THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF DEATH

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ABSTRACT: Two people in distress over the death of a parent converse with each other about the loss. Death must convey some meaning. The attempt at creating such meaning appears to be a function of the comfort to be derived to the survivors. To the extent that death is seen as transition to some other form of further existence, e.g., to some place of tranquility, the survivors remain at peace. That vision, however, presents considerable difficulties since it demands some form of contact with the deceased. In the absence of such contact, doubts remain and the survivors suffer from a sense of abandonment and apathy due to the lack of meaning.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are mortal. Yet despite this very obvious fact humans have great difficulty visualizing death. This lack of cognizance may be partially due to avoidance. But, as we shall observe, there are additional factors involved. The embodiment of death requires some form of discourse about it. That is, the realization of death requires that some form of meaning be attached to it. Otherwise it leaves a void, a 'nothingsness', with lasting consequences. In view of the profound trauma attached to death, especially that of a significant other, people need to relate to others to attain some sense of meaning following the death. Depending on the meaning attached to the death, some sort of 'closure' may be achieved. If death is seen as merely a transformation from one form of existence to another, its acceptance is more easily accommodated. If, on the other hand, death is construed as the 'great unknown', people suffer a deep sense of uncertainty that leaves them in an existential vacuum.

The present paper reports on two persons who have experienced a parental death due to cancer. These two participants, the student-
researcher and a student-participant, engage in an open and revealing dialogue with each other. One participant, Maria, is 41 years old and is in the process of obtaining a BA degree in psychology. The student-researcher, Aida, is 28 years old and is also in the process of obtaining a degree in psychology. Maria’s father died two months ago at the age of eighty-three, while Aida’s mother died almost six years ago, at the age of forty-five.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the two participants construe their parental deaths. Of particular interest is the relationship between their construction of death and their subsequent adjustment to the absence of their parent. If death is seen as transcendental, transcending the ordinary, mundane life into another form of existence, acceptance is made easier than if it is judged to be non-transcendental, i.e., as something so final that it totally terminates the person’s life. Even though the two participants initially hold these different views about the finality of death, at the end of their discourse both express their painful uncertainty about it. They arrive at a consensus about death as something mysterious. The stages that the bereaved person goes through, i.e., denial, numbing, anger, mourning, and even death itself are agreed to be an inevitable phenomenon to be faced by everyone. Nevertheless, facing the grim reality of it is not the same experience for everyone. As will be seen, their construction of the reality of death is at least partially based on the comfort they try to derive from the construction, a comfort that is not easily obtained due to the great uncertainty.

The discursive approach in the present analysis is based on the proposition that two or more persons experiencing a significant event in their lives such as the death of a parent will turn towards each other to make sense of such a catastrophe. In their conversation they may make various factual assertions about death as well as cite warrants for their assertions. The combination of factual statements and the warrants for the statements are referred to as evidentials (Rettig, 1993). These evidentials constitute the basis for their construal of death.

THE DISCOURSE

Aida: “How has your father’s death changed your feelings about death?”
Maria: “It’s hard to . . . um . . . I don’t know maybe because it’s so new that . . . I remember initially in the first few days . . . first is the