

Attitudes Towards Death : Some Observations.

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Abstract :

The purpose of this essay is to highlight the responses towards death. Studies suggest that although people like to deny their own deaths they ultimately accept it for the fact that death is a universal reality. Although most people believe that the oldsters are more afraid of death than the youngsters, most gerontological studies do not support this view and say that the opposite is true. The author takes a different position and suggests that the fear of death is more latent and less manifest among the youngsters and it is more manifest and less latent among the oldsters. Further, he suggests that all human beings are more or less afraid of death. However, some youngsters may be more fearful of death than some oldsters and some oldsters may be more fearful of death than some youngsters. It depends on one's socialization and the formation of personality.

Introduction :

How do the people respond to death? Are they afraid of death? If yes, why are they afraid of it? Do the people accept their deaths? If yes, why and how do they do so? Many people believe that compared to the younger people, elderly are more afraid of death. To what extent is this view correct? These issues have been analyzed in the following pages.

Death is one of the central concepts of thanatology. Thanatology is the study of biological, social, psychological and other relevant aspects of death and dying. Since most deaths take place in old age, it (death) is an important area of social gerontology or sociology of aging. However before we embark on the main theme of our essay it is necessary to define the term death. According to the United Nations, death refers to "the total and permanent disappearance of all evidence of life at any time after birth has taken place."¹ When the heart and breathing cease to function death becomes almost inevitable. However to be sure, physicians usually try to examine if brain death has taken place. If they notice irreversible absence of brain function in a person they declare the man/woman dead.²

Problems of studying attitude towards death.

There are some problems in studying the attitude towards death. Attitude towards death is often complex and it is of changing nature. Attitude may depend on age, sex, religion and marital status. It also depends on cultural variation among other factors. The issue of attitude towards death is also a matter of emotion. Therefore, it is a psycho-social phenomenon. It is often very difficult to comprehend and assess one's real attitude towards death. A researcher can hardly be ascertained about one's attitude by simply asking question as to whether one is afraid of death. For example, a respondent can just say that he/she is not afraid of death and seldom thinks of and talks about his/her own death. This brief comment may lead

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us to conclude that the respondent has taken the issue of death easy and he/she is not afraid of death i.e. he/she has no negative reactions to death. But this conclusion may not be correct. It may so happen that the person in question is so afraid of death that she/he is trying to avoid the matter of death and unwilling to think and talk about the matter in detail. However, the study of attitude toward death is difficult, but not an impossible issue to handle, and here, in this paper, we would like to do this job.

Types of attitude towards death

Two major types of attitude have been identified. One of these is the fear of death and denial; and the other is the acceptance of death. Denial means that one does not like to believe or recognize death for oneself; and acceptance means awareness of our finitude of life, planning for, and even approval of one's own death. The first one may also be termed as the negative attitude and the second, positive. There are other forms of reactions to death about which I shall talk later.

Fear of death and denial: The negative attitude

Almost all people are more or less afraid of death and therefore, they can hardly think of their own death. Most people think like this; 'They will die, not me;' Death is imminent for others, and my death is too far.' These perceptions about death reflect avoidance, the fear of death and denial. It is denial for the fact that one can hardly think of his/her own death. (although they know and believe that death is also waiting for them).

Studies on death suggest two explanations for human fear of death. One explanation claims that the fear of death is learned. It means people learn to be afraid of death from society. During the process of early socialization children notice that their elderly people respond to death in a negative and fearful manner. Thus, they also learn to be afraid of death. If the children did not see others to be afraid of death, perhaps they would not have developed the fear of death. Another explanation suggests that fear of death is the inseparable part of human existence and therefore, it can not be changed. It is an inborn human nature. Living organism will seldom like its own extinction. Therefore, fear of death and denial is a natural part of human condition. It does not require to be learned. For, it is already there within the human being.³

All people are more or less afraid of death. **How can this be ascertained?** One of the symbolic evidences of fear of death finds expression at the time when people report or send message of death. When one dies, people usually do not utter the word; death'. They usually do not say, 'he/she has died'. They want to avoid the words 'death', 'died' etc. Instead, they say, 'he/she expired'; 'he passed away', 'she is no more with us', 'he breathed the last', 'she left us once for all', 'God took him away', etc. Fear of death and denial is also found in sympathy cards. Upon learning one's death many people in western society send sympathy or consolation cards to the kins of the deceased person. Such consolation or sympathy cards usually do not contain the word 'death'. Instead, metaphoric words and language are used. In the United States a researcher found the word 'death' in only six, out of 200 sympathy cards he studied.⁴

Thus, we notice that people make a very careful effort to avoid the term death; instead, they use metaphor; and this behavior is clearly an indication of the fear of death, avoidance and denial. Many people consider the topic of death as taboo or forbidden matter. Some people do not like to talk about death in front of their children and they do not like to allow their children to see dead body. This behavior is also an indication of the fear of death.

