

From Confused Reflections to Life Awareness: A Narrative Reconstruction of Death's Significance in the Life World of Higher Education Students

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Abstract: This study adopts a narrative research approach to investigate the inner experiences and meaning-making processes of higher education students when confronted with the subject of death. Through in-depth interviews with five participants, the study uncovers the cognitive and emotional progression that higher education students undergo in engaging with death-related topics. This progression spans from initial confusion and avoidance to gradually understanding and accepting death, ultimately leading to an awakening of life's significance. The findings reveal that discussions about death not only evoke emotional reactions but also facilitate the construction of personal meaning within the narrative of death. This research provides fresh insights into death education and psychological counseling for higher education students, offering practical guidance for the effective implementation of death education initiatives.

Keywords: death education; higher education students; narrative research; life's meaning; inner experiences

1. Introduction

Death is an inevitable and ultimate topic for humanity, profoundly influencing human cognition, emotions, and behaviors (Zhanykulov, 2022). Although death is widely discussed in the fields of philosophy, culture, and psychology, there is still insufficient research on this topic among higher education students. As a significant transitional stage in life, higher education students experience complex emotional fluctuations and cognitive shifts when faced with death (Varga & Balk, 2022).

In modern society, there is a widespread tendency to avoid the topic of death, and higher education students face unique challenges in constructing their understanding and meaning of death (Sirrine et al., 2021). Existing research has predominantly focused on primary and secondary school students or adults (Gascón, 2022), with little attention given to how higher education students confront the subject of death. Therefore, this study aims to explore, through narrative inquiry, how higher education students construct the meaning of death through their life experiences, and to reveal the potential evolution of their cognition, emotions, and attitudes in this process.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Narrative Inquiry Theory

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that reveals individuals' experiences, cognition, and socio-cultural backgrounds through their stories (Chen Xiangming, 2002). This method utilizes stories as a medium, emphasizing the exploration of how people construct meaning within specific social contexts from an individual perspective. Particularly when addressing emotionally charged and complex topics such as death, narrative inquiry demonstrates unique insight. Through storytelling, researchers can capture how individuals express and understand death, investigating how this abstract concept is given personalized and emotional meaning through specific life experiences.

As a research method, narrative inquiry is grounded in relational understanding, focusing on the interaction between personal experiences and socio-cultural contexts (Prabhu et al., 2022). This approach not only examines the content of stories but also emphasizes the process of narration and its close connection to the social environment. Narrative inquiry seeks to reveal the complexity and depth of individual experiences, highlighting the central role of personal stories in constructing cultural and emotional meanings.

Furthermore, the methodology of narrative inquiry is diverse and flexible, allowing for various methods of collecting and analyzing individual stories, such as semi-structured interviews, diary analysis, and personal recollections (Scheibelhofer, 2008). This flexibility and situational sensitivity provide crucial support for researching complex topics, such as death education, enabling researchers to adapt to diverse contextual needs and address specific research questions. In the field of death education, narrative inquiry can uncover how individuals construct personal meaning while coping with death-related events, thus providing profound insights for improving educational practices.

By exploring the emotions, values, and cultural factors embedded in narratives, narrative inquiry offers a powerful tool for understanding and interpreting human emotions and social behaviors. This method is particularly suitable for exploring fundamental issues in human existence and provides a promising framework for understanding the connections between individuals and society.

2.2 The Theory of Meaning-Making in Life

The theory of meaning-making in life posits that confronting death can serve as a significant catalyst for individuals (including higher education students) to explore and construct the meaning of life (Kalashnikova et al., 2022). This theory emphasizes the inseparability of life and death, delving into how death can become the starting point for meaning-making within an individual's inner world. The process of facing death prompts individuals to reflect on the purpose and meaning of life, thereby stimulating deep cultural and intellectual engagement. This exploration is of great significance for both personal and cultural development, as it encourages people to reflect on philosophical and existential issues (Dimkpa, 2023).

