

# Perception Of The Concept Of Death Among Children, Young And Older People And The Comparison Of These Perceptions: A Qualitative Study

Hanife Akgül<sup>1</sup>, Sedef Ünsal Seydoğullari<sup>2</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Death is one of the most important concepts that make life meaningful and it is the inevitable end. From the moment we are born, we are one step closer to death with every passing second, and this creates the stage of consciousness that enables people to connect and make sense of life more tightly. Death, which means the definitive end of life, has been seen as an important event in all societies and in every period of life. The purpose of the current study is to determine and compare the perceptions of children, young people and older people about death through metaphors. The study is a qualitative research. A total of 192 people, 57 children, 63 young and 72 older people, determined on a voluntary basis constituted the sample of the study. A questionnaire form consisting of open-ended questions was used in the study. Descriptive analysis technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in the analysis of the data. It was tried to determine with which metaphors the participants would present their perceptions of death and the common characteristics of the metaphors that would emerge. In the evaluation of the data obtained, content analysis method was used in accordance with the qualitative research design. According to the research findings, 29 metaphors were produced by the children, 37 by the young people and 46 by the older people to express the concept of death. The children compared the concept of death most with old age, sadness, grave, accident, earth, sleep, ending, separation; the young people compared it most with beginning, extinction, exam, loneliness, longing, leaf, fear and the older people compared it most with migration, destiny, happiness, reunion, longing, salvation, bridge. The children predominantly expressed death with negative metaphors, the young people used lively metaphors drawn from life experiences while the older people often portrayed death with positive metaphors. The metaphors created by the children, young and older people were categorized into groups. The metaphors generated by individuals regarding the concept of death and the categories formed from these metaphors reveal how the concept of death is perceived..

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### Keywords:

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## INTRODUCTION

"To be or not to be". It seems that human beings are always in favour of "to be", that is, the aspect of living; whereas "not to be", which is death, is a reality that is rarely dwelled upon. The attitudes of people towards death, which is an inseparable fact of life, have been expressed in various ways in writing, verbally and behaviourally. The awareness of being on a journey towards death from the moment of birth sets humans apart from other living beings and profoundly influences them (Diggory & Rothman, 1961). Human beings can postpone, ignore, make the concept of death acceptable by rationalizing it and extend their life spans, but they cannot escape the inevitable end (Wahl, 1959). To be in life is to be in death as well (Bauman, 2000). "If our ultimate fate is death when we are born, do we begin to live or to die?" (Montaigne, 2011). Life and death are two parts of one whole. Death is the ultimate goal of life. Life is the path we follow to achieve this goal. Just as the purpose of life is death, death also has the purpose of completing (Jung, 1997). Death is the secret of life, its meaning and perhaps the answer to who we are.

The concept of death is a condition of worldly life with numerous philosophical, religious, social and biological dimensions that humans cannot experience but only seek to understand through observation. "What is death?" It is the complete and definitive end of life in a human, animal or plant; a journey to the afterlife, eternal sleep, the command of God, passing away, decease or expiration (Turkish Dictionary, 2021). It is the definitive and irreversible cessation of metabolism, that is, of the constant exchanges that are characteristic of living beings. When the dynamics of molecular changes that make up the living whole are interrupted, the living being dies quickly or slowly by undergoing complete disintegration (Kaya, 2002). The

<sup>1</sup>Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, hanifeakgul@comu.edu.tr, orcid.org/0000-0001-8543-9343

<sup>2</sup>Duzce University, sedefseydoogullari@duzce.edu.tr, orcid.org/0000-0001-9067-1999

end of a living being's state of existence and its change of form both quantitatively and qualitatively (Tanhan & Arı İnci, 2009). The concept of death has been the biggest intellectual problem for people throughout history. This concept manifests itself directly or indirectly in all activities of people. Individuals do not want to think that they will die one day because there is a desire in the soul of human beings to be immortal (Kaya, 2002). Death involves unknowns in many ways. Human beings have always been fearful of the unknown and have preferred to stay away when faced with unexplainable situations, with death undoubtedly being the most prominent among them. For humans, death is a dark and philosophical concept that we often avoid thinking about and choose to deny, as it contains both the unknown and a sense of fear.

The issue that theorists trying to explain death have most focused on is the fear of death. Psychoanalytic theory, one of the theoretical perspectives on death, argues that humans are born with life and death instincts. While the life instinct refers to the human desire to live, the death instinct is related to the destructive tendencies of the human being. According to Freud, the purpose of life is death and the person is aware of his/her own mortality and is not afraid of death because he/she has never experienced death (Freud, 1967). According to psychoanalysts, people have a subconscious belief that they are immortal, which causes them to have an intense emotional reaction to being mortal (Sezer and Saya, 2009). Another movement that focuses most on death and death anxiety is the existential approach. Existentialist Heidegger saw people's efforts to escape from death and denial of death as an obstacle to being a healthy person, and emphasized that accepting death is important for health (Heidegger, 2004). Irvin Yalom, the most well-known and current representative of existentialism, also emphasized, like Heidegger, that the way to cope with death anxiety is to accept death, confront it and recognize it, and argued that the first source of anxiety of humans is death (Yalom, 2001). Another theorist, Viktor Frankl (2019), the founder of logotherapy theory, viewed death as the realization of human existence and stated that the inevitability of death enables the person to take responsibility for his/her actions.

From the perspective of developmental psychology, it is seen that the issue of death is examined mostly with a focus on the perception of death and through children's perceptions (Hunter and Smith, 2008; Lee, Lee and Moon, 2008; Tamm and Granqvist, 1995; White, Elsom and Prawat, 1978). The common results of these studies are that children's understanding of the components of death such as universality, inevitability, causality and finitude develops parallel to their cognitive development. While coping with the death of a loved one or someone close can be challenging for adults, it is considerably more complex for children. Because children cannot comprehend death in the same way as adults, making sense of and accepting death is more complex during childhood. The age of children, their personality traits, the developmental stage they are in, the time and place they live, all influence the way they make sense of death. It is also noted that individuals' perception of death varies according to their developmental stages and is shaped by the way the concept of death is conveyed to them (Sezer & Saya, 2009).

