

Original Paper

Mortality Anxiety Management of Chinese Undergraduates in
the Horizon of Cultural Psychology

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Abstracts

The death attitude and personality questionnaire was used to investigate and analyze Chinese undergraduates' views on death. The results showed that: (1) The mortality concept of Chinese undergraduates is divided into nine dimensions, which sequence ranked from high to low according to their scores is unfinished feeling, interpersonal relationship, life review, calmness, life attachment, liberation, spiritual concept, terror and pain. This result is obviously inconsistent with Terror Management Theory (TMT), reflecting the characteristics of Chinese culture. (2) The mortality cognition of Chinese undergraduates is divided into seven dimensions, which sequence ranked from high to low according to their scores is body's becoming cold, body's decay, sensory loss, consciousness loss, loss of control, soul drift away, and body's becoming stiffness. This result is consistent with TMT. However, the subjects' statements about the cognition of the process of spiritual change at death salience reflected the color of Chinese culture, consistent with Taoist and Buddhist thoughts in Chinese traditional culture. This shows that there are the thoughts of death anxiety management in Chinese culture, which are of great value and Enlightenment to the effective development of life education.

Keywords

Mortality Anxiety Management (MAM), views on death, Chinese traditional culture, undergraduates, Confucianism, Taoism

1. Introduction

Death is the manifest destiny or final destination of all creatures, so that they have an instinct to seek life and avoid death. Animals only react to death according to their death instinct. Different from animals, human beings have consciousness, especially self-consciousness, in addition to death instinct that is the same as other animals, so that they can recognize the life and death of themselves and others. Under the effect of the instinct of pursuing advantages and avoiding disadvantages, pursuing life and avoiding death, people might consciously or unconsciously produce the emotion of loving life and fearing death, and then produce death anxiety. Earnest Becker (2007) found by the research on conscious cognition of human beings to the inevitability of death that human understanding of the limitation of their life existence, that is, death, would cause anxiety (Li, 2017, p. 255). This anxiety is death anxiety. It would result in various psychological contradictions or conflicts to realize the inevitability of death, in which most prominent two are the contradiction between life and death, the contradiction between the realization of human potential and the transience of life (Li, 2007, p. 220; Ye, 2014, p. 362). Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon (1986) constructed Terror Management Theory (TMT) by their research in death anxiety, which pointed out that human beings have self-consciousness, which makes them aware of their own mortality and various events that lead to death. Under the survival instinct of human self-protection, the consciousness of mortality leads to human existential terror or anxiety. The terror or anxiety plays a central role in human motivation and behavior. In order to relieve or even eliminate the negative emotions of death anxiety or terror and reduce the uncertainty, human beings try to manage them. This kind of management is death anxiety management, which purpose is to alleviate or even sublimate or transform negative emotions such as anxiety or terror.

The existing research shows that there is cultural differences in death anxiety management. Maheswaran and Agrawal (2004) found that the same Mortality Salience (MS) may cause different Mortality Salience Effect (MSE) in different cultures in that different cultures have different views on death, social norms and social behaviors. Navarrete, Kurzban and Fessler (2005) found that the countries such as Costa Rica that are collectivism culture have no Cultural Worldview Defense (CWD) had by individualistic culture. Compared with the traditional paradigm of MS, the MSE primed by the collective mortality for Japanese subjects are more intense. Japanese subjects showed a higher level of self-effacement rather than self-esteem enhancement after MS priming (Wakimoto, 2006).

Since there is cultural difference in MAM, what is the MAM of Chinese people should be recognized or known. In view of the increasing trend of youth suicide in China, it is necessary to research in MAM of Chinese adolescents in order to prevent and suppress this phenomenon of youth suicide's increasing. Therefore, we designed this study to explore the concept of death and MAM strategies of undergraduates under the background of Chinese culture.

This research assumes that individuals in the Chinese cultural context hold different views on death with Chinese cultural characteristics from those in the West. When Mortality Salience (MS) is primed, it isn't necessarily for Chinese subjects to perceive death as negative and personal, and to have

symbolic behavior of escaping from their own death. On the contrary, they may show the views on mortality of a higher level of interpersonal dependence, and be able to treat death more rationally and acceptably. Therefore, this research would boost the life education in China, and provide some guidance and reference for the effective development of life education and the prevention of suicide, especially the suicide and neglect of life of adolescents (Luo, Zhang, 2018).