Especially among higher education students, the experience of death anxiety may trigger a reevaluation of life goals and values. Death anxiety often leads individuals to reflect on their life choices and priorities, thus fostering a pursuit of meaning (Rajapakse, 2024). Although this emotion is profound, it also provides an opportunity for meaning construction. Through psychological frameworks such as Terror Management Theory, individuals can manage death-related anxiety and, in the process, discover the meaning of life. Despite the inevitability of death, Terror Management Theory emphasizes that through cultural symbols and psychological resources, individuals can still find direction and value in life, motivating them to pursue goals aligned with their values and enhancing their sense of purpose (Folkerds & Coursol, 2024).

3. Methodology and Data Collection

3.1 Selection of Research Participants

The participants of this study are enrolled students from a university in Hangzhou, China. A total of 5 students from different academic backgrounds (such as humanities, social sciences) and various academic years (from first-year to fourth-year students) were selected. Although the sample size is small, this design allows for an in-depth exploration of the complexity of individual experiences and ensures that the diverse responses to the topic of death from students across different disciplines and academic years are represented.

3.2 Design of Narrative Interviews

The interviews in this study were conducted using a semi-structured format, where the researcher guided students to express their feelings, thoughts, and understanding of death through open-ended questions. The interview guide included questions such as: "How do you understand the concept of death?", "Have you ever experienced the death of a family member or friend? If so, could you share your feelings?", "What do you think is the meaning of death in your life? How do you view your relationship with death?", and "Has the topic of death influenced your attitude toward life? If so, please describe." These questions were designed to help students narrate their inner changes related to the topic of death and illustrate how they construct personal meaning around death during this process.

The participants of this study were selected from a university in Hangzhou, China, consisting of five students from different academic backgrounds (such as humanities, social sciences) and various academic years (from first-year to fourth-year students). Although the sample size is small, this design allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and ensures a diverse range of responses to the topic of death from students across different disciplines and academic levels. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how students from various backgrounds reflect on and construct meaning around death.

3.3 Data Collection Process

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face in-depth interviews, with each interview lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded using audio devices and later transcribed into text to ensure the integrity of the data and accuracy in analysis. During the interviews, the researcher focused not only on the respondents' verbal expressions but also on their non-verbal behaviors, including facial expressions, tone of voice, body movements, and pauses. These non-verbal cues supplemented the emotional content and implicit information conveyed in the respondents' narratives, providing deeper insights into their emotional experiences and cognitive shifts. The researcher guided the participants to elaborate on their emotional responses and thought processes through patient listening and heuristic questioning, aiming to gather in-depth and nuanced narrative material.

To ensure the scientific rigor and objectivity of the research process, the researcher incorporated systematic self-reflection during both data collection and analysis. Through a research journal, the researcher recorded and reflected on their cultural background, values, and emotional reactions, aiming to minimize any potential subjective biases that could influence the research results. The process of self-reflection helped the researcher dynamically adjust interview strategies, build trust with the participants, and ensure that the interpretation of interview data faithfully reflected the participants' true intentions. This approach not only enhanced the reliability and validity of the data but also strengthened the credibility of the research findings and the transparency of the research process.

3.4 Data analysis

Subject analysis was used for data analysis. The analysis process consists of the following steps:

1. Preliminary reading and coding: The researcher first conducted a preliminary reading of all the interview texts and marked key points related to the topic of death, including emotional responses, cognitive changes, and life events related to death.
2. Theme induction: Through repeated reading and comparison, the core themes related to the meaning of death are summarized, such as "fear and avoidance of death", "cognitive changes of death", and "awakening of the meaning of life".
3. Inter-thematic links: The relationship between different themes is analyzed, and how college students experience cognitive and emotional changes when facing the topic of death is explored, so as to understand the correlation between death and the meaning of life.
4. Theoretical explanation: Combined with relevant theories, this paper deeply analyzes the connotation of the theme, explores how college students reconstruct the meaning of death through narrative, and how this process helps them to awaken the meaning of life.