The first studies on children's understanding of death were conducted from a psychoanalytic perspective. Psychoanalysts initially employed descriptive, open-ended interview techniques, as well as projective methods such as storytelling or drawing, to encourage children to freely express their knowledge about death. These studies primarily focused on children's emotional responses to death while also measuring their conceptualizations of death (Slaughter, 2005). Psychoanalytic researchers have concluded that young children's capacity to understand and accept death is limited due to their emotional immaturity, and that children's misconceptions about death likely exacerbate their anxieties. While the initial observations of psychoanalytic researchers were supported, the subsequent wave of research on children's concepts of death became more systematic and focused on cognitive aspects. It is remarkable that some of the early researchers pointed out that children's misconceptions about death stemmed from their inability to recognize death as a "biological' concept" (Slaughter, 2005).

The cognitive view on the development of death perception is the Piagetian approach. This approach focuses on the cognitive aspects of children's understanding rather than their emotional aspects and proposes an understanding based on Piagetian stages of cognitive development. This approach, which developed methods to access and measure children's conceptual understanding of death, has identified the subcomponents of death as follows: (a) irreversibility or finality (understanding that the deceased cannot return to life), (b) universality (understanding that all living beings die), (c) personal death (the understanding that death applies to oneself), (d) inevitability (the belief that all living beings must eventually die), (e) cessation or non-functionality (the belief that bodily and mental functions cease after death), (f)

causality (the understanding that death ultimately results from the breakdown of bodily functions), g) unpredictability (the understanding that the timing of death cannot be foreseen) (Slaughter, 2005; Slaughter & Griffiths, 2007).

It can be said that since the mentioned initial research, two conceptions of death have emerged. The first perspective argues that children view death as an emotionally charged illness and that the driving force of emotional reactions is grief, anxiety and a fear of separation inherent in the nature of death (Von Hug-Hellmuth, 1964). These emotions, of course, are similar to what adults feel. The second perception is that young children's understanding of death is quite different from that of adults, and this difference can intensify children's emotional reactions (Slaughter, 2005). A common mistake often made regarding thoughts and perceptions of death is assuming that what it means for children is the same as what it means for adults. However, children do not perceive death in the same way as adults (Giblin & Ryan, 1989). The age of children, their personality traits, the developmental stage they are in and the ways they encounter death all influence the conceptualization of death.

Based on theoretical approaches, the developmental progression of a child's perception of death can be briefly summarized as follows:

1-3 years old: Limited or no understanding of the concept of death

4 years old: A very limited understanding of death. They cannot express any specific emotions related to death or the idea that death is connected to sadness or grief.

5 years old: It is an age when the concept of death becomes more factual. They may still think of death as something reversible. Physical actions associated with death can emerge; the child may avoid lifeless things or derive pleasure from killing insects, etc.

6 years old: The beginning of an emotional reaction to the concept of death and awareness is evident. Concerns about the mother abandoning the child start to arise. The idea of death as a result of aggression or killing can start to emerge. They might become somewhat preoccupied with graves/funerals and engage in burying activities, still not believing in their own mortality.

7 years old: There is a perception similar to the one in the sixth year. However, a more detailed, better understanding and realistic evaluation are fostered. The child has an interest in causes of death, aging, violence and illness. The child entertains the idea that he/she could die but denies the notion that he/she will die.

8 years old: The child's interest shifts from graves and funerals to what will happen after death. They have a more developed concept of death and retain some magical thoughts related to death.

10 years old: This is the age when reference is made to logical or biological principles. "It's when you don't live, when there's no pulse, no fever and no breath. (Gesell, 1941). They now directly contemplate death, not just the surrounding objects like coffins and graves. They accept the idea of dying when they grow older in a quite realistic manner (Gesell, 1941).

In line with Piaget's stages of cognitive development, it can be said that preschool children in the preoperational stage perceive death as a temporary condition due to the fact that their concept of continuity has not developed yet. It is emphasized in the literature that the perception of death as a temporary departure or sleep, which is often held by preschool children, should not be reinforced by adults' responses to children's curiosity (Slaughter, 2005). It is claimed that the fear of death does not appear until the age of 10 because abstract thinking has not yet developed and death is perceived as a temporary situation. Children at the ages of 7-8, who focus on the biological aspect of death, such as the heart stopping, the inability to move, and not being able to breathe, have noticed the physical causes of death. Research results indicate that as children begin to understand the biological aspect of death, their anxiety about death also decreases (Slaughter and Griffiths, 2007).

As we move towards adolescence, the abstractness of the concept of death becomes more clearly understood under the influence of both mental development and different learnings. Due to the development of abstract thought in this period, it is possible to perceive the uncertainty of the concept of death and philosophical and religious interpretations are made for the concept of death. This results in a better understanding of the consequences of death (Gudas, Koocher & Wypij, 1991).

For adults, the concept of death is complex and multifaceted and gains meaning within the framework of social and cultural traditions and beliefs, personal and emotional concerns, religious doctrines and conceptual understandings. In this period, death is primarily understood as a biological event, and this

biological understanding influences the understanding of the other aspects of this complex concept. For them, death is true for all living beings, it is the final stage of the life cycle, inevitable and irreversible, and is ultimately accepted as stemming from a disruption in the functioning of the body (Slaughter, 2005). The main area of research in addressing the issue of death in adulthood and old age has been the fear of death. Research indicates that religious belief significantly affects death perception and anxiety in adults (Gibbs & Achterberg-Lawlis, 1978; Osarchuk & Tatz, 1973; Thalbourne, 1996). In particular, it is stated that belief in life after death is an aspect that significantly reduces death anxiety. The belief in an afterlife is universal, and it is noted that some of the great civilizations in human history developed based on the assumption of a world beyond this one, which is not a physical but rather a spiritual one (Kaya, 2002). Not seeing death as an end (Diagory & Rotham, 1961; Osarchuk & Tatz, 1973) and seeing it as a situation coming from God (Feifel and Branscomb, 1973) are also among the factors that reduce death anxiety. There are research findings suggesting that as religious individuals age, it becomes easier for them to accept death (Feifel & Branscomb, 1973).