2. Method

2.1 Tools

Mortality Attitude Personality Survey (MAPS) is used, which is the most commonly used independent variable manipulation method in the empirical research of TMT: mortality attitude personality survey (Burke, Martens, 2010). It includes two open-ended questions: (1) To imagine that you are experiencing death, what kind of emotions and thoughts you will have; (2) To feel what changes your body and mind is experiencing when you are dying and after your death.

2.2 Research Objects

54 undergraduates from two universities in Guangdong Province were selected to fill in the questionnaire. 54 Mortality Attitude Personality Survey (MAPS) were collected. One invalid questionnaire was excluded, and 53 were valid. There were 7 boys and 46 girls.

2.3 Analysis Method

To make statistics, collation, classification and analysis of the answers of the returned questionnaires in order to make the answers of each questionnaire be separated and summarized into different dimensions. For example, the answer fragments that mentioned “there are still many people who have not been met, there are still many things that have not been done, have not seen the world in time, parents and relatives and friends have not been repaid in time”, are categorized into the dimensions of “unfinished feeling” and “interpersonal relationship”. By this way, we would code and sort the answers of the research subjects to make them into a systematic dimension table to explore the concept of death presented by the Chinese in the empirical research of TMT.

3. Results

Nine dimensions of mortality concept are obtained by sorting and classifying the answers to question (1), which is respectively Unfinished Feeling (UF), Interpersonal Relationship (IR), Life Review (LR), Calmness (C), Life Attachment (LA), Liberation Sense (LS), Spiritual Concept (SC), Terror (T) and Pain (P). See Table 1 for details.

Table 1. The Analysis Results of Dimension of Mortality Concept

| | T | P | C | LR | IR | LS | UF | LA | SC |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| N | 10 | 6 | 15 | 17 | 33 | 6 | 35 | 14 | 12 |
| % | 19% | 11% | 28% | 32% | 62% | 11% | 66% | 26% | 23% |

Seven dimensions of mortality cognition are obtained by sorting and classifying the answers to question (2), which is respectively Body's Becoming Cold (BBC), Body's Decay (BD), Sensory Loss (SL), Consciousness Loss (CL), Loss of Control (LC), Soul Drift Away (SDA), and Body's Becoming Stiffness (BBS). See Table 2 for details.

Table 2. The Analysis Results of Dimension of Mortality Cognition

| | BD | BBS | BBC | SL | CL | LC | SDA |
|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| N | 18 | 9 | 20 | 14 | 12 | 11 | 15 |
| % | 33% | 17% | 38% | 26% | 23% | 20% | 28% |

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Analysis in the Mortality Concept of Chinese Undergraduates

The results showed that only a small number of participants expressed terror and pain in the death priming paradigm, and 66% and 62% of the participants expressed the mortality concept related to unfinished feeling and interpersonal relationship, respectively. It is different with Terror Management Theory (TMT) constructed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon (1986). TMT believes that human beings will have anxiety and terror of death due to the conflict between survival instinct and predictive ability, from which a series of defense mechanisms are derived. In other words, the ability of human beings to anticipate the future and to objectify themselves makes them aware of their own mortality and the events that lead to death. However, due to the survival instinct of self-preservation, then produce corresponding existential anxiety or terror, which plays a central role in human motivation and behavior. The cause for the difference is the cultural differences between Chinese and the Western largely.

Unfinished feeling chiefly manifests in two aspects: regret emotion and the inability to implement life planning further. Most of the participants expressed language fragments similar to "there are still a lot of things not done, not to tour many places. Many people have not been visited". Because undergraduates are young, far from the normal age of human death, when they face the problem of their own death, they show more regret for the future of life and not resigned to be unable to realize their ideals and aspirations. For Chinese undergraduates, anticipating death would stimulate their regret that they have not fully come true their life meaning. In other words, the mortality lack of life meaning in mortality concept of Chinese undergraduates is more prominent than terror and sadness. For

individual of undergraduates, unfinished feeling also expresses life attachment to some extent, but it also shows more reluctance and regret. The unfinished life goal often has the powerful driving effect, therefore this kind of emotion is advantageous to the survival, can cause people “to pursue the life and to avoid the death”, which may become one kind of strong survival potential for the individual who has the suicide idea. In fact, this view of death is the embodiment of Confucian’s life goal of “bringing honor to the family (Qi-jia), governing the country (Zhi-guo), and making the world peace (Ping-tian-xia)”.

