

Fearlessness about death and suicidal ideation: Religious identity matters

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Abstract

Introduction: Religion is a salient aspect of patient background in treatment (Pargament, 1997).

However, research investigating the role of religion in suicide is lacking and inconsistent (Gearing & Alonzo, 2018). The current study (1) clarifies the association between religious identity and fearlessness about death in a psychiatric sample and (2) tests whether religious identity moderates the association between fearlessness about death and suicidal ideation.

Methods: Participants were 155 patients seeking treatment in a partial hospital program.

Religious identity was assessed using the Identities in Treatment Scale (Hom et al., 2022).

Fearlessness about death was assessed with two relevant items from the Acquired Capability With Rehearsal for Suicide Scale (George et al., 2016), as in prior studies (Shahnaz et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2023).

Results: Fearlessness about death interacted with religious identity to predict suicidal ideation, $b = .47$, 95% C.I. [.02, .91], $p = .042$. Conditional effects showed that greater fearlessness about death was associated with greater suicidal ideation among non-religious patients, $b = -.56$, 95% C.I. [-.88, -.24], $p = .001$, but not in religious patients, $b = -.09$, 95% C.I. [-.41, .22], $p = .559$.

Conclusions: Our results suggest that fearlessness about death is a risk factor for suicidal ideation, but only among those who do not identify as religious. Results from this study inform theories of suicide and elucidate the influence of religious identity on links among suicide risk factors and suicide-related outcomes.

Key Words: suicidal ideation, religious identity

Introduction

Suicide is a leading cause of death globally (World Health Organization, 2021).

According to the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behavior (IPT), suicide requires both the desire to die and the acquired capability to do so (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010). This capability may be acquired in part through exposure to painful or life-threatening events and stimuli (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010). Through habituation, these painful and provocative events steel the individual to the fear and extreme discomfort involved in suicide; this relatively blunted response to death and dying is called “fearlessness about death.”¹

In the original formulations of ideation-to-action theories, including the IPT, it is assumed that suicidal thoughts and desires precede suicidal behaviors, and that worse suicidal ideation reflects greater risk for suicide (Klonsky et al., 2018). Later, factors thought to contribute to greater suicide capability, like fearlessness about death, were found to be uniquely related to suicidal behavior among ideators, although effects were small (Chu et al., 2017). An earlier review found that capability was bivariately associated with suicidal ideation (Ma et al., 2016). More recently, scholars have suggested that some forms of suicidal ideation may increase capability. For example, a functional model of suicide capability described how severe suicidal ideation involving vivid imagery may effectively act like provocative events and build suicide capability (Smith & Cukrowicz, 2010). Indeed, fearlessness about death and other facets of capability predict concurrent suicidal ideation severity as well as short-term changes in suicidal ideation (e.g., Spangenberg et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2023).

In the model proposed by Smith & Cukrowicz (2010), contextual factors are hypothesized to be additional variables implicated in the path to suicide. One such contextual variable that may influence a person’s fearlessness about death (and by extension, capability for

suicide) is religious identity, given that religions are where people often receive their earliest and most powerful beliefs about death. To date, no work has examined how religious identity may alter the path to suicide via changes in fearlessness about death. This may be an important gap in the literature because it is possible that many religious people, who often hold beliefs that may reduce one's fear of death (i.e., Heaven), may experience less fear of death as a function of these beliefs. Despite the empirical connection between fearlessness about death and suicidal ideation (Spangenberg et al., 2019), and some work suggesting that religious individuals experience lower fear of death (for a review, see Ellis & Wahab, 2013), many studies have found that being religious is a protective factor against suicide (for a reviews, see Gearing & Alonzo, 2018 and Lawrence et al., 2016), thus calling into question the utility of fearlessness about death as a predictive variable for suicide in religious individuals. The Cultural Model of Suicide (Chu et al., 2010) has suggested that such identity-related factors may be critical to fully understanding suicidal risk. To build upon findings connecting ideation and capability, and further examine how contextual factors influence the pathway to suicide, we examined how the link between fearlessness about death and suicidal ideation differ as a function of religious identity in a psychiatric sample.