The number of studies addressing perceptions of death in older people, experienced in various ways and with different emotions during the aging period, is quite limited in Turkey. As in adulthood, the way death is handled in old age is mostly on the basis of the fear of death. Death, which is viewed as a positive and normal process by some, is considered an extremely difficult situation to accept by some older individuals (Yılmaz & Mermutlu, 2023). Older individuals have been studied in terms of their education level, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, age and gender, and it has been found that the perception of death is significantly correlated with these variables (Koç, 2004). It is noted that the dimensions of the fear of death can change depending on the situation of being socially isolated during this period. For lonely individuals, death may be a desired situation. For individuals who perceive the current old age period positively, death is considered as "God's command" and a fate that everyone will experience (Yılmaz & Mermutlu, 2023).

### **IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH**

In the current study, the concept of death was discussed from a cognitive perspective, and unlike other studies, individuals' perception of the concept of death according to their developmental period was evaluated through the use of metaphor. A metaphor is a form of speech that involves implied similarity, a way of expressing a thought in a different way. Individuals sometimes use metaphors to express some emotions and metaphors are valuable as they make it easier for individuals to reveal their thoughts and express themselves (Meier & Davis, 2016). It was thought that the use of metaphors in a complex and challenging topic like death would provide more explanatory information about individuals' perceptions. In addition, studying the perception of death in children, young and older people through metaphors enhances the originality of the study.

The purpose of the current study is to determine and compare the perceptions of death in children, young and older people through metaphors. Within the context of this general purpose, the sub-purposes of the study are worded as follows:

1. What are the metaphors that children have about death?
2. Under which conceptual categories can the metaphors that children have about death be categorized?
3. What are the metaphors that young people have about death?
4. Under which conceptual categories can the metaphors that young people have about death be categorized?
5. What are the metaphors that older people have about death?
6. Under which conceptual categories can the metaphors that older people have about death be categorized?

## **METHOD**

### **RESEARCH MODEL**

This study is a qualitative, descriptive research and employed the survey model. In the study, the phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research designs, was used. In this design, many people who experienced the same event are studied and their perceptions of a phenomenon, their experiences related to the phenomenon and the meanings they attributed to it are tried to be revealed through content

analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Metaphors are used to collect qualitative data because rich data are obtained through metaphorical concepts (Patton, 2002; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Metaphors can be used to understand, interpret, describe and compare social phenomena (Silman & Şimşek, 2006). Metaphors, which make less understood subjects easier to comprehend, can also serve as tools for information gathering and inquiry (Semerci, 2007).

### ***STUDY GROUP***

This study was conducted in 2023 on a total of 188 individuals, including 57 children aged between 7 and 12, 63 young adults aged between 18 and 22 and 71 older individuals aged 75 and above, all residing in Çanakkale. The sample was selected based on voluntary participation, and convenience sampling, which allows the researcher to choose a case that is close and easily accessible, was preferred in this study (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

### ***DATA COLLECTION TOOL***

As the data collection tool of the study, a form consisting of open-ended questions was used to determine the metaphorical perceptions of the participants about the concept of death. The form consists of two sections. The first section includes questions to elicit the participants' demographic information (Only information about gender and age was obtained from the participants in the personal information form), while the second section consists of the sentence "Death is... like... because...". The participants were asked to complete this sentence. Research data was collected through face-to-face survey application. The prepared form was distributed to the participants, they were told how to answer it, it was illustrated with another concept and the practitioners were asked to answer it. The answered forms were collected and processed. The sentences obtained form the data source of the study.

Ethics committee approval for this research was obtained from Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University. It was taken with the decision of the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board numbered E-84026528-050.01.04-2300214718, dated 08.09.2023 and numbered 11/29.

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

In the analysis of the collected data, the content analysis technique was used. The main goal in content analysis is to interpret the data by classifying them and creating connections between them for a specific purpose, and then bringing them together within the framework of various concepts and themes and thus to reach the concepts and relationships that can explain the data. In content analysis, similar data are brought together within the framework of certain concepts and themes and organized in an understandable manner (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The content analysis was performed by a group of 3 experts in the current study. Then it was checked by two experts. The following stages were followed in the analysis of the metaphors developed by the participants. In the first stage, the forms were checked one by one, and the metaphors created by the participants were examined by the researchers. Forms that had multiple metaphors, metaphors that did not match the explanatory sentence and forms that were not fully filled out were excluded from the study. The remaining forms were numbered and coded. In the second stage, the coding of themes was carried out. During this stage, the metaphors produced were grouped based on common characteristics regarding the subject of the metaphor and the attributed thought. In the third stage, the data were organized and described according to the codes and themes. The data were identified and interpreted, and the created metaphors were categorized. These categories were tabulated separately for the children, young people and older people. In the final stage, the findings were interpreted, and conclusions were drawn. For the verification of the results, the opinions of two experts were sought. In accordance with the opinions of the experts, themes and the codes under the themes were reviewed again. In order to calculate the reliability of the study, Miles and Huberman's (1994) reliability formula was used ( $\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{agreement}}{\text{agreement} + \text{disagreement}} = \frac{192}{192+9}=0.95$ ). In this way, the agreement between the researchers and experts was calculated to be 95%. This value is thought to be enough for the reliability of the study. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that a reliability of 70% is sufficient, while Saban (2008) considers results of 90% and above to be sufficient for reliability in qualitative research.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitation of the study is that the participants' perceptions of death were evaluated through the questions asked to them. Additionally, it is limited to 188 participants who could be reached.

