



Relational Vs Self-Focused Death Anxiety: Big Five Correlates In an Albanian Community Sample

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Abstract

Background: Most evidence on Big Five correlates of death anxiety comes from Western samples, leaving cross-cultural generalizability uncertain. We tested whether trait–mortality links replicate in Albania while separating fear of one’s own death from fear of others’ death.

Method: Albanian adults (N = 530; 80% female; age 18–58, M = 24.9) completed the BFI-2-S and the revised Collett–Lester Fear of Death Scale (two 7-item subscales). Analyses prioritized effect sizes (95% confidence intervals), correction for multiple testing, and equivalence testing to interpret null associations.

Results: Neuroticism related to fear of one’s own death ($r = .17$, 95% CI [.09, .26]) and Agreeableness related to fear of others’ death ($r = .13$, 95% CI [.05, .21]); both survived Bonferroni correction ($p < .005$). Other traits showed small, non-significant associations; Conscientiousness and Openness (for fear of own death) were statistically equivalent to negligible effects ($|r| < .10$). Descriptively, fear of others’ death was substantially higher than fear of one’s own death (M = 4.20 vs 2.98 on a 1–5 scale), suggesting a relationally weighted mortality concern. Religious affiliation did not differentiate either dimension.

Conclusion: Trait correlates of death anxiety appear dimension-specific in Albania, with notable emphasis on relational mortality fear; longitudinal work is needed to test mechanisms and temporal ordering.

Keywords: Albania; Big Five; death anxiety; fear of death; personality

1. Introduction

Death anxiety is clinically consequential and theoretically central to existential psychology, yet its expression is shaped by both dispositional factors and cultural meaning systems. Across traditions, people simultaneously acknowledge mortality and defend against it through denial, symbolic continuity, and relational anchoring (Becker, 1973; Yalom, 1980). In contemporary research, death anxiety is often operationalized as a multidimensional construct rather than a single global fear, with separable concerns about one’s own death and the death of significant

others (Collett & Lester, 1969; Lester, 2004). These dimensions differ phenomenologically: fear of one's own death centers on bodily vulnerability and personal nonexistence, whereas fear of others' death is strongly relational, often overlapping with attachment threat and anticipatory grief (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008; Stroebe & Schut, 2001).

Within the Five-Factor Model, Neuroticism has repeatedly emerged as the most consistent correlate of death anxiety, aligning with heightened negative affectivity, threat vigilance, and catastrophic interpretation of internal cues (Iverach et al., 2014; Watson & Clark, 1984). Proposed protective pathways include Extraversion via social connection and positive affect (Lucas & Diener, 2001) and Conscientiousness via perceived control and future-oriented planning (Bogg & Roberts, 2004). However, the literature is heavily weighted toward Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (WEIRD) samples, raising the likelihood that "known" associations are partly context-bound rather than universal (Henrich et al., 2010).

A theoretical framework that has been particularly productive for understanding mortality defenses is Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 1991). TMT proposes that awareness of death generates existential terror managed through investment in cultural worldviews and self-esteem, which serve as symbolic buffers against mortality salience. Crucially, TMT predicts that personality traits and cultural contexts jointly determine which symbolic resources are available and how potent they are as anxiety buffers. Cross-cultural research has borne out the cultural specificity of these dynamics: studies in Arab, Asian, and Southern European samples have found that death anxiety levels, factor structures, and personality correlates diverge meaningfully from those observed in North American and Northern European samples (Abdel-Khalek, 2002; Tang et al., 2002; Lester & Abdel-Khalek, 2003). These findings argue against assuming that trait–mortality links documented in WEIRD populations are invariant across cultural settings.

The Albanian context warrants specific attention as a testing ground for these questions. Albania underwent one of the most radical social transformations in modern European history, including decades of enforced state atheism under communist rule (1967–1991), followed by rapid socioeconomic liberalization (Vurmo, 2011). Despite this enforced secularism, strong familistic values — organized around the concept of the "fis" (patrilineal kin group) and the Kanun customary law — persisted throughout the communist period and continue to shape contemporary social life (Gjonca et al., 2002; Young, 2000). In such a context, the subjective meaning of death may be organized less around individual extinction than around relational rupture — the dissolution of bonds that constitute social identity. This cultural feature provides a direct test of whether mortality fear is fundamentally self-focused, as much Western existential theory implies, or whether relational configurations of death anxiety may be primary in interdependent cultural settings.

