measures to test the concept of death. The focus on the components of death further allowed learners to engage themselves in the construction of meanings they assigned to the specific components as these related to their drawings. The significance of the methodology relates to the linguistically complex nature of interviewing children, particularly about an abstract concept such as death.

The child's knowledge about the cultural meanings embedded in death-related activities can gradually be acquired through observing and participating in the practices involved. Cultural practices greatly affect the development of the conceptualisation of death, and therefore variation in the development and age of acquisition of the components should be viewed as a function of the particular context in which learners are initially exposed to death.

Children's social scripts are determined by their working memory capacity. Children think about death in terms of scripted events, or observed cultural practices regarding death-related behaviour, that have accumulated in memory. Information is integrated in terms of observed death-related behaviours using social scripts already in their repertoire as frames of reference in order to deal with the situation.

The concept of death is not a purely cognitive construct. Its development is strongly affected by other factors depending on the context within which such development occurs. Future research should therefore continue to examine the impact of different environmental factors on children's conceptions of death. Further research should possibly include additional constructs, such as emotional factors that play a role in children's understanding of death, and how the context contributes to this development.

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