

Changes in Spirituality as Reported By Death-Workshop Attendees

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ABSTRACT

The Life, Death, and Transition Workshop conducted by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is an intensive, five-day, death-awareness experience. To determine what changes, if any, it produces, 244 persons from 13 workshops were asked to participate in a survey to evaluate change in spirituality. To assess this, the Alexander Spirituality Change Survey was constructed, tested, and found to have moderately high reliability, Coefficient Alpha .757. Significant positive change in spirituality by attendees was reported and appeared to be sustained over time.

INTRODUCTION

The need for expanded awareness in the field of death education has been widely acknowledged over the past decade. In response to that demand, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross designed, developed, and conducted a workshop titled, "Life, Death, and Transition." The workshop illuminated and personalized the death process and appeared to have a profound emotional impact on many of the attendees.

As death education has expanded, so have the attitudinal-change studies associated with it. Few studies, however, have focused on the spiritual aspects of death education. Since much of the attitudinal change in attendees of the Life, Death, and Transition workshops seemed to be spiritual, and since no previous attempt had been made to collect or analyze data concerning this change, this study was undertaken.

The present seminar configuration was adopted in June, 1977, after Kubler-Ross began to work with her new partners. It provided a

method for externalization of negative feelings in a safe place, where participants shared their grief, pain, and fears. Kubler-Ross hypothesized that before new thanatological material could be accepted, psychologically unresolved issues that exacerbate the emotional turmoil frequently associated with death must be addressed. Few attendees seemed untouched when confronted with personal accounts of debilitating illnesses or impending death. Extreme anger, frustration, guilt, and sorrow were frequently displayed in these sessions.

Of crucial import was the presentation of material regarding NDEs similar to those popularized by Moody (1975). In addition, first-hand accounts of other documented mystical experiences that might affect the spirituality of the attendee were presented.

The presence of Kubler-Ross herself, however, was probably what distinguished the Life, Death, and Transition workshops from others of a similar nature. As a result of Kubler-Ross's previous work in the field, many people attending the workshops probably had certain preconceived ideas concerning their content. Many professionals anticipated the cognitive aspects of thanatology. The patients and their families were more prepared to explore the affective domain and frequently had expectations about meeting Kubler-Ross. Few, if any, including clergy, came overtly expecting spiritual change. In any case, the effect of Kubler-Ross's personality must be taken into account when evaluating the data below.

More than one thousand people attended the workshops between June, 1977, and February, 1979. Attendance was voluntary, and selection was normally based on chronological application. Special consideration was given to terminal patients, parents of children diagnosed as terminal, and octogenarians. The largest professional representation was from the field of medicine, including counselors. Clergy also accounted for a significant number of attendees.

METHOD

To measure changes in spirituality, it was necessary to develop and test a new instrument, the Alexander Spirituality Change Survey (ASCS). This instrument included two methods of data collection. The first section contained open-ended questions concerning pre- and post-workshop attitudes toward life, death, religiousness/spirituality, self, others, values, and the workshop itself. The second section was a pre- and post-workshop evaluation of change demonstrated on eleven semantic differential items.

The semantic differential segment was constructed by identifying descriptors connoting qualities of high and low spirituality. A jury of nine clergy and six lay persons of widely varying backgrounds identified the descriptors used and then paired the bipolar adjectives. The polarity for presentation in the ASCS was randomly selected. The final ordering was as follows:

1. Patient – Impatient
2. Forgiving – Unforgiving
3. Warm – Cold
4. Miserly/Greedy – Giving/Charitable
5. Accepting – Judgmental
6. Disbelieving – Believing
7. Prejudiced – Tolerant
8. Hopeful – Hopeless
9. Meditative/Prayerful – Noncontemplative
10. Concerned/Caring – Unconcerned
11. Turbulent – Peaceful

The measurement was conducted in two ways. Participants of two workshops, December, 1978, and January, 1979, were asked to complete pre- and post-workshop instruments. That group, Group A, N=87, was evaluated separately from Group B, N=157, which received the mailed version of the instrument. The participants from Group B were randomly selected from attendance rosters of workshops conducted between June, 1977, and October, 1978. The only difference was that the mailed version required the individual to recreate subjectively his pre-workshop attitudes. Demographically, groups demonstrated a high degree of homogeneity in all areas assessed.