In the United States, religious affiliation remains high relative to other countries of similar education and wealth (Pew Research Center, 2018), suggesting that understanding the role of religious identity in psychopathology may be useful in predicting outcomes and personalizing treatment delivery in psychiatric settings given the theorized link between cultural factors and suicide (Chu et al., 2010). Many patients have even reported the desire for their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to be integrated into care (Knox, Caitlin, Casper, & Schlosser, 2005; Lindgren & Coursey, 1995; Puchalski, Larson, & Lu, 2001; Rosmarin et al.,

2011; Rosmarin et al., 2015). Further, religious and spiritual individuals experience improved treatment outcomes for both physical and mental health (for a review, see Lucchetti et al., 2021).

Religious identity has been proposed to impact suicidal thoughts and behaviors; however, the nature of this relationship remains unclear, with some studies finding religion to be a protective factor and others finding it to be a risk factor (for reviews, see Gearing & Alonzo, 2018 and Lawrence et al., 2016). There are several theoretical reasons why religious identity might protect from suicide attempts. First, most religions have doctrines around death that discourage suicide. For example, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that because people are merely the stewards rather than owners of their lives, they ought not end them (Pope John Paul II, 1993). Traditionally Islam holds a similar perspective, viewing suicide as a cardinal sin and teaching that life is a gift from God whose outcome is to be determined by God alone (Shoib et al., 2022). In some cases, it is taught that people who die by suicide are prohibited from entering Heaven. These doctrines may discourage suicide in people who follow religions with such teachings due to fear for the safety of their immortal soul should they die by suicide (Dervic et al., 2004).

Other aspects of religion may reduce the likelihood of a person dying by suicide. The IPTS proposes that perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness are key contributors to suicide-related outcomes. Religion may protect against these effects by providing people with a supportive social community and the belief that there is an ultimate loving entity who cares about them and has a plan for their lives (Blackmore et al., 2008; Quarshie et al., 2013). For example, one study found that religion served as a protective factor against suicidal behavior in high-risk pregnant women (Benute et al., 2011). These women reported experiencing

more social support, comfort in the belief in a loving God, greater purpose in life, higher self-esteem, and having models for coping with crises (Benute et al., 2011). Data from an Israeli population-based sample, demonstrated that lifetime suicide attempts, though not suicidal ideation, were significantly less common in religious individuals than non-religious individuals independent of substance use, psychopathology, and social functioning (Burshtein et al., 2016). A similar pattern was found in a sample of college students in northwestern China, where greater religiosity was associated with a reduced risk of suicidal behaviors following traumatic experiences (He et al., 2019). Nevertheless, more work is needed to determine if religious contexts provide unique buffers against interpersonal risk factors for suicide, as one study found that secular “churches” offer comparable social connectedness to their religious counterparts (Brown et al., 2021).

Conversely, other studies suggest that religious identity may contribute to the onset or exacerbation of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. If individuals identify with a minoritized religious group, view God as distant and angry, or have a poor relationship with their faith community, they may be at higher risk for suicide (for reviews, see Ellis & Wahab, 2013 and Lawrence et al., 2016). Two Vietnamese national population-based surveys found that following a religion other than Buddhism (Vietnam’s leading religion) was a significant risk factor for suicidal behaviors in adolescents (Le et al., 2012). Cross-sectional survey results from Chinese college students indicate that for those who do not believe in the dominant political ideology of China, being religious was associated with increased total suicidality (including ideation, plan, and attempt), perhaps due to social marginalization (Zhao et al., 2012). Additionally, religion may be used to avoid coping with negative feelings or events (i.e., “negative religious coping”), which has been associated with more common presence and greater severity of suicidal thoughts

and behaviors (Mihaljevic, Aukst-Margetic et al., 2012) and more common presence of suicidal ideation (Stratta et al., 2012). Further, given the theorized connection between one's cultural context and exposure to psychologically provocative and fear-inducing events (Smith & Cukrowicz, 2010), it is possible that the typically frequent and vivid discussions of death and dying in religious contexts may habituate religious individuals to thoughts of their own deaths—even painful ones. For example, the veneration of religious martyrs across religions often includes vivid accounts of their deaths—e.g., “The Last Judgment” fresco in the Sistine Chapel, which includes paintings alluding to deaths by skinning; crucifixion; and roasting. Indeed, these accounts often include stories of respected individuals welcoming painful, frightening deaths, which may result in religious individuals being less avoidant of frightening, painful deaths themselves given their long exposure to stories of such deaths.