Why are the people afraid of death and why do they deny it? Studies conducted on the etiology of the fear of death identified some common reasons of fearing death.⁵ One of the important causes of the fear of death is the belief that the process of dying might be too painful. That is why, once dying begins many people desire to die relatively quickly with little or no suffering.

People are also afraid of what might happen to their dead bodies. Many people are found to be anxious about the treatment and disposal of their dead bodies. People usually expect that their dead bodies should be handled with care, respect and love. Most people also expect that funeral rites are properly observed according to their faith after their death. At death everybody lose control over his/her body and nobody knows what will happen then. Therefore, one of the reasons of fearing death is loss of control over body and humiliation.⁶

Many people who believe in the life after death are afraid of what might happen to them on the doomsday or the day of last judgement. They believe that they may either be rewarded in heaven or be punished in the hell. Since they can't be sure of this, many people are worried about the probable punishment in the life hereafter.⁷

Almost all people have some specific goals and ambitions, plans and projects to materialize. Since death can interrupt all their plans, people are afraid of death for the reasons that their goals would not be achieved. One of the reasons for fearing death is that it would not be possible for a person to take care of his/her dependent people. A person also fears death for the reason that his/her death would bring bereavement and grief to his/her kins and affines, friends and neighbors.⁸ Another reason for fearing death is that he/she will no longer be able to see, observe, enjoy and experience this fast changing wonderful universe!

One of the mid-life crises is the fear of death. Many middle aged people think of their remaining years of life and try to organize and finish their important works before they die.

Some day that fear of death may depend on life satisfaction. Many of the rich People who are satisfied with their life may be less fearful to death. Because they need not worry about their children's financial status. Poor people, on the other hand, are worried about their children's prospect, and this lead them to be more worried about death.

Compared to the unmarried people, married people are more fearful of death. For they are worried about their children's future. Some research works suggest that compared to male, female are more fearful of death. Men are more busy with their activities and have little time to think of death. However, some researchers argue that people of both sexes are almost equally fearful of death.

One of the reasons of fearing death is, what Freud says, death instinct (as opposed to life instinct). It is said that death instinct become more active with aging process. Elderly people with active death instinct frequently think and talk about death. Thus, fear of death is an instinctive human propensity particularly in old age.

Nature of the fear of death

Fear of death is not same among all the people. But everybody says that death is an unknown event and it generates fear in human being. Researchers have found many informants who narrated their attitudes in different ways. Let me quote from a few of them. One of the respondents says that he wants some body to come back and tell him what it (death) is like. He continues and says that the good Lord gave brains to scientists but they [scientists] can't tell him what it [death] is like. This voice comes from a man distressed by the unknown (death). Another informant says that it is incredulous. It's hard to believe what could happen, where he would be. He says that he can't think of it as just going to sleep. There must be something else. It's very difficult. It is uncertainty of the thing. The hereafter (life after death) is perhaps awesome and fearful.⁹

Many people think that the process of dying might be long, painful or difficult. An 85 year old man says that death will be a wonderful thing if it is like a sleep from which no body wakes up. He says that when death comes, he wanted to go (die) quickly. One old woman was afraid of being watched while she died. She said, "If I should go, I want to go right now. I don't want to struggle with death. I don't want any body standing over me, see me go".¹⁰ Some are worried about the impact of their death on their family. One man said, "The day has to come. It's unknown. My family would cry and carry on, my wife would tear her hair out".¹¹

On the other hand, there are people who want their children and other kinsmen watch them dying. In deed, many people are afraid of facing death and think that they will feel better if their kinsmen are nearer to them at the time of their death. But, many people do not like to see people dying. Many people do not like to see dead body and do not like to visit the house where death has taken place.

Acceptance of death : The positive attitude

Although people are afraid of death, and there are reasons for this, yet they know and believe that death is a universal reality and nobody can escape from it. Although people often see that death happens to other people, and although they like to think that they are far away from death, they realize, believe and aware of their own death; and it may take place at any time. In other words, they know that they have no alternative but to accept death for themselves. People are afraid of death and therefore, they try to deny, avoid and reject it; but at the same time, they know that they have to accept it. Because, death is universal.

