UNCONSCIOUS AFFECTIVE CONCERN AND THE FEAR OF DEATH: A COMPARISON OF MORTUARY AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

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This study attempted to ascertain the differences between mortuary and college students in terms of unconscious affective concern with death and the conscious fear of death.

Twenty male mortuary students and twenty male college students participated in the study. Each subject was given a Word Association Test and a Death Anxiety Scale. The Word Association Test was constructed for the purposes of this study on the logic that words associated with death and designated as affect-laden would elicit a longer response time than words designated as basal and not related to the affect-laden words. The Death Anxiety Scale has been shown to be a reliable and valid instrument for measuring the fear of death.

It was predicted that mortuary students would express less fear of death as measured by the DAS and show less unconscious affective concern (UAC) as measured by response time on the WAT. Mean scores on the DAS for the mortuary and college students were 4.70 and 5.95, respectively, but the difference was non-significant. Mean response times to words associated with death for the mortuary and college groups were 2.28 and 2.30, respectively. Although these means differed
significantly from their respective basal means of 1.81 and 1.86, they did not differ significantly from each other.

It was concluded that there were no significant differences between the two groups. Although the Word Association Test appears to distinguish between affect- and non-affect-laden words, it does not appear to be sophisticated enough to detect differences between the two groups.

It was recognized that variables such as age, religion, and normality of the subjects could have accounted for the non-significant results. However, it was also concluded that the non-significant differences could be accounted for in terms of the degree of repression and intellectualization exhibited by both groups.
UNCONSCIOUS AFFECTIVE CONCERN AND THE FEAR OF DEATH: A COMPARISON OF MORTUARY AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

By

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Denton, Texas
May, 1972
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Introduction

Death as a psychological variable has received much scientific attention in the past few years (Kastenbaum, 1965; Lester, 1967). Man has, for the most part, tended to deal with death and the thought of dying through religion, philosophy, biology, literature, and the arts, and there have been many theories concerning the fear of death. Wahl (1959) felt that the fear of death was realistic because someday man will cease to be, while Freud (1925) considered the fear of death to be derived from an unconscious wish for the death of others. Zilboorg (1943) felt that the extent to which one is preoccupied with the fear of death may determine its effect on other psychological processes, and Schilder (1942) felt that the fear of death was a fear of losing the possibility of pleasure.

Recently, empirical studies have revealed that on a conscious verbal level, people in Western culture do not seem to be seriously concerned with the thoughts of death (Lester, 1967). Caprio (1946) claimed, however, that death plays an important part in our lives at the unconscious level. This is evidenced by the many rituals associated with death, man's striving for immortality through procreation and fame, and the concern of the religions with the problem. Brickman (1968) views the current drug culture as an upsurge or return of a death instinct. Biegler (1957) claimed that there is an unconscious
awareness of death that is reacted to with anxiety, which may be repressed.

Probably the best explanation for the discrepancy between conscious and unconscious awareness of death lies in the methods used to obtain data. Most studies have used interviews, projective techniques, or questionnaires, which have yielded conflicting results. Perhaps with regard to death one does not always say what one feels, or what one is expected to say differs from what one feels.

Interview techniques have been loosely structured (Hackett and Weissman, 1965; Schilder, 1936), while others have been specific and straightforward (Bromberg and Schilder, 1933; Feifel, 1955). Neither the reliability nor the validity of these interview methods was reported.

Some researchers have used conventional projective instruments to measure the fear of death. Rhudick and Dibner (1961) administered the Thematic Apperception Test, McCully (1963) asked children to make up a story, and Faunce and Fulton (1958) utilized a sentence completion inventory. For the most part these studies reported clinical impressions and offered no description of criteria quantification, reliability, or validity.

Alexander, Colley, and Adlerstein (1957) studied the unconscious reaction to death in order to contrast this with the apparent conscious indifference. Response times and psychogalvanic responses were recorded for thirty-one male students to words in a word association
test. Their responses to words related to death were more emotional (that is, had a longer response time and larger psychogalvanic response) than to neutral words drawn from the general language. Christ (1961) found that death words elicited a longer latency in a group of elderly psychiatric patients. Thus, it appears that although a large number of people claim to be indifferent to thoughts of death, their autonomic systems are not.