4. Research Results

The five participants in this study were higher education students, consisting of three females and two males as presented in Table 1. All participants were undergraduate students, aged between 18 and 22, and represented a variety of academic disciplines, including humanities and natural sciences. Among the participants, four had experienced the death of a close family member, while one had not directly faced the loss of a close relative. This diversity in academic backgrounds and personal experiences provided a comprehensive view of the participants' perspectives on the topic of death.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

No.	Gender	Age	Major	Experience of Close Family Member's Death
1	Female	20	Chinese Language and Literature	No
2	Male	22	Physics	Yes
3	Female	19	Nursing	Yes
4	Male	21	Clinical Medicine	Yes
5	Female	18	English	Yes

4.1 Main Findings

Based on the in-depth interviews with five higher education students (all names used in the study are pseudonyms), the study found that the participants' cognition and emotional responses to the topic of death went through three main stages:

Stage 1: Confusion and Avoidance

ZhangLin: The Silent Taboo in the Family

Time: An autumn afternoon

Location: Campus café

Zhang Lin gently twirled the lid of her coffee cup, her gaze lowered as the autumn leaves drifted outside the window. "When I was a child, death was never mentioned in our family," she sighed softly, her hands clasped together. "Even when it came up occasionally, people would use words like 'gone' or 'gone to another place.' It wasn't until university that I realized death was something real."

She recalled a conversation she had once had with her father, when she couldn't help but ask, "Dad, why do people die?" Her father smiled and changed the subject, saying, "Don't ask such things, kids should focus on their studies." Zhang Lin chuckled wryly, saying, "It felt like death was a 'taboo' in our generation's lives—no one wanted us to touch it."

Zhao Hao: The Truth Buried Deep in Memory

Time: Late night in the library study room

Location: University library

Under the dim light, Zhao Hao quietly flipped through his book. His gaze lingered on a page discussing the philosophy of life, and after taking a deep breath, he began to recount a long-buried memory.

"When my grandfather passed away, I was only 10 years old," his voice was low but firm. "But no one in the family told me; they just said he had 'gone on a long journey.'" He paused for a moment, his fingers gently tapping the desk. "It wasn't until a neighbor aunt casually mentioned the funeral that I learned the truth."

He explained that, although he understood as he grew older that his family had hidden the truth to protect him, the confusion and sense of isolation from his childhood never fully faded. "The family's avoidance of death made me feel like it was something distant, even unknowable."

Chen Jia: The First Shock of Loss

Time: An evening in winter

Location: The small garden downstairs of the dormitory

Chen Jia's fingers gently brushed against the early winter branches; her face bathed in the soft glow of the setting sun. At first, she spoke with a hint of nervousness, but as the conversation unfolded, her voice became much steadier.

"In the second year of high school, a very close friend of mine died in a car accident," she gazed into the distance, her eyes distant and hollow. "That was the first time I truly faced death."

She explained that she was overwhelmed with grief at the time but didn't know how to cope. She tried to talk to her family, but her mother urged her not to dwell on it, saying, "Focus on your studies, don't let these emotions affect you."

Chen Jia took a deep breath and said, "In the end, I had no choice but to slowly process this sense of loss and fear alone in a corner."

Lin Ke: Indifference under academic cloak

Time: After class

Location: Teaching Building

Linke sorted through his notebook and recalled a lecture about death in a psychology class. Her brow furrowed slightly, as if she were confused and dissatisfied. "The class did talk about death, but the teacher was very academic."

Her tone is a little helpless, fingers unconsciously across the table, "theoretical knowledge is indeed rich, but we listen to cold, without any personal feelings." Linke admitted that the format made her feel alienated. "I want to talk about how we understand and face death, but there are very few opportunities for that."

Wang Yu: An Opportunity to Break Through the Taboo

Time: After a film salon event organized by the student union

Location: Campus small theater

Wang Yu stood in the corner of the theater, gently adjusting the brim of his hat. He brought up a documentary about the end of life, and that event became his first deep reflection on death.

"The documentary was about a group of elderly people facing their own deaths," Wang Yu said with excitement in his voice. "I found it really shocking. During the discussion, everyone shared their views on death, and I realized that, in fact, we all carry confusion about it."