### FINDINGS

Three tables were created by analyzing the data collected to determine the metaphorical perceptions of the children, young and older people about the phenomenon of death. The tables include the metaphors that emerged as a result of the analysis, the aspects of resemblance in metaphors and the common category sections where the metaphors are collected. Explanations regarding the metaphors and their categories are provided below. Table 1 presents the children's metaphors, their justifications and categories.

**Table 1:** Children's Metaphors about Death, Their Justifications and Categories

No	Metaphor	f	Aspect of Resemblance	Category
1	Old age	5	When we get old we die	Concreteness
2	Grave	4	The place where we are placed after death.	
3	Earth	3	Being buried	
4	Sleeping	3	A long sleep, never waking up	
5	Darkness	2	Both are scary	
6	Fainting	1	Lying still	
7	Grandfather	1	Death of a relative	
8	Coffin	1	Home	
9	Finish	3	End of life	End of Life
10	End	2	Finish	
11	Sleeping	2	Not being aware of anything	
12	A dark well	2	Shortness of breath. No bottom visible	
13	Emptiness	1	Never going out again	
14	Darkness	1	Everyone sinking into darkness	
15	Fragile building	1	Collapsing, disappearing	
16	Love	1	Ending	
17	Sheep	1	Being slaughtered at the festival of sacrifice	
18	Accident	4	Happening at once	Being Fast and Sudden
19	White light	1	Happening at once	
20	Ending	1	Being fast and sudden	
21	Infinity	1	Without saying goodbye	
22	End of the game	1	It ends immediately	Separation
23	Sadness/sorrow	5	Our family is sad	
24	Separation	3	Separation from our loved ones	
25	Nightmare	1	Not wanting to leave the loved ones	Being Punished
26	Prison	2	Staying under the soil	
27	Despair	1	Regret doesn't work	
28	Hell	1	Boiling water	Waiting
29	Sleeping	2	We wait to wake up	

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that 57 children developed 29 metaphors. The children likened the concept of death most to the metaphors of sleep (7), old age (5), sorrow (5), grave (4), accident (4), earth (3), finish (3) and separation (3). The children were also found to associate the concept of death with metaphors such as darkness, end, prison, dark well (2), grandfather, sheep, fainting, coffin, fragile building, emptiness, darkness, love, white light, ending, infinity, end of the game, nightmare, hell, despair (1).

The metaphors developed by children regarding the concept of death were categorized into six groups, taking into account their justifications. When the metaphors developed by the children are examined, it can

be seen that they emphasized the aspects of death such as “Concreteness”, “End of Life”, “Being Fast and Sudden”, “Separation”, “Being Punished” and “Waiting”. Of the metaphors created by the children, 36% (n=20) are in the category of concreteness, 22% (n=12) are in the category of end of life, 15% (n=8) are in the category of being fast and sudden, 16% (n=9) are in the category of separation, 7% (n=4) are in the category of being punished and 4% (n=2) are in the category of waiting. Based on the categories created through the metaphors developed by the children, it can be said that, the concept of death is perceived by children primarily as concrete, end of life, separation and being fast and sudden. Some of the interpretations made in this context are given below.

#### *Category of Concreteness:*

The metaphors developed by children in this category are old age (n=5), grave (n=4), earth (n=3), sleeping (n=3), darkness (n=2), fainting (n= 1), grandfather (n=1) and coffin (n=1). Accordingly, it is seen that children try to explain the concept of death, which is an abstract concept and which they have difficulty in making sense of, with concrete concepts. The most emphasized metaphor in this category is “old age” and then “grave”. Explanations made by children regarding the metaphors they developed to concretize the concept of death are given below as direct quotations.

The child, who compared death to “old age”, explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“People die when they get old, as we get older, we get closer to death, old people die, old people die the most, my grandfather died because he was old.”* The child, who compared death to a “grave”, explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“When a person dies, they put him/her in the grave, the person disappears there and goes to heaven or hell from there, all that remains on Earth is his/her grave.”* The child, who compared death to “sleeping”, explained the reason by saying, *“You can’t feel anything, you can’t hear anything, you can’t see anything”*, while another child explained his/her reason by saying, *“After sleeping for a while, you will wake up again and start from scratch, you will forget what you experienced yesterday, the day before and two days ago, and you will continue your life from where you left off.”*

#### *Category of End of Life:*

The metaphors developed by the children in this category are finish (n=3), end (n=2), sleeping (n=2), dark well (n=2), emptiness (n=1), darkness (n=1), fragile building (n=1), love (n=1), sheep (n=1). The most emphasized metaphor in this category is finish (n=3). Explanations made by children regarding the metaphors they developed in this category are given below as direct quotations.

The child, who compared death to “finish” explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“Life in this world finishes, he/she cannot do anything here, he/she can do it in another world”*, and another explained the reason for the comparison by saying *“Death is the reason for the end of life”*. The child, who compared death to “darkness” explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“Death is as dark as night, when everyone dies, everyone is buried in darkness. There is no life in the night, there is no life in the dark, and when you die, everything is dark because your eyes close.”*

#### *Category of Separation:*

The metaphors developed by the children in the category are sadness/sorrow (n=5), separation (n=3), nightmare (n=1). The most emphasized metaphor in this category is the metaphor of sadness/sorrow (n=5). Explanations made by children regarding the metaphors they developed in this category are given below as direct quotations.