Overall, associations between religious identity and suicide are complex. Individual differences in fearlessness about death—a construct that some studies have found to be empirically associated with more severe ideation (e.g., Spangenberg et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2023)—may partially account for the complex relation between religious identity and suicide outcomes. Some aspects of religion, such as community belonging and the feeling that life has an ultimate meaning, may reduce suicide risk. However, if one's religious beliefs increase fearlessness about death (e.g., by providing beliefs in a positive afterlife one can look forward to and a loving, forgiving God who would overlook doctrinal violations, and providing contextual exposures to death-related content), then this would putatively increase suicide risk in individuals considering suicide. For example, a qualitative study found that Swiss psychiatric patients referenced the desire to be with God and enter another life in deciding to attempt suicide (Huguelet et al., 2007). A review of the relationship between fear of death and religiosity yielded

mixed results, finding that 40 studies provided results indicating that religiosity and fear of death are inversely correlated; nine indicating a curvilinear relationship; 27 indicating a positive correlation; and 32 indicating no significant relationship (Ellis & Wahab, 2013). These inconsistencies suggest that a further examination of how fearlessness about death and religious identity contribute to suicide outcomes is warranted.

The present study clarifies the relations among religious identity, fearlessness about death, and suicidal ideation by assessing whether or not the hypothesized increase in fearlessness about death in religious individuals predicts suicidal ideation in those individuals, or if fearlessness about death is not predictive of suicidal ideation among religious individuals. While much work has examined the relationship between suicidal behaviors and religion, relatively little has examined religion's association with suicidal ideation. Elucidating this relationship may produce promising avenues for early intervention with respect to suicide risk, especially given that recent work suggesting that ideation serves as a form of mental rehearsal that may habituate ideators to thoughts of suicide, thus increasing capability (Stewart et al., 2023). Further, religious identity impacts people's thoughts and attitudes about life and death and includes mandates for (or against) particular behaviors, including suicide. As such, the influence of religious identity on suicide-related outcomes may be strongest at the cognitive level, operationalized as the presence; form; and intensity of suicidal thoughts. Finally, existing research has focused primarily on community or outpatient samples. Our study builds on this research to investigate the association between religious identity and suicidal ideation among a sample of patients with severe levels of psychopathology in tertiary care. It is possible that religious identity may be particularly salient in this acute sample with high rates of suicidal ideation, as one's religion is often a source of coping during challenging times.

Given that religions often include beliefs that might make death seem less frightening to adherents (e.g., Heaven, reincarnation, etc.), we hypothesized that religious identity would be associated with greater fearlessness about death in a sample of adults attending an intensive outpatient program. In turn we hypothesized that greater fearlessness about death will be associated with more severe suicidal ideation. However, we hypothesized that religious identity would moderate the association between fearlessness about death and suicidal ideation, such that higher fearlessness about death would be significantly associated with more severe suicidal ideation among non-religious people, but not among religious people.

Methods

Participants

Participants included 155 patients enrolled in a suburban New England, insurance-based partial hospital program between July 2020 and January 2021. Religious participants were mostly Christians (12% Protestant, 29.9% Catholic, 3% Orthodox, and 31.4% non-specific). The remaining religious participants were Jewish (17.9%), Buddhist (3%), and Hare Krishna (1.5%).

	Religious	Not religious
<i>n</i>	67	88
Age <i>M (SD)</i>	40.75 (16.921)	31.22 (12.056)
Gender identity <i>n (%)</i>	Female	40 (59.7%)
	Male	25 (28.4%)
	Not listed	2 (2.3%)

Sexual orientation	<i>n</i> (%)	Bisexual	6 (9.0%)	19 (21.6%)
		Gay/Lesbian	3 (4.5%)	5 (5.7%)
		Heterosexual/ Straight	57 (85.1%)	56 (63.6%)
		Queer	1 (1.5%)	4 (4.5%)
		Not listed	-	4 (4.5%)
Latine	<i>n</i> (%)		4 (6.0%)	5 (5.7%)
Race	<i>n</i> (%)	White	61 (91.0%)	79 (89.8%)
		Black	3 (4.5%)	1 (1.1%)
		Asian	3 (4.5%)	7 (8.0%)
		American Indian or Alaskan Native	2 (3.0%)	-
		Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1 (1.5%)	-
		Unknown/other	2 (3.0%)	2 (2.3%)
Education level	<i>n</i> (%)	Some high school	-	1 (1.1%)
		High school/GED	6 (9.0%)	2 (2.3%)
		Some college	20 (29.9%)	30 (34.1%)

