The Effect of Culture on the Perception of Death

[Name]

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PERCEPTION OF DEATH

Abstract

Death is viewed through the lens of culture, and an individual’s culture affects how both their own death and the death of others. The impact of culture manifests itself in beliefs about the afterlife (or lack thereof), in rituals and symbols associated with the deceased, and how the living feel about life after being exposed to death. Current research shows that culture is a great influencer on the individual’s perception of death and is responsible for the creation of death rituals and rites to alleviate the loss of control caused by death. This report examines the ecological systems approach proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner and shows the significance of cultural interactions on the actions of the individual. The five stages of emotions experienced by the dying, a series of stages put forth by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross is also discussed to elaborate on the individuality of death perception within the broader scope of culture.

Excellent abstract!!
PERCEPTION OF DEATH

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Death is the natural conclusion to life. It is inevitable, inescapable, and can be brought about untimely by disease or disaster. The reaction to death, however, is not as concrete or consistent. From a broad demographic, such as the entirety of the Catholic faith, down to an individual as specific as a young man from a certain island during a certain time experience death yet react differently to it and its implications. Despite the universality of death as a necessary component of the human condition, no two people respond the same to it. Candles, flowers, prayers, or chants may be said on behalf of the dead, or for the benefit of the living. One person may erect a shrine filled with pictures of the deceased, while another may sell all their belongings and never speak the name of the deceased again. If death is universal and human, then why are the reactions to death so varied? The individual is a culmination of their genetics and culture; what they are and what they are taught. Culture is the ultimate determining factor in how a person responds to death, which creates differences in beliefs about the afterlife, the response of the living towards mortality, and the rituals involved in coping with death, both immediately after death or long-term.

Although belief in an afterlife takes many forms across cultures, the belief in life after death (or lack thereof) is a major component of grief and coping with death. One study done by researchers from the Department of Clinical Psychology at Antioch University, New England sought to examine the relationship between 51 Italian-American women and their fathers, and how the individual beliefs of the women affected how they coped with the deaths of their fathers. The women varied not only in occupational and educational background, but also in age (ranging from 33 to 86 years of age), and in religious affiliation. Many of the women claimed a Catholic background, but even within that group there were drastic differences in belief (Mangione,
PERCEPTION OF DEATH

Lyons & DiCello, 2016). The similarities of culture arose from the Italian-American background, and somewhat from the geographical region; most of the participants were from the Northeastern United States (Mangione, Lyons & DiCello, 2016)

Despite some of the women reporting that their fathers had not been religious or spiritual in any capacity, those women still reported that their own personal beliefs played an important part with the grieving process after their father died. Several expressed beliefs in communicating with their dead fathers through dreams or signs (a butterfly, a certain number, etc). Other woman stated that their fathers had been incredibly religious, and their response to the death had been based on that shared belief with their father, especially regarding an afterlife. Beliefs in an afterlife were consistent in frequency, but not in form; some were traditional to the Catholic faith (heaven, hell, or purgatory), some were nontraditional, and some professed no belief one way or another. The use of shrines dedicated to the deceased was common, typically consisting of pictures, candles, and other articles that had belonged to their fathers (Mangione, Lyons & DiCello, 2016). Even within this small subset of culturally similar people, there were stark differences and recurring similarities that reflected the complexities within the group and display the variety of ways that people from the same cultural background can interpret those beliefs and manifest them in perceptions of death.

As previously mentioned, the use of shrines or other physical manifestations of the deceased is a common reaction to death, as well as the use of rituals to alleviate the weight of the loss. Rituals may be physical in nature, such as use of prayer beads or rosaries, or nonphysical, such as observing a certain date or listening to a specific song in remembrance of the deceased. Researchers Michael Norton and Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School set out to determine how people used rituals to cope with loss. Their hypothesis stated that rituals helped to
psychologically alleviate the pain of loss by reestablishing a sense of control in the mind of the person who has experienced loss (Norton & Gino, 2014). They conducted three separate experiments to determine the effectiveness of rituals and whether anything can be accepted as a ritual, or if the person must perceive the action as a ritual for it to be effective.

Ultimately, the researchers concluded that rituals do provide a sense of relief to a person who has suffered loss by restoring a sense of perceived control after an uncontrollable event (such as death.) They also concluded that rituals are of a purposeful nature and must be acknowledged as a ritual to receive the benefits of such (Norton & Gino, 2014). Although this study did not focus on culture and its effects specifically, it is easy to draw the parallel between the actions performed as rituals for the experiments, such as symbolically tearing up paper, and the rituals performed for the dead in many cultures, such as cutting of hair or burning an effigy. By destroying a symbol (or in some cases, maintaining one), a person who is coping with death gains a small form of control over the uncontrollable force of death.