The conversion of responses from open-ended questions to a quantifiable system required that numerical values be assigned to each response. These values were assigned by five jurors, who were selected on the basis of academic qualifications, experience, and diversity of backgrounds.

The jurors were instructed to evaluate each response and assign it a numerical value based on change in spirituality. The values ranged from 1, indicating a strongly negative change, through 3, indicating a neutral or no change, to 5, indicating a strongly positive change.

The application of Coefficient Alpha to the test scores of Group A demonstrated an internal reliability of 0.757, an acceptable level of internal consistency for our purposes.

In addition to the application of the ASCS, 20 subjects were randomly selected from Groups A and B for participation in a telephone survey. Each person was interviewed following the outline of

the open-ended questions contained in the ASCS. The purpose of the telephone survey was to corroborate the data gathered previously. Eight subjects were contacted from Group A and twelve from Group B. Their oral responses were evaluated and then cross referenced with their written responses. This was made possible by a discrete identification system used with the instrument. Once data collection was completed, the system was destroyed to insure anonymity.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data revealed that significant positive change did occur in both Group A and Group B. This is best demonstrated by the responses to the open-ended questions. Tables 1 and 2 reflect the frequency distribution of responses to each item by each subject. On these tables 3.0 represents no change, while values above and below 3.0 represent a tendency toward positive and negative change, respectively. The cumulative figures for Group A showed 465 of 564 responses, or 82 percent, indicating positive change. Group B reflected similar results, with 857 of 1,049 responses, or again 82 percent, judged as indicating positive change. Since a total change score was not derived for each subject, we cannot say with certainty the number of predominantly negative individuals. Of the 87 subjects in Group A and 157 in Group B, none was judged to have provided all negative responses.

Responses to the semantic differential items also indicated positive change. Presented in Table 3 are the data representing the mean change for each item for both groups.

A positive shift in the group mean was recorded for every item in both groups based on an eleven-point scale. It should be noted that Group B, the respondents to the mailed survey, reflected significantly higher change on all items.

The magnitude of the reported change was quite high. The Z scores for all open-ended items in both groups exceeded 3.70, which was indicative of a probability less than .0001. For Group B semantic differential responses, the $Z \geq 3.70$ criterion was again exceeded in all cases. Group A semantic differential responses demonstrated a probability of .0001 for five items, .05 for five items, and failed to reach significance on only one item, prayerful — noncontemplative.

The results of the telephone survey supported the statistical data. Eighteen of those called were judged positive in change in their spirituality. From Group B one subject recorded a mixed reaction, and one felt the workshop had been a negative experience and stated

TABLE 1
Frequency Distribution for Responses
to Open-Ended Items, Group A

Numerical Value of Response	Death	Life	Spirituality	Self	Others	Values	Workshop	Total	Percent
1.0								0	0.
1.2	1			1	1			3	.5
1.4								0	0.
1.6							1	1	.2
1.8		1		1			2	4	.7
2.0	1							1	.2
2.2							1	1	.2
2.4								0	0.
2.6		1					2	3	.5
2.8	1	6		2	1			10	1.8
3.0	17	17	17	0	8	14	3	76	13.5
3.2	7	12	5	4	0	4	2	34	6.0
3.4	9	7	4	2	2	5	3	32	5.8
3.6	4	5	10	3	2	3	1	28	5.0
3.8	7	8	14	2	4	10	3	48	8.5
4.0	10	9	20	38	46	26	7	156	27.7
4.2	3	6	8	12	8	9	3	49	8.7
4.4	6	4	1	8	3	2	10	34	6.0
4.6	8	1	0	5	5	1	11	31	5.5
4.8	4	1	1	2	1	2	16	27	4.8
5.0	4	2	4	1	1	1	13	26	4.6
Total	82	80	84	81	82	77	78	564	

3.0 = no change
 < 3.0 indicates negative change
 > 3.0 indicates positive change