		4-year college	
		graduate	19 (28.4%)
		Graduate degree	28 (31.8%)
			22 (32.8%)
			27 (30.7%)
History of			
homelessness	<i>n (%)</i>		4 (6.0%)
			5 (5.7%)
Unemployed	<i>n (%)</i>		30 (44.8%)
			44 (50%)

Measures

Identities in Treatment Scale

The Identities in Treatment Scale (Hom et al., 2022) presents open-ended items that ask patients to state various identities they hold based on the ADDRESSING framework (e.g., socioeconomic status, gender, race, religious or spiritual tradition). Patients then elaborate on how each identity has contributed to mental health problems they are hoping to address in the program. Respondents were considered religious if they indicated that they held a religious identity by responding affirmatively to the Identities in Treatment Scale item asking if they held a religious identity or if they indicated a specific religious identity (e.g., Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, Judaism); respondents were considered non-religious if self-identified as atheists or agnostics or stated that they did not hold a religious identity. Two raters independently coded participants as religious and non-religious (98.64% agreement). A third rater was used to resolve two discrepancies that occurred. Previous research suggests that spirituality is independent from religion (Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006), and because only a small proportion of participants identified as spiritual, these participants were excluded from the current study.

Acquired Capability with Rehearsal for Suicide Scale (ACWRSS)

The Acquired Capability with Rehearsal for Suicide Scale (ACWRSS) is a 7-item questionnaire that assesses one's thoughts and feelings about their own death (George et al., 2016). Patients rate how aligned they are with each statement from a scale of 0 ("agree not at all") to 8 ("agree very strongly"). Previous research suggests that the ACWRSS has adequate reliability and validity (George et al., 2016). In the current study, internal reliability of the full scale was acceptably high ($\alpha = .78$; $\omega = .79$).

To measure fearlessness about death, we used the only two items from the ACWRSS that directly measure fearlessness about death specifically (e.g., "Picturing my own death is a very scary thing for me" and "Even if I wanted to, killing myself is too scary to follow through with it"), as in prior studies (George et al., 2016; Shahnaz et al., 2020; Stewart et al., 2023). Although the scale contains other items measuring other facets of capability, we included these two items alone because we were interested in fearlessness about death specifically, rather than total capability. We created a fearlessness about death composite score by averaging participants' responses on these items. Lower scores indicate greater fearlessness about death. The two-item fearlessness about death subscale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties in prior studies, including good internal consistency and test-retest reliability (George et al., 2016; Shahnaz et al., 2020). Instructions were altered to indicate that the patients should respond based on how they felt in the moment that they were completing the form. Internal consistency was lower than what is typically considered acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .51$), most likely due to it being two items.

Depressive Symptom Index – Suicidality Subscale (DSI-SS)

The Depressive Symptom Index – Suicidality Subscale (DSI-SS) is a 4-item questionnaire that assesses for frequency, severity, intrusiveness, and impulsivity of suicidal

thoughts by asking patients to select which of four statements best describes them (Metalsky & Joiner, 1997). Each item in the DSI-SS is scored from 0 to 3, with a greater total score corresponding to higher levels of suicidal thoughts, including planning and impulses. We measured suicidal ideation based on patients' total DSI-SS score. Previous research suggests that the DSI-SS has adequate reliability and validity (Stanley et al., 2021). In the current study, internal reliability was acceptably high ($\alpha = .89$; $\omega = .92$). Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .87$).