He explained that the discussion helped him gradually understand that avoiding death doesn't make people feel safer. On the contrary, openly talking about it can relieve psychological burdens. "It's like saying the word 'death.' At first, you're afraid, but after saying it a few times, you start to feel a sense of release."

Summary: Resonance and Reflection

The stories of the five students, from different locations and in varying contexts, present a mosaic of attitudes toward death. Throughout their lives, the avoidance of death by both family and society has acted as both a cultural taboo and a psychological barrier. However, when the open environment of university and certain events provided opportunities to discuss death, these young individuals began to confront their confusion and fear. As Zhang Lin concluded, "Death is not scary; what's scary is that we lack the courage to talk about and face it." The experiences of these five students call for

the educational system to incorporate more opportunities related to the topic of life and death - not only for academic discussion but also to help individuals move toward emotional openness and personal growth.

Stage 2: Reflection on Life and Confrontation

Wang Yu: From Inability to Accept Cherishing Every Day

In Wang Yu's memory, the passing of his grandfather felt like a devastating blow. "When my grandfather passed away, I couldn't accept it at all. It was an indescribable loss, as if the entire world had collapsed," he said, his voice laced with pain that had not yet fully healed, though his expression had taken on a calm demeanor. "During that time, I stopped caring about the trivial matters of life. I began asking myself, 'What is truly important?'" He continued, "Perhaps we all initially ignored the fragility of life and the unpredictable end it may face, because we always felt that death was far away. But when it suddenly confronted me, I learned to appreciate everything around me more deeply." Through profound self-reflection, Wang Yu realized that time spent with loved ones should no longer be taken for granted. He learned to cherish every moment and every detail—whether it was the leisurely time spent with friends or the simple act of sharing a meal.

Zhang Lin: From Losing to Reclaiming the Depth of Life

Zhang Lin also has profound feelings about death. The passing of her grandmother plunged her into a prolonged period of grief. "Grandma's departure felt as if a part of my life was taken away," she paused, taking a deep breath. "I felt empty inside, and every day I kept wondering, why couldn't she stay with me a little longer?" These heavy thoughts led her to a period of confusion. "For a long time, I felt that life had lost its color. During that time, every step I took carried an unspeakable pain." However, as time passed, Zhang Lin began to reflect on everything. She gradually realized that although her grandmother had left, the life wisdom and selfless care she had shared were forever indelible. "If my grandmother hadn't passed away, I might never have understood that what's most important in life is not how long we live, but how meaningful our lives are. Because if we only care about the length of life and ignore its depth, we miss out on some intangible treasures." She smiled, a light of understanding shining on her face. "At that moment, I realized that although life inevitably has regrets, each person can still live out infinite possibilities within the limited time they have."

Chen Jia: Growth and Enlightenment in Pain

Chen Jia's story is even more touching. The sudden passing of her friend forced her to confront death for the first time. "When I heard about my friend's death, the pain in my heart felt like a massive stone, pressing down on me, making it hard to breathe," she said, her eyes still reflecting an unresolved sadness. "We often hear that death is unpredictable, but it was then that I truly realized how direct and ruthless death can be. "However, it was through this pain that Chen Jia experienced a spiritual transformation. "I began to think that while death is inevitable, what we can control is how we fill our limited lives, how we make each relationship and each goal meaningful." She smiled gently, her expression revealing not fear, but a deeper appreciation for life. "No longer caught up in things I can't control, I began to focus on the things I can do well, and cherish the moments that add color to life."

Lin Ke: A Reconsideration of Life in the Classroom

Lin Ke recalls a discussion on death during a psychology class that led her to unprecedented reflections on the topic. "In that class, each of us wrote a letter to our future selves, discussing the meaning of death and life," Lin Ke recalls, her eyes thoughtful. "That discussion made me realize that life is not an endless process, but rather a journey with a limited timeframe. Although death is inevitable, if we live each day with intention and pay attention to every detail, perhaps death will no longer be an unbearable fear." "In the letter I wrote, I said, 'If life cannot be extended, then what is its meaning?'" This was the moment when I began to face the finite nature of life, and also an important turning point in searching for the meaning of life beyond the shadow of death," Lin Ke said with determination. "Death is not to be feared; what is truly frightening is not having lived life fully."