The child, who compared death to “sadness” explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“When someone in the family dies, everyone gets upset and cries and is always sad.”* Another explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“Death is sadness because we are separated from our loved ones.”* The child, who compared death to a “nightmare”, explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“You don’t want to have a nightmare but you do, you don’t want to die but you die, both are scary, death is like a nightmare, it separates people from their loved ones.”*

The metaphors created by the young people regarding the concept of death, their justifications and categories are given in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Young People’s Metaphors about Death, Their Justifications and Categories

No	Metaphor	f	Aspect of Resemblance	Category
1	Beginning	7	The ending of one life and the beginning of another	New beginning
2	Moving	1	Turning the page to a new life	
3	Reborn	1	Waking up to a new life	
4	Life	1	Resurrection	
5	Infinity	1	Life after death	
6	Real life	1	Eternal life	
7	New world	1	Migration to another world	
8	Journey to the future	1	World of realities	
9	Salvation	1	A new life	
10	Awakening	1	The ending of one life and the beginning of a new life	
11	Silence	1	The disappearance of the body and the survival of the soul	
12	Loneliness	4	Being left alone when you die, abandoning everyone	Separation
13	Longing	3	Longing for family	
14	Being forgotten	1	Leaving everyone	
15	Supper	1	Supper eaten before leaving	
16	Extinction	5	The end of everything	Extinction/Extinction of life
17	Leaf	3	It withers and dries up when it’s plucked from the branch	
18	Finish	2	Extinction of life	
19	Getting lost	2	Breaking away from life	
20	Going and not coming back	1	Being one-way	
21	Telephone	1	Shutting down when the battery runs out	
22	Sugar gum	1	The taste diminishes with time	
23	Ice cream	1	It melts away and disappears as time passes	
24	Exam	4	The inability to make sense of it	Uncertainty
25	Fear	3	The inability to accept	
26	Eternity	2	Uncertainty	
27	Mystery	1	Uncertainty	
28	Sleep	1	Eternity	
29	Reaching the truth	1	The unknown beyond	
30	Transparent room	1	Getting isolated	
31	Path	1	Having a defined direction but an uncertain destination	
32	Refugee	1	Being separated from the homeland	
33	Four walls	1	It’s like cold rooms	
33	Love	1	There is no turning back	
34	Song	1	It looks nice from a distance	
35	Salt	1	If you have a wound, it will hurt	
36	Punishment and reward	1	Reaping what you sow	
37	Needle	1	It pierces the heart and hurts. There’s no solution, no going back	

When Table 2 is examined, it is seen that 63 young people developed 37 metaphors. It is seen that the young people mostly likened the concept of death to the metaphors of beginning (7), extinction (5), loneliness (4), exam (4), longing (4) and leaf (3). Young people also used the following metaphors to define the concept of death; finish, getting lost, eternity (2), moving, reborn, life, infinity, real life, new world, journey to the future, salvation, awakening, silence, being forgotten, supper, going and not coming back, telephone, sugar gum, ice cream, secret, sleep, reaching the truth, transparent room, path, refugee, four walls, love, song, salt, punishment and reward and needle (1).

The metaphors developed by the young people regarding the concept of death were grouped into five categories, taking into account their justifications. When the metaphors created by the young people are



examined, it is seen that they emphasize the aspects of “New beginning”, “Separation”, “Extinction/extinction of life”, “Uncertainty”, “The road of no return”. Of the metaphors created by the young people, 27% (n=17) are in the category of new beginning, 14% (n=9) are in the category of separation, 25.5% (n=16) are in the category of extinction/extinction of life, 25.5% (n=16) are in the category of uncertainty and 8% (n=5) are in the category of the path of no return. Considering the categories, it can be said that the concept of death is most commonly perceived by young people as “New beginning”, “Extinction/extinction of life”, “Uncertainty”. Explanations made by the young people regarding the metaphors they developed in this category are given below as direct quotations.

#### *Category of New Beginning:*

The metaphors developed by the young people for this category are beginning (n=7), moving, reborn, life, eternity, real life, new world, journey to the future, salvation, awakening, silence (n=1x10). This category, in which young people want to see death as a new beginning, can be interpreted as their not wanting to die at all, and their desire to live, even if in another world. The most emphasized metaphor in this category is “beginning”. Examples of metaphors in which young people interpret the concept of death as a “new beginning” are given below as direct quotations.

One young person comparing death to “a new beginning” explained the reason for this comparison by saying, *“It is the beginning or eternal life, a kind of rebirth”*. Another one stated, *“When a person dies, he/she migrates to another world, and since it is a transition to a new and real world, death opens the door, ushering in new beginnings. Just when everything seems to have ended, everything begins anew in a different dimension.”*

The young man, who compared death to “Salvation”, explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“Worldly life is very tiring, difficult and troublesome, with death, these troubles will end, the people and I will be saved, death is the beginning of a new life.”*

#### *Category of Extinction/Extinction of Life:*

The metaphors developed by the young people in this category are extinction (n = 5), leaf (n = 3), finish (n = 2), getting lost (n = 2), going and not coming back, telephone, sugar gum, ice cream (n =1x5). The most emphasized metaphor in this category is “extinction”. Examples of the metaphors in which young people interpreted the concept of death as “extinction” are given below as direct quotations.

The young man, who compared death to “Extinction”, explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“When that time comes, even your loved ones will line up to throw earth on you.”* The young man, who compared death to “Telephone”, explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“When a human’s battery runs out, he/she shuts down and become non-functional, disappearing as if he/she never existed.”* The young man, who compared death to “sugar gum” explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“Life gradually loses its taste over time because death and extinction are approaching.”*

#### *Category of Uncertainty:*

Metaphors developed by the young people in the category are exam (n=4), fear (n=3), eternity (n=2), secret, sleep, reaching the truth, transparent room, path, refugee, four walls (n=1x7). The most emphasized metaphor in this category is “exam”. Examples of the metaphors in which the young people interpreted the concept of death as “uncertainty” are given below as direct quotations.