Accordingly, the present study is positioned as a replication-with-extension. It tests the association between Big Five traits and two death-anxiety dimensions in an Albanian community sample, while adding a precision-oriented analytic approach that reduces reliance on directional claims that cross-sectional designs cannot justify. We hypothesized that (H1) Neuroticism would positively relate to fear of one's own death and (H2) Agreeableness would positively relate to fear of others' death. We additionally explored whether religious affiliation differentiates death-anxiety scores, given mixed prior findings on religiosity and mortality fears (Park, 2010; Steger et al., 2006).

2. Method

a. Participants and procedure

Participants were Albanian adults recruited online via social networks and academic platforms using purposive and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria were age 18–58, Albanian-language fluency, and provision of electronic informed consent. The final sample comprised $N = 530$ respondents (80% female; 18% male; 2% other/unspecified; age $M = 24.9$, $SD = 5.29$). The survey was anonymous, uncompensated, and required approximately 5–10 minutes to complete. Data were stored in encrypted form and analyzed in aggregate.

b. Measures

Personality was assessed with the Big Five Inventory-2 Short Form (BFI-2-S; Soto & John, 2017), a 30-item measure of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Domain scores were computed as mean item scores after reverse-scoring negatively keyed items. Internal consistency varied across domains: Extraversion $\alpha = .71$, Agreeableness $\alpha = .53$, Conscientiousness $\alpha = .67$, Neuroticism $\alpha = .78$, Openness $\alpha = .55$. Agreeableness and Openness fell below the conventional threshold of .70, which should be noted as a psychometric limitation; associations involving these two domains should be interpreted with greater caution, as attenuated reliability may have reduced statistical power to detect true effects.

Death anxiety was measured with the revised Collett–Lester Fear of Death Scale (CL-FODS; Collett & Lester, 1969; Lester, 2004). We used two 7-item subscales: fear of one's own death and fear of others' death. Items were rated from 1 (not at all afraid) to 5 (extremely afraid), and subscale scores were computed as means. Both subscales showed good reliability ($\alpha = .85$ for fear of own death; $\alpha = .88$ for fear of others' death).

All instruments were translated into Albanian using forward translation and back-translation, followed by pilot testing to ensure linguistic clarity and conceptual equivalence. Specifically, items were first translated from English to Albanian by a bilingual psychologist, then independently back-translated into English by a second bilingual translator blind to the original. Discrepancies between the original and back-translated versions were resolved through discussion and revision until conceptual equivalence was achieved. Pilot testing with a small convenience sample ($n = 20$) confirmed that items were linguistically accessible and that response distributions were plausible. We note that formal confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and measurement invariance testing of the Albanian BFI-2-S were not conducted in the present study; this is acknowledged as a limitation, as it means structural equivalence with the original instrument has not been formally established in this sample.

c. Analytical strategy (methodological emphasis on precision)

Analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics (v.27). We reported descriptive statistics (means, SDs) for all variables and used Pearson correlations to estimate associations between traits and death-anxiety dimensions. Given the cross-sectional design, we interpret associations as correlational, not directional.

To address concerns about “novelty” being driven by p values rather than magnitude, we complemented NHST with (a) 95% confidence intervals for effect sizes, (b) a Bonferroni adjustment for multiple correlation tests ($\alpha = .005$ for 10 trait–outcome pairs), and (c) equivalence testing for null effects using a smallest effect size of interest of $|r| = .10$ (Lakens et al., 2018). The SESOI of $|r| = .10$ was selected on the basis of established conventions in personality and health psychology, where correlations below this threshold are generally considered too small to carry theoretical or practical significance (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016; Lakens et al., 2018). This threshold corresponds approximately to the 25th percentile of effect sizes in meta-analyses of trait–outcome associations, making it a conservative but defensible lower bound for inferring the presence of a meaningful association. For additional interpretability, we also computed Bayes factor approximations based on the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) to quantify relative evidence for an association versus the null (Wagenmakers, 2007). Specifically, BF10 values were derived using the formula $BF10 = \exp(dBIC/2)$, where $dBIC$ is the difference in BIC between the null model (intercept only) and the model including the predictor, computed from the Pearson correlation test output (Wagenmakers, 2007). Results were interpreted using conventional thresholds: $BF10 > 3$ as moderate evidence for an association, $BF10 > 10$ as strong evidence, and $BF10 < 1/3$ as evidence for the null (Jeffreys, 1961; Wagenmakers, 2007). All computations were verified in R and cross-checked against IBM SPSS Statistics v.27 outputs.

d. Ethics

The study followed the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and involved no deception or collection of identifiable data. In line with minimal-risk guidance under institutional and national norms, formal IRB review was waived. All participants provided electronic informed consent prior to participation.

