

Fieldwork Project on:

Death and Dying



Cultural Anthropology 200
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This fieldwork study is an examination of death and dying as perceived by people in their late 40's up to 100 years of age. Topics covered include basic beliefs and ideas on heaven and hell, life after death, fears, and preparing to die.

Since the topic is very broad, we looked at differences and similarities of middle age and the elderly as a fair approach on how the viewpoints of younger people may change in the future.

Two main ethnographic techniques were utilized in the study: participant observation and personal interviews. Being able to observe the informants in their natural environment was ideal in getting a more accurate account of their emotions, values, physical character, and so forth. Taking notes on each visit or writing them down as soon as possible in a notebook was very helpful in recording impressions and details. Using this method was effective in getting an emic view on what the informants are really like, without outside interferences. Personal interviews offered the ability to get background information on the informants and their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs. Using set or similar questions for the informants was helpful in making comparisons.

Age was one discriminating requirements of informants. There is a large selection available, mostly through referral from relatives or acquaintances. Elderly informant's, were contacted in care home settings or independent living. From the middle-aged group we included in our paper are Dina forty-two, Ken thirty-nine, Cindy thirty-eight, Don forty, Jerry thirty-five, Betty thirty, Anna forty-five, Russ forty-five, Fred forty-nine, Mary forty-three, Jeanne forty-five and Ben who is thirty-eight. From the elderly group their ages will be kept confidential. From the elderly group we have Lorn, Dorothy, George, Jay, Abraham, Lillian, Will and Amelia.

Dina and Anna from the middle-aged group and Lorn from the elderly group all had similar beliefs that heaven is a beautiful place and everything is white and pure. Angels are everywhere and music is always playing. Hell on the other hand is a hot, fiery inferno where people are in agony and being tortured for their sins. Heaven they believe is a lot harder to get into, but it's worth it if you plan on staying there for eternity. Ken on the other hand had a different opinion. He doesn't believe in God so that means he doesn't believe in a heaven and hell.

Cindy, Don, Ken and Jerry don't believe in god or a higher power and that death was the end. Don and Ken, were raised in a house that believed in science rather than scripture. Don and Ken's parents also were brought up atheist and they believe this is where they developed such a strong belief in science over scripture. As teenagers they told of how their feelings and views upset friends and adults they had encountered. They both feel like they are constantly having to defend their beliefs and have to share with others how they feel because the ones who believe in Christ are being lied to. Cindy and Jerry were raised in catholic homes and told of their stories from their childhood and how they would be forced to go to church and Cindy even attended a Private Catholic school. As they became older they could not see how there could be a God with all the evidence that points to evolution. Cindy and Jerry believe if there was a God why would he allow his children to suffer the way they do? This is evidence to her that there is no God and never will be. All four of these people form the middle-aged group believe that when they die they will go into a unconscious sleep. This stems from their basic beliefs that there is no God.

Most of our informants think about death but Betty and Bob were the only two that don't. Betty thinks it isn't going to happen soon and that there is just no time to even think about it with their busy lives. They figure because they are healthy and never had much health problems the chances of them dying are slim. They both agree that health has nothing to do with you dying necessarily, because even the people who are as healthy as a horse can drop and die without any warning signs. From the elderly group all of the informants think about death especially the ones who have already lost their significant other. All of the informants said they want to die soon. For example Will just recently lost his wife who was staying the care home with him. He who was so dependant on her for his needs can't wait for the day to die and be re-united with his wife. On the other hand Abraham and Lillian have been married for over sixty years, are rather healthy and aren't afraid of death

The people interviewed with Christian backgrounds believe death is a sacred thing and that it is wanted because they will be in heaven with God and reunited with their deceased family members. Dina, Anna and Russ all can't wait to see their loved ones who passed away and also to see what God looks like. All three of these people said

they are devoted Christians who attend church regularly, and have always grown up in the church. From the elderly group Jay who already had many near death experiences says he just wants it to be over with. He comes from a Christian background and believes that he will see his family again. Jay wants to see his wife again so is very anxious to die and be reunited.

The middle-aged group had similar worries. They worry about what will happen to their loved ones and friends when they pass away. Dina for example feels that she doesn't want to leave this earth until she knows that her two daughters and grandchildren are going to be taken care of. They also worry about the way they will die and if it will be painful. From the elderly group Amelia worries more about what will happen to her when she dies because she doesn't know what to expect. Some from the elderly group don't even worry at all. For example Lorn who has no family just can't wait to get the pain over with and has no one to really worry about.

A lot of people think about death but, do not have plans or plots for dying. Most people acknowledge that death is coming but, three out of the fifteen people interviewed from the middle-aged group said they did not have a written will but have intended to have one drawn up before but just never got to it. These three people said they never really thought about a living will until the whole Terri Schiavo case. Fred said that when the Schiavo case first started to be talked about in the media, he told his wife and two daughters that he did not want to burden them with a decision like whether or not to keep him on life support. Fred told them that if his mind went he no longer wanted to be kept alive. Still Fred wants to get a living will just so that the family doesn't ever have to make that decision; it's just with everything that comes up. While saying these things, he showed a great deal of sadness and cared deeply for his family. From the elderly group Dorothy has everything taken care of. Since her husband died twenty years ago she had to get a power of attorney and has a representative of hospice who makes sure all Dorothy's health wishes are carried out. She wants to be cremated and has all of her bills taken care of. Her will states where everything goes, so that none of her family members has to fight over who gets what.

Mary, Jeanne and believe in reincarnation. The definition of reincarnation is Rebirth of the soul in another body or a reappearance or revitalization in another form; a

new embodiment. Mary and Jeanne believe that when you die, depending on how you live, will determine what you will come back as. For example, Mary said that her aunty loves animals and when she would see Mary squash a cockroach, she would tell Mary that she will come back as a cockroach. Mary thinks this was a bit extreme but believes that if you are good here on earth you will come back as something good, and if you are bad you will come back as something bad like an insect. Ben on the other hand, believes that everyone comes back as another human being until they have completed their life's mission which is doing good and completing unfinished business. .

A person's religious background is a major factor in how they view death and the afterlife. There are both similarities and differences between the middle-aged and elderly groups. This fieldwork project has revealed many interesting things about how death is perceived and how little is known or how little it is discussed. One tends to ponder more about death when dying, or when the moment feels closer. Since no one really knows about death, there is much uncertainty. This leads to anxiety, confusion, or even an added faith or hope. Like a child afraid of the dark because of his or her ignorance to why it is dark, so it is us with death and dying. If there is a way to understand death better, like asking questions or discussing the matter more openly with others, that may eliminate the fear of it.