The young man, who compared death to “Exam”, explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“There are two things you cannot avoid in life: exam and death. Both of them are meaningless, they create anxiety in me; they are two things that have no solution. I think the biggest test is after you die; I mean you cannot get rid of exams even after you die.”* The young man, who compared death to “Fear”, explained the reason for the comparison by saying, *“Death evokes fear in me, but I can’t understand why. Death is very senseless, I think about it a lot, but I can’t find its meaning, I can’t accept it, and I’m very scared. I don’t even know why I’m afraid of my fears, just like death.”*

The young man, who compared death to "Path", explained the reason for the comparison by saying, "You're going somewhere and not coming back; the end is uncertain. There's a departure, but no return; it's a one-way trip."

The metaphors created by the older people regarding the concept of death, their justifications and categories are given in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Older People's Metaphors about Death, Their Justifications and Categories

No	Metaphor	f	Aspect of Resemblance	Category
1	Truth	1	Every living thing tastes it	Absolute end
2	Last breath	1	End of life	
3	Marathon run	1	Running without stopping	
4	Sun	1	Its rising and setting	
5	Time	1	Involuntary	
6	Breath	1	Involuntary	
7	End of the road	1	Proof that the time has come	
8	God	1	Manifesting	
9	Invitation	1	Everyone obeys	
10	Migration	5	Coming and going	
11	Lesson	2	One day everyone will die	
12	Earth	1	Going eventually	
13	Destiny	4	Involuntary-mandatory	
14	The most beautiful thing	1	Not being a sinner	A new beginning
15	Life	1	A new life	
16	Beginning	1	Eternity	
17	Youth	1	Being resurrected in the afterlife	
18	Sleep	1	Life's being like a dream	
19	Being born	2	Resurrection	
20	Fortune/inheritance	2	Collecting	
21	Gathering	1	Gathering at the place of judgment	
22	Wedding	1	Entering the afterlife	Uniting with God
23	Happiness	4	Reaching the Creator	
24	Longing	3	The longing ends	
25	Love	2	Meeting with our loved one	
26	Reunion	4	Reaching the Creator	
27	Reaching the loved ones	1	Meeting after death	
28	Loneliness	1	Being alone in the grave	Separation
29	Stopped clock	1	Time stops	
30	Longing	2	Longing for loved ones	
31	Sadness	1	Leaving your loved one	
32	Good deed-sin	1	Paying the price for what you've done	Confrontation
33	Deed	1	Paying the price for what you've done	
34	Fear	1	Not doing good deeds	
35	Prayer	1	Doing good deeds	
36	Harvester	1	Reap what you sow	
37	Judgment day	2	Time for questioning	
38	Cleaning	1	The evil ones pay the price	
39	Justice	1	Equality	
40	Salvation	3	End of suffering, end of pain	Getting rid of worldly troubles
41	Happiness	1	Salvation from loneliness	
42	End	2	End of illnesses and pain	Being an intermediary
43	Migration	1	Going to heaven	
44	Light	1	Embracing the light	
45	Winter	1	Reaching spring	
46	Bridge	3	It takes you the afterlife	

When Table 3 is examined, it is seen that 72 older people developed 46 metaphors. It is seen that the older people mostly likened the concept of death to the metaphors of migration (5), destiny, happiness, reunion (4), salvation, bridge, longing (3). The older people also used the following metaphors to define the concept

of death; being born, fortune/inheritance, love, longing, judgement day, end (2) and truth, last breath, marathon run, sun, time, breath, end of the road, God, invitation, earth, the most beautiful thing, life, beginning, youth, sleep, reunion, wedding, reaching the loved ones, loneliness, stopped clock, sadness, deed/sin, deed, fear, prayer, harvester, cleaning, justice, happiness, migration, light (1).

The metaphors developed by the older people regarding the concept of death were grouped into seven categories, taking into account their justifications. When the metaphors created by the older people are examined, it is seen that they emphasized the aspects of "Absolute end", "A new beginning", "Uniting with God", "Separation", "Confrontation", "Getting rid of worldly troubles", "Being an intermediary". Of the metaphors created by the older people, 29% are in the category of absolute end (n=21), 14% are in the category of a new beginning (n=10), 21% (n=15) are in the category of uniting with God, 7% (n=5) are in the category of separation, 13% (n=9) are in the category of confrontation, 8% (n=6) are in the category of getting rid of worldly troubles and 8% (n=6) are in the category of being an intermediary. When the categories are examined, it can be said that the concept of death is mostly perceived by the older people as "absolute end", "uniting with God" and "a new beginning". Some of the explanations made in this regard are given below.

#### *Category of Absolute End:*

The metaphors developed by the older people in this category are migration (n=5), destiny (n=4), lesson (n=2), truth, last breath, marathon run, sun, time, breath, end of the road, God, invitation, earth (n=1x10). The most emphasized metaphor in this category is "Migration". Examples of the metaphors in which the older people interpreted the concept of death in connection with "absolute end" are given below as direct quotations.

The older person, who compared death to "Migration" explained the reason for this comparison by saying, "Thanks to death, we go from the fake world to the real world, this is the inevitable end." Another said, "We have been preparing for this great migration all our lives. With death, migration to another life begins." The older person, who compared death to "destiny", explained the reason for this comparison by saying, "What is written on our foreheads the moment we are born is the greatest truth and inevitable end. The writing on our foreheads will be read." The older person, who compared death to "truth", explained the reason for the comparison by saying, "It is the truth of life because it is the greatest truth that every living being will experience and cannot escape from, and I am about to reaching that truth."

#### *Category of Uniting with God:*

The metaphors developed by the older people in this category are happiness, reunion (n=2x4=8), longing (n=3), love (n=2), wedding, reaching the loved ones (n=1x2=2). The most emphasized metaphors in this category are "Happiness" and "Reunion". Examples of the metaphors in which the older people interpreted the concept of death as "Uniting with God" are given below as direct quotations.

The older person, who compared death to a "reunion", explained the reason for this comparison by saying, "Since migration to eternity is permanent, it is a longed-for reunion. With death, all lovers are reunited in eternity", and another explained the reason for the comparison by saying, "The lover is reunited with the lover". The elder, who compared death to "longing", explained the reason for the comparison by saying, "Death is what we have longed for since the moment we were born, we always wait for the end of life and for meeting our beloved ones." The older person, who compared death to "reaching the loved ones", explained the reason for the comparison by saying, "Thanks to it, we can reach everything we love in the afterlife, spouse, friend, heaven."