That man is concerned about death need hardly be emphasized, as death is given much attention in our communicative and expressive media. Examples include such phrases as "the holiday death toll," and comic characterizations of the cold-hearted mortician. Funeral homes encourage prearrangement plans, and laymen calmly converse about the number of men killed in war. Death is inevitable; it will come to all men. Yet our understanding of death as a psychological variable has increased very little compared to the progress in other areas of psychology.

One explanation for this lack of progress could be the myriad of variables with which the researcher has had to deal. Differences in sex (Diggory & Rothman, 1961; Lowry, 1965; Middleton, 1936), occupation (Stacy & Markin, 1952), age (Nagy, 1948; Natterson & Knudson, 1960), education (Jeffers, Nichols, & Eisdorfer, 1961), and marital status (Swenson, 1961) have been examined and yielded conflicting results. Swenson (1961) found that age, sex, source of income,
occupation, and urban-rural location had no significant effect on death attitudes. Christ (1961) and Rhudick and Dibner (1961) found the amount of schooling or marital status had no effect on the fear of death.

Personality variables have also tended to influence research in the area of death. Sarnoff and Corwin (1959) found the anxiety associated with the fear of death to be correlated with castration fears, while Boyar (1964) claimed that anxiety from many sources can increase the fear of death. Templer (1970) constructed a scale for measuring death anxiety. He found that death anxiety as measured by his instrument was not a fixed entity but a state sensitive to environmental events and the impact of intimate interpersonal relationships (Templer, 1971).

Alexander and Adlerstein (1960) concluded that in religious students, death anxiety was much closer to consciousness, but religion did not dissipate death anxiety. Martin and Wrightsman (1965) found no association between the fear of death and religious attitudes, but those who participated more in religious activities had less fear.

The psychological literature is void of any research designed to examine those who deal with death every day, i.e., the mortician. The distinctive character of the mortician as he is known today is a consequence of a number of circumstances embedded in our country’s history. Undertaking as a career is more often determined by circumstances than by an unlimited selection from a variety of possibilities (Habenstein and Lamers, 1955). In indirect ways the mortician's
status among the citizenry has helped determine the character of modern funeral procedures. His business affects his standing in the community; particularly, the kind of social reaction accorded him (Bowman, 1959). The mortician as businessman must maintain an emotional distance from his commodity, death. The mortician's services are acceptable to the extent that society has provided a role for him to maintain. Morticians have not received the best publicity, as exemplified by Mitford's The American Way of Death (1963), motion pictures, and other media. Yet, psychologists and the psychological literature have neglected the mortician as an important variable in the study of death.

The present study is an attempt to examine the discrepancy between man's conscious and unconscious concern with death, and more specifically, to examine the differences between those who deal with death every day and the normal population. For the purposes of the present study the following definitions and abbreviations will be used.

1. **DAS.** This abbreviation refers to Templer's (1970) Death Anxiety Scale.

2. **Fear of death** is determined by the number of items answered in the keyed direction on the DAS. The higher the score, the greater is the conscious fear of death.

3. **WAT.** This abbreviation refers to a word association test
designed for the purpose of the present study.

4. **UAC.** This abbreviation refers to unconscious affective concern. It is determined by the response time per word on the WAT. The greater the response time, the greater is the UAC.

Several hypotheses were to be tested:

1. College students will express a significantly greater conscious concern with death than mortuary students as measured by the DAS.

2. Words designated as affect-laden will elicit a greater UAC than basal words among both college and mortuary students.

3. College students will express a significantly greater UAC with words associated with death than will mortuary students.

4. There will be no significant differences between sex, money, or death words for either mortuary or college students.

**Method**

**Subjects**

The subjects consisted of twenty male college students enrolled in a state university in Texas and twenty male mortuary students enrolled in a large mortuary school in Texas.