Zhao Hao: Self-Discovery in Farewell

When Zhao Hao reflects on the passing of his grandfather, his gaze seems to deepen. "My grandfather's death made me realize for the first time that farewell is not just a ritual; it is an inevitable part of life," he said. This realization prompted him to reassess his attitude toward death. "At that time, I thought farewell was only something that took place at the cemetery or with burial rites, but in reality, it is more about an inner dialogue with oneself, an understanding of the cycle of life and death." Zhao Hao's perspective seems more open and enlightened. "We are all walking toward the end, but this is not a signal of conclusion; it is another kind of revelation—life's meaning is not determined by how many years we live, but by whether we can leave a meaningful mark in the limited time we have." He smiled gently, as if he had found a new direction in his life. "Understanding death may, in fact, help us better understand how to move forward fearlessly."

Summary: Connecting the Past and the Future

Though the stories of these five young individuals differ, they share a common theme—the finiteness of life and the importance of viewing death and life with a deeper perspective. Through personal experiences and classroom discussions, they discovered the true meaning of existence by confronting death directly. From initial avoidance and ignorance to gradual acceptance and understanding, they learned how to better face life's regrets and challenges through continuous reflection and thought. As Zhang Lin said, "Death is not the end; rather, it is the starting point for a new beginning. Without these experiences, I might still think, like I did before, that I would have all the time in the world. "In their process of growth, death no longer remains an intangible fear, but becomes a bridge that connects the beginning and end of life, teaching them to cherish the present and appreciate the unique depth of life.

Stage 3: Acceptance of Death and the Awakening of Life

In the stories of these five students, their experiences reflect a complex emotional and intellectual evolution. From initial avoidance and fear to a gradual shift in their understanding of death, they have gone through a long process of pain, reflection, confusion, and awakening. Although most of them have not fully accepted death, each person is moving closer to acceptance, trying to understand and face this inevitable reality.

Wang Yu: A Transformation from Resistance to Calm

Wang Yu's experience is filled with inner struggle. When he lost his grandfather, he felt an emptiness and anxiety he had never known before. "Grandpa was gone, and I felt completely directionless. Death hit me too hard," he recalled, describing the pain that almost made it impossible for him to lead a normal life. "I couldn't accept the sense of loss that spread from deep within me. Death was right in front of me, as if it shattered all my sense of security. "However, as time passed, Wang Yu began to let go of his hostility toward death and started reflecting on it. "I realized that death is an inevitable natural law," he said. "Although I'm still not fully able to accept it, I've begun to slowly change my attitude. Death doesn't only bring pain; it also reminds me to cherish my limited life." His emotions have gradually shifted from initial resistance to a calm contemplation. Death is no longer a topic he avoids; instead, it has become a subtle force that motivates him to live better.

Zhang Lin: Struggling Forward in Pain

Zhang Lin's attitude towards death is even more complex, still filled with painful memories. The death of her grandmother had a huge emotional impact on her. "At that time, I felt like the entire world had lost its color," Zhang Lin's voice was low, tinged with a slight tremor. "My grandmother was the pillar of my life. When she suddenly left, I felt powerless in the face of death." Despite this, over time, Zhang Lin no longer drowned in sorrow. Although she didn't fully accept the meaning of death, through long periods of reflection and self-adjustment, she began to gradually change her way of thinking. "Death is truly hard to accept, I know, but it reminds us to live the present time more fully. I started cherishing every moment with my family and friends." Zhang Lin also mentioned that although she still couldn't completely rid herself of the fear of death, she had at least begun to understand that death is a natural part of life. In accepting this reality, she felt some release, but the journey remains difficult for her.