Procedure

All data were collected via the standard patient intake surveys to the partial hospital program and managed via Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap; Harris et al., 2009). These data were collected during routine care for treatment planning and program evaluation and as such were deemed exempt by the IRB due to being de-identified. This study was pre-registered with the Open Science Foundation

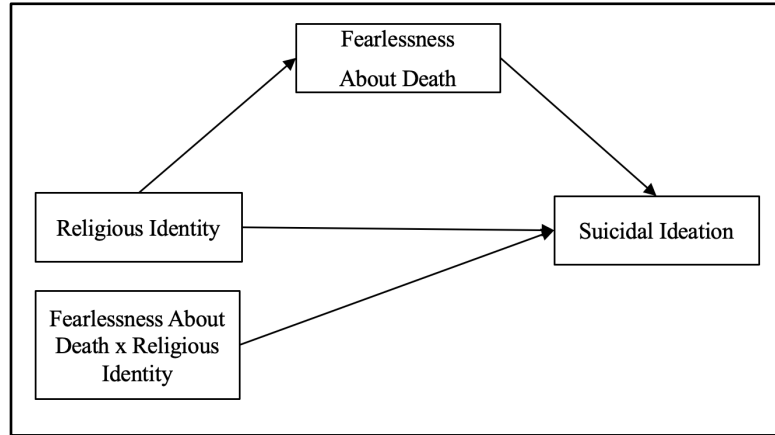
(https://osf.io/dxbgs/?view_only=193425a22af84a80aa88ec82327b2a60).²

Data Analysis

We conducted a mediation and moderation analysis to assess the association among religious identity, fearlessness of death, and suicidal ideation using model 4 with an independent variable by mediator interaction in the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes et al., 2017). This model has been termed a “counterfactual mediation” because the independent variable is also the moderator variable on the second regression equation (Hayes, 2022). We used a bootstrap of 10,000 samples to produce confidence intervals for the test of equality of the conditional indirect effect. See Figure 1 for a depiction of the hypothesized moderated mediation model. In this model, religious identity was entered as the predictor and moderator variable, fearlessness about

death was entered as the mediator variable, and suicidal ideation was entered as the outcome variable.

Figure 1 *Hypothesized Moderated Mediation*



Results

Sixty-seven (43.2%) respondents were coded as religious, and 88 (56.7%) respondents were considered non-religious. The direct effect of religious identity on suicidal ideation was not significant, $b = -.61$, $p = .104$, 95% CI [-1.35, .14]. Further, contrary to hypotheses and the IPTS theory, religious identity was not significantly associated with fearlessness about death, $b = .05$, $p = .848$, 95% CI [-.48, .58]. Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Chu et al., 2017), higher fearlessness about death was significantly associated with more severe suicidal ideation, $b = -.32$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [-.55, -.10]. Unsurprisingly given these effects, the indirect effect of religious identity on suicidal ideation through fearlessness about death was non-significant, $b = -.02$, 95% CI [-.23, .16].

As hypothesized, the significant effect of fearlessness about death on suicidal ideation was qualified by a significant interaction with religious identity, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $b = .47$, $p = .042$, 95% CI [.02, .91]. Follow-up analyses revealed that higher fearlessness about death was

associated with more severe suicidal ideation in the non-religious group, $b = -.56$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [-.88, -.24], but not the religious group, $b = -.09$, $p = .559$, 95% CI [-.41, .22].

Given the differences between the religious and non-religious groups in age and sexual orientation, we re-ran these analyses with age and sexual orientation as covariates. The pattern of results did not change with the inclusion of covariates, so we present only the most parsimonious model. The model with covariates are available via the OSF repository for this project (https://osf.io/dxbgs/?view_only=193425a22af84a80aa88ec82327b2a60).

Discussion

The current study investigated the association between religious identity, fearlessness about death, and suicidal ideation. Given that religious affiliation remains high in the United States and is on the rise globally (Pew Research Center, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018), and the theorized importance of contextual factors in the pathway to suicide (Chu et al., 2010), understanding religious identity's association with fearlessness about death may help to demystify the complicated relationship between this salient identity and a leading cause of death.

Congruent with previous work (e.g., Chu et al., 2017; Hussey, Barnes-Holmes, & Booth, 2016; Meerwijk & Weiss, 2018; Monteith, Bahraini, & Menefee, 2017; Spangenberg et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2023), we found that higher fearlessness about death was associated with more severe suicidal ideation. We also extended prior work by testing whether this relation was moderated by religious identity. In our sample, fearlessness about death only predicted suicidal ideation among participants who identified as non-religious. In other words, the hypothesized link between greater fearlessness about death and more severe suicide ideation depends on whether or not the individual is religious. Findings raise the possibility that beliefs about suicide and expectations about what follows death shape intraindividual contributors to suicide

outcomes. This finding is one example of how the predictive utility and generalizability of suicide theories like the IPTS may be improved by considering such identity-related factors (see Opara et al., 2020). It is possible that in religious individuals, fearlessness about death is acquired simply by virtue of their religious context in tandem with other beliefs about death that discourage suicide. As such, this exposure-based reduced fear may not be a useful predictive variable for suicide in religious individuals after all.