The dimension of interpersonal relationship manifests in three aspects mainly: missing and worry about parents, unable to repay parents, and reluctant to leave and worry about relatives and friends. Most of the participants expressed language clips similar to that “I don’t know what emotions my death would bring to my family, lovers and friends, and they may be hit hard by it”. It shows that the death of Chinese people is not a matter of one person, but involves the entire interpersonal network. In the Chinese society dominated by collectivism culture, the maintenance of social relations has always been an important issue (Li, 2007, p. 59; 2016, pp. 150-156), and it is the same in the face of death. When dying, Chinese people are more concerned with the possible blow and injury to their parents, relatives and friends after their death, and the worry of unable to support their parents’ filial piety, rather than the diffuse terror and anxiety of their own life ending that TMT has supposed. This is consistent with Chinese traditional Confucian culture.

The dimension of Life Review (LR) is mainly to recall and flash back one’s lifetime, especially the unfinished things, important moments and important others at the moment of death. All of participants who referred to the dimension of LR expressed language fragments similar to that “I think that my mind will be recalling my past days”, which is a significant different with life review of the near-death experimenter. The life review described by the subjects in MAPS refers to the recollection and flashback of their own lifetime and highlights, such as “I should broadcast my whole lifetime like a movie in my mind”, in which they look at their own lifetime experience from an outsider’s perspective. However, for the near-death Experiencers, the so-called life review refers to a whole “reliving” that is “experiencing” their own lifetime again as the first-person perspective. This kind of “life review” in this research is incomparable with the “reliving” of “real” experience of dying Experiencers produced by the death priming under the research paradigm of TMT. There are essential differences between them. This reexamination of one’s own life in the dimension of LR is related to the dimensions of unfinished feeling and interpersonal relationship mentioned above. Most of the participants who mentioned this dimension expressed their retrospection of important others and unfinished things, such as “think about my family and my lifetime experience”, which shows that the most prominent part of Chinese undergraduates’ mortality concept is still unfinished feeling and interpersonal relationship.

The dimension of calmness mainly manifests calm and acceptant as facing death. All participants who mentioned the calm mood expressed similar language fragments such as that “all people would be died in every case, I just get off the train of life early”. The dimension of calmness reveals that Chinese

undergraduates have a certain attitude towards life that regards death as a natural law to a certain extent, and takes it as it comes, which is consistent with the research results of Hu, Shunya and Dong (2005). This is a reflection of the Taoist thought in Chinese traditional culture that regards life and death as the natural phenomenon so as not to feel bad and sad about it. It is also consistent with the Zen thought that death is a kind of rebirth (Li, Du, & Zhang, 2019; Li, Zhang, Ye, et al., 2019; Lomas, Etkoff, Gordon, et al., 2017; Lucente & Macchia, 2018). Calmness of facing death is a transcendent attitude towards life and death produced when facing the inevitability of death, rather than equal to talking about life and death lightly, which is with presence of mind in the face of disasters, and not in a constant state of anxiety for the inevitable end of life. The attitude may alleviate the anxiety and terror for death in daily life.

The dimension of Life Attachment (LA) mainly reflects that people can't give up the beauty of life and dare not face death. The participants who mentioned the dimension of LA expressed similar statements as that "I have not been ready to say goodbye to the world now" or "there is still reluctance to give up some beautiful people and things in this world". LA originates from the feeling that one must say goodbye to the good things or the people who can't be given up in life at the time of death, which is a complex emotion about unrecoverable loss of life and some irretrievable people and things. The emotion is different from terror and anxiety. This may indicate that Chinese undergraduates would have a kind of "alternative" self-protection instinct when facing mortality priming, which manifests a relatively mild but complex emotion rather than a negative and strong emotional form. The complex emotion hard to part with of originating LA can be regarded as an important part of life education, which can enhance the individuals' loving and attachment for life and reduce the phenomenon of life neglect and suicide by inspiring things associated with the goodness of life.