#### *Category of a New Beginning:*

The metaphors developed by the older people in this category are being born, fortune/inheritance (n=2x2=4), the most beautiful thing, life, beginning, youth, sleep, reunion (n=1x6=6). The most emphasized metaphors in this category are the metaphors of "Being Born" and "Fortune/inheritance". Examples of explanations in which the older people interpreted the concept of death as "a new beginning" are given below as direct quotations.

The older person, who compared death to "being born", explained the reason for the comparison by saying, "From the womb, you are born into this world, and with death, you are born into the other world, thus a new life begins." The older person, who compared death to "Youth", explained the reason for the comparison by

saying, "Death gives us the chance to return to youth again, when we die, we will be resurrected in the apocalypse at the age of 35." The older person, who compared death to "sleep", explained the reason for the comparison by saying, "When you wake up, everything will start again, the dream will end; real life will begin."

## RESULTS, DISCUSSION and SUGGESTIONS

According to the results of the current study, which aims to determine and compare the metaphorical perceptions of children, young people and older people about the concept of death, the children produced 29 metaphors, the young people produced 37 metaphors, and the old people produced 46 metaphors to express the concept of death.

The children mostly likened the concept of death to metaphors such as old age, sadness, grave, accident, earth, sleeping, ending and separation. The metaphors developed by the children regarding the concept of death were grouped into six categories. These were determined to be "Concreteness", "End of Life", "Being Fast and Sudden", "Separation", "Being Punished" and "Waiting". The metaphors expressed in the category of concreteness include "Old age", "Grave", "Earth", "Sleeping", "Darkness", "Fainting", "Grandfather", "Coffin". The metaphors expressed in the category of end of life include "Finish", "End", "Sleeping", "Dark well", "Emptiness", "Darkness", "Fragile building", "Love", "Sheep". The metaphors expressed in the category of being fast and sudden include "Accident", "White light", "Ending", "Eternity", "End of the game". The metaphors expressed in the category of separation include "Sadness/sorrow", "Separation", "Nightmare". The metaphors expressed in the category of being punished include "Prison", "Despair", "Hell". The metaphor expressed in the category of waiting is "sleeping".

Although no research has been found examining children's perception of death through metaphors, it is known that children's perception of death has generally been examined by having them draw pictures. The common point in these studies is generally related to the conceptualization of the concept of death on the basis of its key components such as inevitability, applicability, irreversibility, causality, universality, dysfunctionality and unpredictability (Brent, Lin, Speece, Dong and Yang, 1996; Ji, Yanhua and Han, 2017; Slaughter and Griffiths, 2007; White, Elsom and Prawat, 1978). The acquisition of these components has been found to be linked to the child's cognitive development parallel to Piaget's periods. When the metaphors created by the children were examined in the current study, concrete indicators such as "old age", "grave", "darkness", "grandfather", "coffin" came to the fore. This can be thought to be related to the fact that the child is not yet in the abstract operations period in terms of cognitive development and that he/she perceives and defines a concept as abstract as death only with its concrete indicators.

The young people mostly likened the concept of death to metaphors of beginning, loneliness, extinction and exam. The metaphors developed by the young people regarding the concept of death were grouped into five categories. These were determined to be new beginning, separation, extinction/extinction of life, uncertainty and the road of no return. The metaphors in the category of "New Beginning" were found to be "Beginning", "Moving", "Being reborn", "Life", "Eternity", "Real life", "New world", "Journey to the future", "Salvation", "Awakening" and "Silence". The metaphors in the category of separation include "Loneliness", "Longing", "Being forgotten", "Supper". The metaphors in the category of extinction/extinction of life include "Extinction", "Leaf", "Ending", "Getting lost", "Going and not coming back", "Telephone", "Sugar gum", "Ice cream". The metaphors in the category of uncertainty include "Exam", "Fear", "Eternity", "Mystery", "Sleep", "Reaching the truth", "Transparent room", "Path", "Refugee", "Four walls". The metaphors in the category of the road of no return include "Love", "Song", "Salt", "Punishment/Reward", "Needle".

It is a common finding in the literature that young people see death as a beginning (Jo and Ann, 2012; Koku and Ateş, 2016; Usta, Aygin and Sağlam, 2016; Zaybak and Erzincanlı, 2016). This result can be associated with the belief in a different life after death. It seems that belief in the existence of a life after death positively affects the perception of death. According to the research results of Osarchuk and Tatz (1973), belief in another life after death reduces the fear of death. Jo and Ann (2012), who determined young people's perception of death through metaphors, found that young people defined death with the metaphors of "rest", "fear", "departure" and "beginning of a new life". Another study examining the perception of death using metaphors was conducted by Teskereci et al. (2020) using a phenomenological design on nursing students. It was stated that the nursing students produced 46 different metaphors and these

metaphors were collected in 4 categories: "beginning", "end", "eternity", and "mystery". Of the students, 29% defined death as an end, and 27% defined it as a beginning. In the current study, 27% of the young people see death as a beginning, and 25.5% see it as extinction and an end. Similar findings were reported by Tanhan and Ari (2006). In their study, most of the university students see death as an end and some see it as a new beginning.