How can we understand that people accept their own death? People not only accept the reality of their own death but also they try to prepare themselves for their own death. How do the people prepare themselves for their own death? Research conducted on this issue identified two categories of people with two distinctive personalities who follow two different ways. Some people are found to

get ready for death by putting their house in order and withdrawing from social activities.¹² On the other hand, some older people think that death is inevitable and it will visit them at any time. Therefore, they do not like to withdraw themselves from social activities. They do not like to sit idle. They go on working and keep them busy with their activities. Their philosophy of life has been expressed in the voice where one says emphatically, "I will die with my boots on". These people try to keep them active as much as possible. For, death will finally stop them doing activities.¹³

These people think that it is neither worthy to neglect death, nor it is worthy to fear and deny it. Rather it is wise to make plan and get ready for death. Such people buy life insurance so that their dependents can get a lot of money after their death; talk about death with others, make funeral arrangements; and make will of their property.¹⁴ These are the people who repay their loans; arrange marriage for their adult children; meet their friends and relatives to beg apology for any wrong or unbecoming behavior.

Many people want to remain immortal by doing noble activities. Some write their autobiographies; publish their creative research works; contribute to social welfare activities; and build up welfare institutions. Even some people buy lands for their own graveyard and help the poor in many ways.

These activities are the reflections of one's mental preparation for death. Again these activities and behavior prove that death is not the end in itself; it is not that everything finished with death. People like to be remembered even after their death. With this end in view, many people are found to contribute the welfare activities.

Who are more afraid of death-the young or the old? People are not unanimous on this issue. Many people say that the oldsters are more afraid of death than their youngsters. While others hold the diametrically opposite view. They say that the younger people are more afraid of death than their oldsters. Let us examine these views. Those who say that the older people are more afraid of death argue that although old age is not a cause of death, most deaths take place in the last part of life when people are elderly. They say that since the elderly people are more close to death and since death is imminent for them they are more afraid of death than the youngsters. They argue that the young people have an statistical reason to believe that the death is still far away from them. Unlike elderly people it is not imminent for them. Therefore, younger people seldom think and talk about death and they keep themselves busy with their career.

Even some research works also support the view that the older are more afraid of death. One researcher conducted research on one hundred older people on this particular issue. It was found that all were very anxious about death except two. In minimizing their anxiety, they adopted different strategies. for example 87% of them never talked about death with anybody. They carefully avoided the topic of death.¹⁵ Another researcher came to the conclusion that compared to the youngsters, the older people are more worried about death; and therefore they avoided the topic of death. In their study Barrow and Smith also found that most older people are afraid of death.¹⁶

The view that the oldsters are more afraid of death than the youngsters are not supported by most gerontological studies. Harris (1990) writes, "Many people assume that because older people have relatively little time left and death is more imminent for them they are more fearful of death than younger persons are, [But] research suggests that just the opposite is true".¹⁷ In one research it was found that the middle aged people (45-54) are more fearful of death. The same study indicates that compared to the middle aged, the older people (65-74) are less fearful of death. In deed, most gerontological works suggest that with the process of aging the fear of death reduces and, the elderly are less fearful of death than the young people. One of the most constant findings of the research works on death is that the fear of death diminishes with age.¹⁸

Why are the older people less fearful of death? One of the researchers identifies several reasons for this.¹⁹ First, The older lower people may see themselves less worthy; or may give less value on their lives; and may think that their future is quite limited. Therefore, they think that it is useless and not profitable to care about death. Second; The elderly people think that they have already lived a long life to an old age; and therefore, any additional years are a bonus for them. So, they hardly worry about death in the last years of life. Third; The more the people grow older, the more they witness others to die; the elderly have dealt with the deaths of many people around them; which help to socialize them to develop a positive attitude and accept the appropriateness and rationality of their own deaths.

Studies on death suggest that although the older people view death with acceptance, not fear, the elderly people think and talk about death more than the people do in other age groups.

"For most older people death is a frequent and important topic."²⁰ The question is why? This preoccupation is due not only to the fact that the deaths are imminent for them but also to the fact that the older people have outlived many of their friends, neighbors, kins and affines; and therefore, their store of death related experience is quite rich and they have many death news to talk about.

It is true that deaths are imminent for them (elderly); and therefore, most deaths take place is old age. They have witnessed many deaths and as such have a long experience of watching death. This helps them to get psychologically prepared for their own death.

On the contrary the younger people are more afraid of death. They can hardly think of their own deaths. They are young, they have a long way to go ahead with their aims, objectives and plans of life. They know that they need to live long to materialize their aims and plans. They are also aware of the fact that sudden death may stand on the way of fulfilling their objectives. Therefore, they are more worried about death. Moreover, compared to older people their store of death-related experience is too small and therefore, they seldom talk about death, and they are not psychologically prepared to accept their own deaths.

As I understand, fear of death is a universal reality. And, therefore, all human being, young or old are afraid of death. Fear of death is more latent and less manifest among the younger people; and it is more manifest and less latent among the older people. The young people have a reason to think that death is more

imminent not for them, but for the older. Therefore, they feel safer for the time being and engage themselves in career building and other activities. Unlike the older people they are more busy with their jobs. And, therefore, they have little time to talk about the issue of death. Thus, their fear of death usually remains untold, hidden, and latent in their sub-conscious mind.