TABLE 2
 Frequency Distribution for Responses
 to Open-Ended Items, Group B

Numerical Value of Response	Death	Life	Spirit	Self	Other	Values	Workshop	Total	Percent
1.0									
1.2							1	1	0.1
1.4							1	1	0.1
1.6							1	1	0.1
1.8							0	0	0.0
2.0			3				5	8	.8
2.2			0	1			4	5	.5
2.4			0	0	1		1	2	.2
2.6	2		0	3	0		1	6	.6
2.8	2	1	1	2	0	2	2	10	.9
3.0	43	34	32	7	10	26	6	158	15.0
3.2	4	13	7	3	3	5	6	41	3.9
3.4	6	7	7	6	1	4	1	32	3.0
3.6	4	7	7	6	7	6	3	40	3.8
3.8	13	16	11	6	15	16	10	87	8.3
4.0	12	10	45	44	42	17	10	180	17.2
4.2	19	20	17	38	49	36	13	192	18.3
4.4	13	17	8	19	15	11	9	92	8.8
4.6	18	10	4	9	4	8	18	71	6.8
4.8	14	14	7	5	3	8	28	79	7.5
5.0	4	4	4	0	1	5	25	43	4.1
Total	154	153	153	149	151	144	145	1049	

3.0 = no change

<3.0 indicates negative change

>3.0 indicates positive change

TABLE 3
Mean Change for Semantic Differential
Items, Group A and B

	Patient/ Impatient	Forgiving/ Unforgiving	Warm/Cold	Giving/ Greedy	Accepting/ Judgmental	Believing/ Disbelieving
Gp A	.675	1.000	.313	.675	1.177	1.113
Gp B	1.794	1.534	1.388	1.058	2.029	1.735

	Tolerant/ Prejudiced	Hopeful/ Hopeless	Prayerful/ Noncontem- plative	Concerned/ Unconcerned	Peaceful/ Turbulent	Total
Gp A	.438	.638	.013	.300	1.069	.672
Gp B	1.087	2.137	1.588	1.178	2.320	1.623

0 = no change

$\bar{x} > 0$ = positive change

that the life after death material was "the work of the devil." These responses were not reviewed or given numerical values. Subjectively, however, it appeared the telephone respondents expressed an even higher magnitude of positive change than they indicated on the ASCS. Examples of the oral responses are in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Sample of Responses to Telephone Survey

Sample Positive Reactions:

A deepening experience -- it was confirmation of what I've heard before.

I now know the connection between mind and spirit.

It extended my own limits to accept people as they are.

Spiritually I'm more intensified — being drawn more toward involvement with others.

I found God at the workshop — I had given up on religion despite a strict upbringing (a terminal patient, male, twenty years old).

My beliefs were reinforced tremendously. It allowed me to help my mother die — I was literally able to talk her through death.

It was the biggest revelation of my life — like a metamorphosis.

It helped me reach a spiritual side of myself.

Am more spiritual, but not toward organized religion.

My belief in the goodness of people was reaffirmed — people do care.

Made me better equipped to share belief (Catholic priest).

Sample Mixed Reaction:

The workshop is super — the key is acceptance by others. I don't believe the stuff about guides.

Sample Negative Reaction:

The spirits working with Kubler-Ross are not good. She has good intentions but is leading people astray. I'm not sorry I went. The awareness of strong adverse forces strengthened my own belief.

A one-way analysis of variance based on age, sex, race, education, profession, religion, and recent experience with death revealed no significant differences. A possible correlation between poor health and increased positive change in spirituality, however, was suggested in the Group B semantic differential responses, reaching a significance level of .05 for 9 of 11 items. Group A did not report the same degree of change.

DISCUSSION

Although positive change in spirituality was reported in both groups, great care must be taken in the evaluation of these data. Certainly such factors as demand characteristics (Orne, 1962), for example, cannot be conclusively ruled out in a study of this kind. Also, the extent to which the reported effects hinge on the personal presence of Kubler-Ross cannot be evaluated from the present design.

An attempt was made, however, to determine if a relationship existed between the time since attendance at the workshop and the amount of change reported. No correlation was found.

This attempt to evaluate changes in spirituality represents an innovative departure from the norm of psychometric measurement. It is recognized of course that a domain as subjective as spirituality is

fraught with controversy and problems of definition. Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest that changes in spirituality do occur in response to Life, Death, and Transition workshops. We recommend that further studies be conducted in the future to explore more fully the parameters of change experienced in death-awareness workshops. As Kavanaugh (1977) has suggested, the time is right for thanatology to bring religion and psychology together.

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