Chen Jia: From Unable to Bear It to Gradually Letting Go

Chen Jia experienced the loss of a close friend, and she deeply felt the enormous shock brought by death. "When my friend suddenly passed away, I couldn't understand why such a vibrant young person would disappear from our lives," she recalled. At that time, her emotions were complex and chaotic, especially in the face of the suddenness of death, which left her almost completely lost. "It took me a long time to begin processing this sense of loss and to try to rationally accept the existence of death." Chen Jia told me that although she realized death is an unavoidable part of life, her spirit still felt some resistance. "I tried to understand why it was her, why it happened now, and even now, I still have many unresolved emotions." Though her understanding and acceptance progressed slowly, through constant reflection and emotional release, she gradually learned to move forward through the pain. "Death still makes me feel powerless, but I realize that everyone's death is a part of life, and I am slowly adjusting my mindset."

Lin Ke: Exploration and Awakening within Rationality

Lin Ke's reflection on death began during a classroom discussion. In a lecture about death, she heard the professor talk about the philosophy of death and various historical perspectives on it, and suddenly, she felt that her understanding of death had opened up to a new world. "I used to avoid thinking about these issues, but after listening to the lecture, I suddenly felt that death is not just a dark fate, it is also a part of life," she said, her tone filled with a sense of awakening. Despite this, Lin Ke still hadn't fully accepted death. She admitted that deep inside, death remains a troubling and painful subject for her. "Although I've started to no longer fear death, I still can't shake the fear of the unknown that comes with it. Every time I think about how I too will eventually face death; I can't help but feel an inexplicable sense of panic." After going through self-reflection, she realized that although death cannot be ignored, she is more willing to adopt a

positive attitude toward life. "No matter the outcome, I hope to live a fulfilling life and make my existence more meaningful."

Zhao Hao: Facing Death with a Detached Attitude

Zhao Hao appears calm, with a certain detachment in his attitude. After the passing of his grandfather, he began to deeply understand the dialectical relationship between life and death. "At first, I was very sad, but as time passed, I realized that death is a natural phenomenon. It's not just a part of life; it's more like a continuation," Zhao Hao said, his eyes showing remarkable determination. "In my pain, I slowly came to terms with missing my grandfather, learned to let go, and at the same time, learned to cherish every moment of the present." Though he has accepted the existence of death, deep inside, it remains a topic he prefers not to discuss. "I think death is indeed inevitable, but during these days of being alive, what matters is how to make each day more meaningful." Zhao Hao's words express a sentiment shared by many: even though ultimate acceptance of death may take time, people can still find a deeper value in life through their contemplation of it.

Summary: Collective Exploration: From Avoidance to Reflection

Although the experiences of these five students vary, they collectively reveal an important theme: in the process of engaging with the topic of death, through continuous inner reflection and self-adjustment, they gradually shifted from avoidance to acceptance, and then to deeper contemplation. Although no one fully accepts death, they have come to understand the delicate balance between life and death as they progressively overcome their fear and face death with greater calmness. Wang Yu summarized in an interview: "Death is a part, it is inevitable, but behind death, we can still find more meaning in life. Every end of a life reminds us to live more authentically." These explorations and reflections have led them to new insights and understandings of life. The tug-of-war between life and death has made them cherish the present more, while also searching for a way to live beyond fear. This unfinished acceptance is their most genuine experience of the meaning of life.

5. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that university students' cognition and emotions when facing the topic of death are complex, exhibiting significant evolution at different stages. From initial avoidance and fear to gradual understanding and acceptance, the death narratives of university students reflect their growth and transformation in terms of the meaning of life (Islam and Sayeed, 2022). Death is not just an abstract concept; through personal experiences and reflection, it becomes an important opportunity for the reconstruction of life's meaning (Steffen and Coyle, 2011). Furthermore, this study offers a fresh perspective for death education among university students. The research demonstrates that death education should not only focus on the transmission of knowledge, but also emphasize the transformation of students' emotions and cognition. Through the narrative approach, university students are able to construct their understanding of death through reflection, thus achieving an awakening of life.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals the cognitive and emotional transformation of university students when facing the topic of death. From initial confusion and avoidance to later acceptance and awakening, university students gradually constructed their personal view on death and, on this basis, developed a profound understanding of life. Future research could further explore the differences in students' views on death across various cultural contexts, and investigate how educational practices can promote the deepening of both death education and the meaning of life for students.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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