3. Results

a. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 summarizes descriptive statistics for personality traits and death-anxiety dimensions. Participants reported moderate fear of their own death ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.12$) but high fear of others’ death ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.69$) on a 1–5 scale.

Variable	M	SD	α
Extraversion	3.43	0.66	.71
Agreeableness	3.52	0.52	.53
Conscientiousness	3.75	0.59	.67
Neuroticism	2.96	0.73	.78

Openness to Experience	3.61	0.58	.55
Fear of own death	2.98	1.12	.91
Fear of others' death	4.20	0.69	.86

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and reliabilities for study variables ($N = 530$). α = Cronbach's alpha. Agreeableness and Openness α values fall below the conventional .70 threshold (see text).

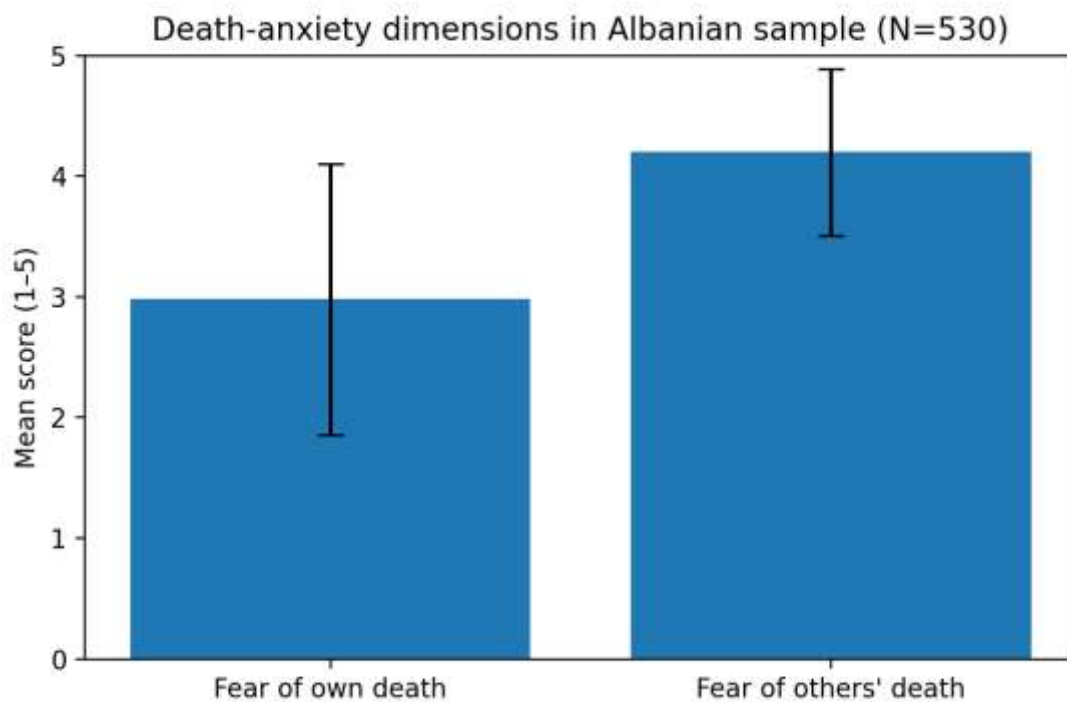


Figure 1: Mean levels of fear of own death vs fear of others' death (error bars = SD).

b. Trait associations with death anxiety

Table 2 presents effect-size estimates for key trait–death anxiety associations, including 95% confidence intervals and BIC-based Bayes factor approximations. As hypothesized, Neuroticism showed a small positive association with fear of one's own death ($r = .17$). Agreeableness showed a small positive association with fear of others' death ($r = .13$). Other tested correlations were small and non-significant; in equivalence testing, Conscientiousness and Openness (for fear of own death) were compatible with negligible effects ($|r| < .10$). To estimate unique trait contributions while accounting for shared variance, two multiple regressions entered all five traits simultaneously as predictors. For fear of one's own death, the model explained modest variance ($R^2 = .036$, $R^2_{adj} = .027$), with Neuroticism the sole significant independent predictor ($\beta = .300$, $SE = .071$, $t = 4.25$, $p < .001$). For fear of others' death, the model explained more variance ($R^2 = .112$, $R^2_{adj} = .103$), with three significant predictors: Neuroticism ($\beta = .289$, $SE = .041$, $t = 6.99$, $p < .001$), Conscientiousness ($\beta = .171$, $SE = .054$, $t = 3.20$, $p = .001$), and Agreeableness ($\beta = .155$, $SE = .056$, $t = 2.75$, $p = .006$). The

Conscientiousness association with fear of others' death was not apparent in the bivariate analysis and emerged only when shared trait variance was partialled out, suggesting suppression; this pattern warrants replication before drawing strong conclusions.