It is true that death is more imminent for the older people, and their death related experience is also long. It is equally true that compared to young and middle aged people they have enough time to gossip and talk about the issue of death. Most studies suggest that the older people talk about death not because they are more fearful of death but because they have long experience to talk about it. This may or may not be true to fact. I would say that the fear of death which remains latent in young life becomes manifest in old age, and they (elderly) begin to express this fear in talking about the issue of death, thus allow their fear and anxiety to get released. It has been observed that compared to the younger people the aged are more active in preparing themselves for death. It may mean they are quite fearful of death and, since the death is approaching to them very fast they are finishing their last jobs of life. Both fear of death and the time constraint (for, death is imminent) compel them to organize and prepare them for death. So, fear of death is quite active and forceful among the oldsters. Therefore, instead of saying that compared to older people the younger are more afraid of death, it is more reasonable to say that some younger people may be more afraid of death than some older peoples and some older people may be more afraid of death than some younger people. It depends on one's perception, experience and socialization. In a word, one has to examine one's personality formation studying one's fear of death. Moreover, cross section study may often give faulty result; and therefore, longitudinal studies are necessary to examine the aging affect on the fear of death.²¹

Concluding remarks

Fear of death is one of the universal realities of human life. Fear of death finds its expression both in ordinary conversation and other forms of social interaction. Despite the fact that human being is afraid of death, they know and believe that they will have to accept the reality of death. They not only accept it, but also they do prepare for it. Thus, apprehending their impending death most people try to organize and complete their pending activities.

Although many people assume that since the older people have lived long; they have little time left and since death is more imminent for them they are naturally more afraid of death. But most gerontological studies suggest that it is not true. Studies reveal that the younger and middle aged people are more afraid of death than the older people. The author takes a different position and says that while some younger people may be more afraid of death than some older people; some older people may also be more afraid of death than some younger people. To him, it depends on one's personality among other things. He also suggests that the fear of death is more latent and less manifest among the younger people and it is more manifest and less latent among the older people.

Notes and references

1. See Diana K. Harris (1988). **Dictionary of Gerontology**. New York : Greenwood press. In this paper, the author is concerned with the attitudes towards normal death; not the unusual deaths caused by murder, suicide, accident etc.
2. Physicians talk about two forms of death : clinical death and brain death. When the heart and breathing cease to function it is called clinical death. At this stage, resuscitation is, however, possible. When the brain cells die, or if there is the cessation of brain function for a period of 24 hours-reflected in a flat electroencephalogram (EEG) it is then called brain death. Thus, three conditions are essential to declare a person dead : heart needs to stop beating : breathing needs to be ceased; and brain wave activity as determined by EEG requires to cease. However, because of the development of medical technology, it has become very difficult to define death. For example, life support technology; ventilation or life extending devices are being used for patients who are in coma. The use of such technologies make the situation difficult to define death. For, patient may survive for long time then. In such a situation ethical, moral, religious and legal questions may arise. However, physicians usually declare a person dead when heart, breathing and brain cells cease to function. Please see L.A. Despelder, (1983) *The Last Dance : Encountering Death and dying*, California : Mayfield pub.co.; and B. Hayslip Jr. (1989) *Adult Development and Aging*. New York: Harper and Row.
3. See David L Decker (1980) *Social Gerontology : An Introduction to the Dynamics of Aging*. Boston : Little, Brown and Co.
4. See Despelder (1983).
5. See Russell A Ward (1984) *The Aging Experience : An Introduction to Social Gerontology*. New York : Harper and Row.
6. See Russell A Ward (1984).
7. Ibid, p.325.
8. Ibid, p.325.
9. See G.M. Barrow et al (1979) *Aging, Ageism and Society*. New York : West Pub Co.
10. See G.M. Barrow (1979) p.284.
11. Ibid, p.384.
12. To know more about this issue please See D.K. Harris. *Sociology of Aging*. New York : Harper and Row.
13. Ibid, p.415-416.
14. See Russell A Ward (1984).
15. See G.M. Barrow (1979).
16. See ibid, p.383.
17. See D.K. Harris (1990).
18. See ibid, p.415.
19. For detail please see D.K. Harris (1990); Russell A Ward (1984) and B. Hayslip Jr (1979).
20. See Harris (1990), p.415.
21. In cross-sectional method data are obtained from different age groups only once, rather than several times. Here, there is no scope to see the aging effect. On the other hand, in longitudinal method data are obtained from different age groups several times and there is an opportunity to study the aging effect; and this gives us more accurate picture of the reality.