All mortuary students were volunteers. They were not informed of the purpose of the study, and were not known to have a history of any psychiatric illness. Mortuary students ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-eight years, with a mean age of 21.8 years.
College subjects were solicited from three freshman biology laboratories at a large state university in Texas. All subjects were volunteers. They were not informed of the purpose of the study, and were not known to have a history of any psychiatric illness. In addition, college subjects had never worked in a funeral home nor had a death in their immediate families within the past year. Subjects consisted of three freshmen, four sophomores, six juniors, five seniors, and two graduate students. They ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-three, with a mean age of 24.1 years. A cross section of major studies was represented, including economics, pre-law, pre-medical, psychology, biology, history, and government.

Instruments and Apparatus

The instruments used in this study were Templer's (1970) DAS, a WAT, a cassette tape recorder, and a Lafayette Stop Clock, Model 54014. The DAS has been shown to be a reliable and valid instrument for measuring the fear of death (Templer, 1970, 1971).

The WAT used in this study was constructed following the method of Alexander, Colley, and Adlerstein (1957). The original procedure was described by Jung (1918) and his associates, and later discussed by Rapaport, Gill, and Schafer (1968). The concepts chosen that should be affect-laden for the subjects were sex, money, and death. In order to establish a baseline against which to measure, the list also consisted of
basal or neutral words, that is, words with no apparent relationship to the affect words.

The WAT used consisted of thirty words. Some of the words have also appeared on other word association lists (Alexander et al., 1967; Rapaport et al., 1968). The WAT consisted of fifteen basal words, five sex-related words, five money-related words, and five death-related words (Appendix B). It should be pointed out that the basal words are by no means affect-free for all subjects. They are samples from language, and any word may have special meaning for any person; for this reason the basal words are broader in scope. For example, the psychological distance from "table" to "water" is broader than from "casket" to "burial," or from "lover" to "intercourse." The focus of the present study is whether the critical words are more affectively charged than the basal words and whether those who will deal with death every day react differently than those who will not.

**Procedure**

Each subject was told that he was helping to determine if a WAT was a reliable and valid instrument. A standard set of instructions was read, followed by an oral administration of the WAT. The experimenter was the same for all subjects. Each WAT was identified by number and recorded on a portable cassette recorder. Subjects were then asked to complete the DAS (See Appendix A). The time interval
between word presentation and subject response was recorded, using the Lafayette Stop Clock Model 54014. Means for each subject for each of the four word groups were computed. The present study did not attempt to analyze response words.

Subjects' scores on the DAS were computed by totaling those items answered in the keyed direction. A t test was used to determine if there was a significant difference between the two groups. Mean response times on the WAT were compared by use of a 2x4 analysis of variance with repeated measures. The level of significance was set at .05 for rejection of the null hypothesis.

Results

Analyses are presented for two sets of measurements: subjects' raw scores on the DAS and response times on the WAT. On the DAS the college group obtained a mean score of 5.95 and the mortuary group obtained a mean score of 4.70 (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortuary</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although these scores were in the direction predicted, the difference was not significant, as determined by a t test. With regard to the conscious report of the fear of death, there was no significant difference between the two groups, as measured by the DAS.

Mean response times for both groups are given in Table 2. Once again, means for the two groups were in the direction predicted. Differences were assessed by an analysis of variance technique and results are presented in Table 3. The F ratios indicated that the only significant difference occurred among word groups. This indicated

TABLE 2

MEAN RESPONSE TIMES IN SECONDS FOR EACH WORD GROUP ON THE WAT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Basal</th>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Money</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortuary</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that mortuary students did not respond in a significantly different manner from college students with regard to UAC with death.
TABLE 3
SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variation</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A (subject groups)</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects within groups</td>
<td>.6962</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (word groups)</td>
<td>11.60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>12.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B x subjects within groups</td>
<td>36.27</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at the .01 level

A Neuman-Keuls (Winer, 1962) test of significance revealed that there were no significant differences between death, sex, and money words (see Table 4).