Inconsistent with our hypotheses, religious identity was not associated with higher fearlessness about death, adding to a mixed literature. Because most religions hold that their affiliates who live according to their correlative moral doctrines can expect to enjoy a positive afterlife, intuitively, it is sensible to expect religious individuals to report more fearlessness about death. Conversely, some psychologists have theorized that religious people may be more afraid of death than non-religious people because their seeking or maintenance of religious affiliation is motivated by a desire to assuage their death-related fears in the first place (Menzies & Menzies, 2021; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015). Therefore, it cannot be said with certainty that death-related exposure in religious contexts leads to greater fearlessness about death; more work is necessary to better understand this relationship. Additionally, religious identity was not associated with suicidal ideation, once again adding to a mixed literature. Accordingly, our hypothesis that fearlessness about death would mediate the association between religious identity and suicidal ideation was not supported.

Religion may serve as both a source of comfort *and* concern in a person's death conception. On the one hand, most religions provide people with the belief that they have an opportunity to achieve a positive afterlife; on the other hand, this opportunity is often balanced by the threat of a negative after life (Bassett & Bussard, 2021). As such, any increases in

fearlessness about death religious people experience may be offset by religion-specific fears (e.g., Hell). Finally, it is also possible that religious identity is primarily a result of generational transmission rather than personal conviction. If so, it stands to reason that religious and non-religious people should not differ in their levels of fearlessness about death because for many religious people, what is important about religion may be non-belief related factors (e.g., tradition, ritual, and community) more so than belief-related factors. An important target for future research is to ask about the role of specific religious factors (e.g., afterlife beliefs, moral doctrines surrounding suicide) in suicidal thoughts and behaviors and investigate suicidal action rather than mere ideation.

The results of this study should be interpreted considering several limitations. The present study did not assess the relationships between perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and religious identity, which may have provided insights as to why religious identity is protective against suicide for some individuals (i.e., if these variables are low in religious individuals). Additionally, the present study used the two-item fearlessness about death subscale of the ACWRSS to measure fearlessness about death. Since the completion of our study, a new measure of fear of suicide rather than death alone has been published (Grunewald et al., 2023), in line with the field's acknowledgement that fear of suicide and fear of death are distinct constructs. Although the ACWRSS does instruct respondents to think about death in the context of suicide, and does ask one question about suicide specifically, the new Fearlessness About Suicide Scale (Grunewald et al., 2023) is more precise. As such, future work may benefit from the use of this new measure. Further, this study excluded participants who identified as "spiritual but not religious", and future studies may gain novel insights from their inclusion. Additionally, most of our sample were White and affluent, and most religious participants

identified as Christian. As such, the results may not generalize to other populations. Replication of these results in more diverse samples is critical, especially given that Islam is the fastest growing religion globally and that some minoritized groups (e.g., Black people and immigrants) in the United States have higher rates of religious identity relative to other groups (Pew Research Center, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2015). Future work investigating the role of religion in fearlessness about death and suicide-related outcomes should address these limitations.

Conclusions

The current study sought to clarify the relationship among fearlessness about death, religious identity, and suicidal ideation. Our primary finding was that fearlessness about death was associated with more severe suicidal ideation, but the strength of this relation depended on religious identity. Fearlessness about death predicted more severe suicidal ideation among non-religious participants but not religious participants. Such findings highlight how salient identity-related factors may improve the predictive utility of suicide theories, and ultimately, help to refine treatments that protect against suicide.

Footnotes

¹ This research area would benefit from clearer terminology. Fearlessness about death, death anxiety, fear of death, and other related terms are often used interchangeably or used to delineate nuanced attitudes that are not always clearly differentiated from one another in theory and measurement. This likely contributes to the inconsistency observed in findings across studies investigating various death attitudes.

² Please note that the registration does not list fearlessness about death under the Measured Variables section. This was simply an input error and the intention to examine fearlessness about death is indicated throughout in the registration in other sections.

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