As a robustness check, models were rerun controlling for age and gender ($n = 509$, excluding participants with missing demographic data). Results were substantively unchanged: Neuroticism remained the sole significant predictor of fear of one's own death ($\beta = .245$, $SE = .073$, $t = 3.36$, $p = .001$), and the same three traits remained significant predictors of fear of others' death (Neuroticism: $\beta = .248$, $SE = .043$, $t = 5.82$, $p < .001$; Agreeableness: $\beta = .166$, $SE = .057$, $t = 2.90$, $p = .004$; Conscientiousness: $\beta = .126$, $SE = .056$, $t = 2.25$, $p = .025$). Gender emerged as a significant covariate on both outcomes (fear of own death: $\beta = -.498$, $p < .001$; fear of others' death: $\beta = -.216$, $p = .006$), with male participants reporting lower death anxiety on both dimensions, consistent with prior literature on gender differences in mortality salience (Cicirelli, 2002). Age was not a significant covariate in either model.

Trait	Outcome	r	95% CI	p	BF10 (approx)
Neuroticism	Fear of own death	0.174	[0.09, 0.26]	<.001	150.00
Agreeableness	Fear of others' death	0.131	[0.05, 0.21]	0.003	4.27
Extraversion	Fear of own death	-0.030	[-0.11, 0.06]	0.491	0.06
Extraversion	Fear of others' death	0.068	[-0.02, 0.15]	0.118	0.15
Openness	Fear of own death	-0.024	[-0.11, 0.06]	0.581	0.05
Conscientiousness	Fear of own death	-0.007	[-0.09, 0.08]	0.872	0.04

Table 2: Key correlations with confidence intervals and BIC-based Bayes factor approximations (Wagenmakers, 2007).

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. E	3.43	0.66	.71	—					
2. A	3.52	0.52	.53	+.16**	—				
3. C	3.75	0.59	.67	+.35**	+.22**	—			
4. N	2.96	0.73	.78	-.32**	-.11*	-.27**	—		
5. O	3.61	0.58	.55	+.27**	+.12*	+.20**	-.07	—	

6. FOD	2.98	1.12	.91	-.03	+.03	-.01	+.18**	-.02	—
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*Table 3: Full intercorrelation matrix with descriptive statistics (N = 530). E = Extraversion; A = Agreeableness; C = Conscientiousness; N = Neuroticism; O = Openness; FOD = Fear of own death; FOD-O = Fear of others' death. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .005$ (Bonferroni-corrected threshold).*

Note. E = Extraversion; A = Agreeableness; C = Conscientiousness; N = Neuroticism; O = Openness; FOD = Fear of own death; FOD-O = Fear of others' death. $p < .05$. ** $p < .005$ (Bonferroni-corrected threshold). $N = 530$.

c. Religious affiliation

A one-way ANOVA tested differences in death anxiety across categories of religious affiliation. No significant differences emerged for fear of one's own death, $F(3, 525) = 1.89$, $p = .13$, or for fear of others' death, $F(3, 525) = 1.14$, $p = .33$. Religious affiliation was measured as a categorical variable (Muslim, Christian, Atheist, Other), which captures nominal group membership but not the intensity or frequency of religious practice. This is a recognized limitation: research consistently shows that it is religiosity (i.e., the degree of engagement, practice, and belief salience) rather than mere affiliation that predicts death-related attitudes (Ardelt, 2003; Wink & Scott, 2005). Future studies in the Albanian context should assess religiosity using continuous or multi-item instruments capturing frequency of practice, subjective importance of faith, and afterlife belief, which may reveal associations obscured by the binary affiliation measure used here.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the cross-cultural robustness of trait correlates of death anxiety and to test whether associations differ by mortality dimension in an Albanian community sample. Two main findings stood out: (a) Neuroticism aligned with fear of one's own death, and (b) Agreeableness aligned with fear of others' death. Both effects were small in magnitude but statistically reliable and survived conservative multiplicity control, consistent with the view that trait–mortality links are present yet modest.