The data suggest that on a conscious level, college subjects express a slightly greater fear of death, but that the difference could likely be the result of chance. On an unconscious level, words associated with death elicited a slightly longer response time among
TABLE 4
MEAN DIFFERENCES ON THE WAT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word group</th>
<th>Basal</th>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Money</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basal</td>
<td>. .</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.54*</td>
<td>.74*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>. .</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td></td>
<td>. .</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>. .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant at the .05 level.

college subjects, but once again the difference was not significant. For both groups, words designated as affect-laden elicited a greater UAC for both college and mortuary groups. And finally, there were no significant differences among the affect-laden word groups.

Discussion

The first hypothesis predicted that the college group would express a significantly greater fear of death than the mortuary group, as measured by the DAS. Although the scores obtained were in the direction predicted, they were not significantly different. There appears to be little or no difference between the two groups with regard to the expressed fear of death. This hypothesis was made on the assumption that the mortuary
subjects' familiarity with the various aspects of death (e.g., preparation of the body, the funeral service, management of the bereaved) would lessen the fear of death. The hypothesis was not confirmed.

The second hypothesis predicted that words designated as affect-laden would elicit a greater UAC for both groups. This hypothesis was confirmed, and supported the findings of previous studies (Alexander et al., 1957; Christ, 1961). A longer response time appears to be associated with the emotionality of a word.

The third hypothesis predicted that the college group would express a significantly greater UAC than the mortuary group. The group means were in the direction predicted but the difference was not significant. This hypothesis was made on the assumption that the mortuary groups' continual association with the various aspects of death would provide an appropriate channel for unconscious emotions, affects, strivings, and attitudes of the subjects (Paul, 1967). The hypothesis was not confirmed.

The fourth hypothesis predicted no significant differences for either group with regard to the three affect-laden categories. The hypothesis was confirmed, and supported the findings of previous studies (Alexander et al., 1957; Meissner, 1958). Both groups responded in the same general directions to words involving affect.

Several factors should be considered before any conclusions can be drawn from the present study. Freud (1925) felt that one does not carry a conscious fear of death as one would an everyday attitude about
life. Freud also felt that one does not like to consider his own death. The instructions given for all subjects completing the DAS were very explicit in this regard. They were to answer the items as they applied to them at the present time. There is a possibility that the subjects' replies were unrepresentative of their actual beliefs. Again, what one says may be different from what one feels.

The present study utilized a normal population in that no subject had a history of any psychiatric illness. Perhaps with regard to the fear of death in normal subjects, the amount of variability is so small as to be unmeasurable. Bromberg and Schilder (1933) felt that normal people display little fear of death on a conscious level. They, and others, have also felt that death anxiety is associated with certain syndromes of psychopathology (Bromberg and Schilder, 1936; Greenberg, 1964; Middleton, 1936; Schilder, 1936).

Another variable that was not controlled in the present study was that of religious preoccupation. In studies concerning death, investigators have had to deal with several levels of death awareness and several definitions of religiousness. The ambiguity of these variables has led to conflicting results and conclusions. Templer and Dotson (1970) found no significant relationship between DAS score and religiosity among college students. They felt that religion had quite a limited effect upon attitudes and behavior of most college students. Adlerstein (1958) felt that many religious persons may deny the reality of a physical
death by maintaining a belief in an after-life. The nonreligious person uses more repression, while the religious person is able to talk of death in a positive manner. Alleman (1964) found that college students saw death as temporally immediate, but emotionally remote. Intellectualization was the main defense against the fear. Perhaps this holds true for mortuary students as well. Their classroom approach, which places the act of death in terms of numbers and kinds, forces the student to intellectualize as a defense against his own emotions and feelings. This could possibly account for the nonsignificant differences found between the two groups on the DAS.

The intellectualization utilized to cope with the emotional aspect of death could also account for the nonsignificant differences between the two groups with regard to UAC. Although the present study did not concern itself with response words, mortuary subjects tended to respond to death words in terms of business and technical associations. For example, to the word embalm, mortuary subjects tended to reply with "fluid," "preserve," or "body." To the word funeral, they tended to respond with "home," "money," and "work." College subjects, on the other hand, tended to respond to the death-related words with the word "death." Perhaps with regard to associative disturbances on the WAT, the two groups differed not so much in quantity (time per response) but in quality (type of association which produced the response). In the mortuary group, perhaps associations,
conscious strivings, interests, and attitudes, and not unconscious affects and emotions, accounted for their responses.