The older people mostly likened the concept of death to the metaphors of destiny, happiness, reunion, salvation and bridge. The metaphors developed by the older people regarding the concept of death were grouped into seven categories. These are absolute end, a new beginning, uniting with God, separation, confrontation, getting rid of worldly troubles, being an intermediary. The metaphors in the category of absolute end include "Migration", "Destiny", "Lesson", "Truth", "Last breath", "Marathon run", "Sun", "Time", "Breath", "End of the road", "God", "Invitation", "Earth". The metaphors in the category of a new beginning include "The most beautiful thing", "Life", "Beginning", "Youth", "Sleep", "Being born", "Fortune/inheritance", "Reunion". The metaphors in the category of uniting with God include "Happiness", "Reunion", "Longing", "Love", "Wedding", "Reaching the loved ones". The metaphors in the category of separation include "Loneliness", "Stopped Clock", "Longing", "Sadness". The metaphors in the category of confrontation include "Good deed-sin", "Deed", "Fear", "Prayer", "Harvester", "Afterlife", "Cleaning", "Justice". The metaphors in the category of getting rid of worldly troubles include "Salvation", "Happiness", "End". The metaphors in the category of being an intermediary include "Migration", "Light", "Winter", "Bridge".

Yılmaz and Mermutlu (2023) evaluated older individuals' perception of old age and death anxiety through semi-structured interviews with the participation of 50 older people and examined them within the framework of aging theories. Most of the older people defined death as "disease", "old age", "neediness", "deficiency". It has been stated that women, in particular, perceive death as a "salvation". Similarly, in the current study, the older people see death as a salvation in the category of "getting rid of worldly troubles". The feeling of helplessness and loneliness that may be felt during old age due to reasons such as increased diseases, decreased social relations, and the fact that some roles in life can no longer be fulfilled may be the reason why the elderly see death as a salvation. Indeed, the metaphors "salvation", "happiness" and "end" generated by the participants in this category demonstrate their desire for the cessation of troubles and suffering, liberation from loneliness and the end of illnesses and pains.

When the perceptions of death are compared in the three different developmental periods addressed in the current study, namely childhood, youth and old age, it is seen that the metaphors of separation and end of life are common metaphors about death produced by the children, young people and older people. However, while death is seen as a new beginning for young and older people, it is seen that the children do not use a similar metaphor. Seeing death as a beginning is a result of believing in the existence of another life after death. Thalbourne (1996) examined psychology students' views on death and found that students with high belief in life after death had low death anxiety. However, when viewed from the perspective of Turkish society, this belief largely corresponds to the concepts of "afterlife", "paradise" and "hell". Since the primary school children who participated in the study are in the concrete operational period, they cannot yet comprehend abstract situations.

It is interesting that the "beginning" metaphor was the most produced metaphor among the young people, while it was not expressed at all in the children. Starting from adolescence, the existence of forms such as spirits and ghosts, and what happens to a person when he/she dies, begin to be questioned. The concept of death becomes abstract in nature (Meb-Unicef, 2001). With the development of abstract thinking, adolescence is characterized by increased interest in various inquiries into subjects such as philosophy, politics, religion and belief. Holcomb, Neiymer and Moore (1993) investigated the impact of the meanings attributed to death by university students on death anxiety and they found that 60% of the participants believed that life continues after death. For this reason, it can be thought that the idea that death is a new beginning is widespread. In addition, metaphors like "sugar gum" (The taste diminishes with time), "telephone" (Shutting down when the battery runs out), "refugee" (Being separated from the homeland), "love" (There is no turning back), "salt" (If you have a wound, it will hurt) and "needle" (It pierces the heart and hurts) also demonstrate the advanced skill of metaphor production and perception, as well as the development of abstract thinking during this period.

There are many studies showing that older people tend to see death as the beginning of a new life (Hökelekli, 1992; Thalbourne, 1996). While it may be related to belief for older people, the perception of death as a new beginning can also be considered as a way to cope with the fear associated with death (Koç, 2004). In fact, research has shown that belief in another life after death reduces the fear of death (Osarchuk and Tatz, 1973; Santrock, 2012; Tanhan and Arı, 2006; Thalbourne, 1996).

Knowing the perceptions of children (7-12), young people (18-22) and older people (over 75 years of age) regarding death is important for developmental researchers, developmental experts, practitioners, mental health professionals, parents and older people, children and their relatives. When developmental researchers' findings on the development of the perception of death are introduced to developmental psychology practitioners, they provide important insights and perspectives in practice regarding how to approach children, adolescents and older people and what approach should be adopted. For instance, parents, grandparents or teachers who are tasked with answering a child's questions about death, which is often a subject of great curiosity for them, are in need of understanding how death is perceived by children and what approach and information are necessary for addressing it. Comparative studies such as the one here can also provide important information about how the perception of death is shaped according to life periods and how this perception affects the individual's anxiety about death and the individual's satisfaction with life. As discussed here, while the perception of death can be expressed with similar metaphors by individual in different developmental periods such as young and older people. While in adolescence and old age, death is seen as a "new beginning", when it is better understood and questioned, in childhood, however, a similar perception is not fostered. From the perspective of mental health professionals, as expressed by existentialists, understanding how individuals perceive death, which is one of the most fundamental concerns of humans, or how they deal with loss and grief, assists in working with them using the correct approach and methods. Therefore, it is thought that this study makes an important contribution to the literature and the field of mental health.

Since the perception of death is a subject that has not been studied enough, it is important to increase research on the subject. It is known that especially the old age period has rarely been studied. Studying the perception of death in old age can guide studies to increase the life satisfaction and quality of life of older people. Moreover, educational programs can be developed for children and young people that will shape their perception of death or reduce their death anxiety. Psycho-educational programs regarding working with grief can be developed for mental health professionals. This study is a qualitative research. Research based on quantitative data can be planned regarding the death perceptions and concerns of older people and young people.

## **Declarations**

### **Conflict of Interest**

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author(s) with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

### **Ethics Approval**

The formal ethics approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University. We conducted the study in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration in 1975.

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### **Research and Publication Ethics Statement**

Hereby, we as the authors consciously assure that for the manuscript "Perception Of The Concept Of Death Among Children, Young And Older People And The Comparison Of These Perceptions: A Qualitative Study" the following is fulfilled:

- This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- The paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

### **Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article**

The authors provide equal contribution to this work.

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