The pattern is theoretically coherent. Neuroticism reflects chronic negative affectivity and low tolerance of uncertainty, which plausibly intensifies self-focused mortality fears and anticipatory threat monitoring (Iverach et al., 2014; Watson & Clark, 1984). In contrast, the Agreeableness association was specific to fear of others' death, suggesting that empathic attunement and relational investment can amplify anticipatory grief and distress about separation, even when they are adaptive in most interpersonal contexts (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008; Stroebe & Schut, 2001). A notable finding from the multiple regression analysis was the emergence of Conscientiousness as an independent predictor of fear of others' death ($\beta = .171$, $p = .001$), a pattern that was not apparent in the bivariate correlations. This suggests a potential suppression effect: when shared variance with other traits is removed, Conscientiousness's unique contribution to relational mortality fear becomes visible. One interpretation is that the future-oriented planning and goal-directedness associated with Conscientiousness heightens sensitivity to the loss of others as a disruption of anticipated life trajectories and social futures.

However, this is speculative, and the pattern warrants independent replication before being incorporated into theoretical accounts.

A striking descriptive feature was the pronounced gap between fear of others' death and fear of one's own death. While cross-study comparisons should be made cautiously, this "relational skew" is consistent with a cultural ecology in which family bonds and social interdependence carry high psychological weight. In such settings, the most psychologically potent mortality cue may not be personal extinction but relational rupture: the imagined absence of the people who hold daily life together.

From a methodological standpoint, the present work responds directly to a common critique of incremental trait research: significance without interpretability. By emphasizing confidence intervals, multiplicity control, and equivalence testing, we show that several hypothesized links were not merely "non-significant" but compatible with effects too small to matter practically under a prespecified threshold. This is useful for theory pruning and for avoiding overfitting cultural narratives onto noise.

Clinically, the findings support a dimension-specific formulation. For individuals high in Neuroticism, interventions that target intolerance of uncertainty and catastrophic interpretation may be especially relevant when mortality cues are self-focused (Hayes et al., 2011). For highly agreeable individuals, work on emotion boundaries and differentiating compassion from over-identification may be more relevant when death anxiety is relational (i.e., oriented toward loss of others).

Limitations are substantial and should not be hidden behind confident verbs. The design is cross-sectional, preventing causal or directional inference. The sample was young and predominantly female (80% female; M age = 24.9 years), and recruitment was online and nonprobability-based, likely over-representing urban, educated, and digitally connected respondents. Robustness checks confirmed that the primary findings (Neuroticism predicting fear of one's own death; Neuroticism and Agreeableness predicting fear of others' death) were maintained after controlling for age and gender; however, the strong female skew means the present estimates may not generalize to the broader Albanian adult population, and the male subsample ($n = 96$) was too small to permit reliable gender-stratified analyses.

A further limitation concerns common-method bias. All measures were self-report and administered within the same online survey session, creating conditions under which shared method variance could inflate associations between personality and death anxiety beyond their true magnitude (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Social desirability pressures are also relevant: death anxiety is a socially sensitive topic, and Albanian cultural norms around stoicism and family honor may lead respondents to underreport fear of their own death in particular, potentially contributing to the observed asymmetry between the two subscale means. No behavioral anchors, implicit measures, or social desirability scales were included to assess this possibility. No formal attention checks were embedded in the survey; it is therefore not possible to estimate the proportion of responses provided inattentively, which may have introduced unsystematic noise into the reliability estimates.

Future work should combine longitudinal designs with theoretically proximal mediators (e.g., attachment insecurity, meaning in life, intolerance of uncertainty) and, ideally, incorporate qualitative narratives of death to capture culturally specific meaning-making

processes (Park, 2010; Steger et al., 2006). Psychometric refinement of the Albanian BFI-2-S through CFA and measurement invariance testing would also strengthen the foundation for future trait research in this context. Religion should be assessed dimensionally, capturing practice frequency, belief salience, and afterlife conviction alongside nominal affiliation. Finally, future samples should target demographic balance — including male participants and a broader age range — and use multi-method assessment to reduce common-method confounding.

5. Conclusion

In an Albanian community sample, Neuroticism related to fear of one's own death and Agreeableness related to fear of others' death, while other trait associations were small. Descriptively, participants reported substantially higher fear of others' death than fear of their own death, highlighting the value of separating mortality dimensions in culturally embedded research. The findings are best understood as a replication-with-extension that maps boundary conditions and motivates longitudinal, mechanism-focused follow-up work.

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