The influence of culture resonates through beliefs and rituals towards the dead, but also finds its way into feelings towards life as well. A person dealing with the death of a loved one is, by extension, faced with their own mortality. This reflection on life can take a positive or negative turn depending on way the individual was taught to think about death. One study done by researchers Christine Ma-Kellams and Jim Blascovich of the Department of Psychology and Brain Sciences at the University of California set out to determine the effects of culture on the individual perception of life after being exposed to the concept of their own mortality (Ma-Kellams & Blascovich, 2012). The two sides contrasted were the “eastern” holistic beliefs of East Asia, which emphasize duality of “yin” and “yang” and similarly, life and death as intrinsically connected; the other side examined was that of the “west” with a focus on the
PERCEPTION OF DEATH

United States and European American beliefs that are primarily linear in nature, emphasized by a need for legacy and lasting impact (Ma-Kellams & Blascovich, 2012).

Throughout the five experiments performed by Ma-Kellams and Blascovich, the participants of East Asian background tended to respond positively to every day activities, humor, and other simple aspects of life after being exposed to thoughts of death and personal mortality. In contrast, those of European American background responded negatively to the same stimuli, only responding positively towards activities that created a sense of lasting impact, implying a cultural importance on personal legacy. The reactions appeared to be based entirely on cultural upbringing, and nearly all the participants within the respective cultural groups responded similarly to the other participants in their own group (Ma-Kellams & Blascovich, 2012). Not only did the groups respond in form with the hypothesized responses, but when participants of both groups were given articles to read that promoted either a western (linear) belief system or an eastern (holistic) belief system, the participants who received the holistic articles responded positively to thoughts of life in the face of mortality as the East Asian participants had in previous experiments, showing the effect of the cultural beliefs upon the perceptions of death and mortality (Ma-Kellams & Blascovich, 2012).

The ecological-systems approach, as proposed by developmentalist Urie Bronfenbrenner, proposes that individuals are affected by three different levels of influence around them. At the furthest circle is the Macrosystem, which encompasses broad themes such as cultural values, political ideologies, and social conditions. This ring of the model is the most general of the three but includes the broadest forms of the systems that get increasingly narrow as you go inward towards the individual. The middle ring, the Exosystem, is comprised of more specifics, such as religious institutions and educational institutions. Finally, the innermost level, the closest to the
PERCEPTION OF DEATH

individual, is the Microsystem and consists of those the individual interacts with the most often, such as family, peers, neighbors, and those who attend their house of worship (Berger, 2016).

Although the ecological systems approach is typically viewed from the inside out, it becomes more evident going from the outermost to innermost level that broad schemes trickle through and influence the levels closer to the individual. The religious philosophies of a Tibetan monk would influence the workings of the religion itself and determine how the individual temple is maintained based on those beliefs. Likewise, the monk, influenced by these patterns, would continue them and uphold the beliefs, continuing the cycle. When he dies, his fellow monks would uphold the shared belief based on their holy texts or teachings, sanctifying, preparing, and enacting funeral rites in line with those teachings. There would be no reason for the monks to bury their friend in the manner of a Judeo-Christian or a Neo-Pagan follower of Týr. The choices of the monk are entirely influenced by the culture he was born into, which is interconnected with the culture of those immediately around him, although differences may arise if there are different belief sects within the same group, as in the case with the Italian-American women mentioned previously. A shared belief system does not necessarily mean a same expression of belief.

Culture not only impacts the loved ones the deceased, but also the dying before they take their last breath. Many fear death; some long for it. As discussed, the universal of death is not accompanied by a universal reaction to death, as each person has been conditioned to feel a certain way towards it due to the beliefs of the culture they were raised in. A holistic belief system may feel that death is the completion of life, or perhaps the start of a new one; a linear belief system may create a sense of uncertainty, believing that this life is all there is, and the great sleep is closing in. They will never be who they once were, or perhaps they will spend
eternity in a designated afterlife as a form of themselves. Although there is no set reaction to death, researcher Elisabeth Kübler-Ross observed that dying patients followed a pattern of five stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance (Berger, 2016). As previously mentioned, the researchers who observed those with a holistic point of view, seemed to bypass all the stages and end up at Acceptance, whereas those with a linear belief system tended to lean towards one of the previous four, if not all of them. Individuals do not necessarily go through all five or go through them in order. Culture is an important factor in how individuals cope with death, both their own and the death of those around them.

The individual is the final determining factor in the unique perceptions of death that exist across the world, as no two people have the exact same life experiences. The similarities arise from shared culture, and it is culture that influences the greater aspects that manifest in rituals and beliefs towards the inevitable end. The need for control, purpose, and meaning in chaos are evident in the rites and beliefs towards death. Either the hope for a better life than this one, or to give meaning to the only life they are given, individuals seek out ways to understand that which cannot be surpassed, and beliefs across all cultures are created around the hope that the end is not the end.
PERCEPTION OF DEATH

Perfect APA style!

References


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P/A Agreement
Pronoun/Antecedent agreement:
A pronoun usually refers to something earlier in the text. The thing to which it refers is known as the pronoun’s antecedent. A pronoun and its antecedent must match in number; a singular pronoun must be used when referring to a singular noun and a plural pronoun must be used when referring to a plural noun.

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