The difference in mean age of the two groups could have been a confounding variable in the present study. Age tends to influence death attitudes until mental development is complete (Lester, 1967). Blake (1969) found that older people tend to use denial much more than younger people, and he felt that this factor operated in producing the finding that younger people reported more fear of death than older people. The age span in the present study was fifteen years, and this could have been the source of a large amount of variability.

The observations reported in this study confirm the findings of previous studies, that we respond to words related to death with greater emotional intensity (as indicated by response time) than to equivalent words drawn from our language. We do not, however, respond to death-related words with any greater emotional intensity than we would to any other affect-laden words. Finally, mortuary students' responses to affect-laden words do not differ significantly from a normal college student population. Because several factors could have contributed to no difference being found, one cannot assume that the hypotheses would not be confirmed under different conditions. However, neither the WAT designed for the purpose of the present study, nor the DAS appears to be sophisticated enough to detect any significant differences between mortuary and college subjects.
Further empirical research is recommended in the area of death and its meaning for man. The sheer inevitability of death for all men warrants its investigation as an important psychological variable.

Summary and Conclusions

This study attempted to ascertain the differences between mortuary and college students in terms of unconscious affective concern with death and the conscious fear of death.

Twenty male mortuary and twenty male college subjects were administered a Word Association Test and a Death Anxiety Scale. Words designated as affect-laden elicited a greater emotional response (as measured by time per response) than neutral or basal words. There were no significant differences between the two groups with regard to unconscious affective concern with death. Likewise, there were no significant differences between the two groups with regard to the expressed fear of death as measured by the Death Anxiety Scale.

Although variables such as age, religion, and normality of the population may have affected the results, it is concluded that there are no significant differences between mortuary students and college students with regard to the two instruments used in this study. It is further concluded that differences between the groups, however
slight, were a result of a qualitative degree of repression and intellectualization utilized by both groups to handle the emotionality of death. It was recommended that further empirical evidence be gathered in the area of death as a psychological variable.
Appendix A

Death Anxiety Scale

Instructions: Below are 15 statements. Please read each statement and answer whether it is true as applied to you or false as applied to you at the present time. Please answer all of the items by blackening the appropriate circle. Your responses will be held in strict confidence and used for the purpose of research only.

1. I am very much afraid to die. (T)*
2. The thought of death seldom enters my mind. (F)
3. It doesn't make me nervous when people talk about death. (F)
4. I dread to think about having to have an operation. (T)
5. I am not at all afraid to die. (F)
6. I am not particularly afraid of getting cancer. (F)
7. The thought of death never bothers me. (F)
8. I am often distressed by the way time flies so very rapidly. (T)
9. I fear dying a painful death. (T)
10. The subject of life after death troubles me greatly. (T)
11. I am really scared of having a heart attack. (T)
12. I often think about how short life really is. (T)
13. I shudder when I hear people talking about a WW-III. (T)
14. The sight of a dead body is horrifying to me. (T)
15. I feel that the future holds nothing for me to fear. (F)

*Keyed directions are given in parentheses.
Appendix B

Word Association Test

Oral instructions: You have volunteered to help determine the validity of a word association test. I am going to say a list of words, one at a time. As I say each word, you are to respond with the first word that comes to mind.

|   | Word       | Group
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>(B)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>(M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Table</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Income</td>
<td>(M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lamp</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Funeral</td>
<td>(D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Maiden</td>
<td>(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Brick</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cremate</td>
<td>(D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Weather</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Intercourse</td>
<td>(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Casket</td>
<td>(D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Bird</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Lover</td>
<td>(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Dollar</td>
<td>(M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Frame</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Embalm</td>
<td>(D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Nipple</td>
<td>(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Walk</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bills</td>
<td>(M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Insect</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Romance</td>
<td>(S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Hunger</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Burial</td>
<td>(D)</td>
</tr>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Sunrise</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>(M)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Word groups are shown in parentheses. B=Basal, D=Death, S=Sex, M=Money.*
References