The dimension of Spiritual Concept (SC) reflects in the phenomenon of using religious concept to come true "life continuity" when facing death. All participants who mentioned the dimension of SC expressed statements similar to that "I don't know what kind of world I would go to and what scene see after my death". SC provides Chinese undergraduates with religious concepts such as "Resurrection", "afterlife", "soul rebirth" and "Mengpo soup", which may be able to provide notions of transcending the death of the body by constructing an immortal soul, so as to play a role of relieving their mortality anxiety. It is consistent with literal immortality that TMT assumes, which essence is a spiritual immortality or soul immortality in a sense. This is consistent with the ontology of Xin (mind) in Zen culture. As Hui-neng said, human self-nature or original Xin is neither born nor died, neither increasing nor decreasing (Li, Du, & Zhang, 2019). Everyone is born in the original Xin or self-nature, and returns to the original Xin or self-nature after death (Li, Zhang, Ye, et al., 2019; Li, Du, & Zhang, 2019; Lomas, Etkoff, Gordon, et al., 2017).

The dimension of Liberation Sense (LS) mainly reflects in the sense of relief and ease in the face of death. All participants who mentioned the dimension of LS expressed similar thoughts as "feeling good, like a sigh of relief". Different from the calmness, LS manifests more about pleasure after calm, as if

all pain in life disappeared with death, so as to be relaxed and relieved. If one thinks that death can bring relief, to some extent, he would think that living is a painful thing, or life is a thing that can or even needs to get rid of. This is actually an expression of the concept of Buddhism and a bipolar cognition. If people can guide and utilize properly this idea, it would play a positive role. For example, Christianity regards the suffering of human life as atonement, and atonement is to go to heaven in order to be free (Li, Du, Zhang, et al., 2019b); Buddhism, especially Zen culture, regards self-torture as a necessary way to understand one's own mind and see one's self-nature to become a Buddha (Li, Du, Zhang, et al., 2019a). In this way, we can give full play to the rationalization and sublimation of liberation, relieve mortality anxiety, and even turn mortality anxiety into positive motivation. On the contrary, it will become negative cognition and produce negative effect. It is just like the Buddha-like existing in the youth nowadays. This shows that the dimension of LS has the value of life education. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct life education according to the specific situation of young LS.

The dimensions of terror and pain mainly manifested in the strong negative emotions in the face of death. All participants who mentioned terror or pain expressed statements similar to that "I feel scared" or "I may feel a little pain, and my parents and family would also feel pain for my death". The proportion of Chinese undergraduates who directly or indirectly express terror or anxiety for death is the smallest among all dimensions. As an adaptive emotion, anxiety or terror is the embodiment of survival instinct when facing death situation. However, most of the participants did not express anxiety or terror of death, which seems to show that terror and anxiety is the least significant dimension of mortality concept for Chinese undergraduates. This result is not consistent with the hypothesis of TMT that "the anxiety or terror of human beings in the face of death is extremely important to human motivational behavior", which most important reason is cultural differences. This attitude of Chinese students is consistent with the mortality concept of Chinese Taoist culture and Buddhist culture. It is the embodiment of the natural view of Taoist culture and the idea of immortality of soul and spiritual rebirth of Buddhist culture.

To sum up, Chinese undergraduates would produce rich and complex emotions and cognitive concepts in the face of death priming, among which Unfinished Feeling (UF) and Interpersonal Relationship (IR) are particularly obvious. This is quite different from the hypothesis of TMT that "mortality salience would result in individual terror and anxiety". The complex positive emotions and concepts produced by Chinese subjects in the process of mortality salience may offset and neutralize the anxiety and terror formed by death salience, thus making them not show obvious anxiety or terror.

4.2 Analysis in the Mortality Cognition of Chinese Undergraduates

By classifying the research results, we divide the dimensions of mortality cognition into two categories: body perception and consciousness perception. Body perception includes four dimensions: Body's Becoming Cold (BBC), Body's Decay (BD), Sensory Loss (SL), and Body's Becoming Stiffness (BBS); consciousness perception includes three dimensions: Consciousness Loss (CL), Loss of Control (LC), Soul Drift Away (SDA).

Most of the subjects who think about the changes of the body after death talked of that “the various organs of the body are failing, and the metabolism is slowing down”, “the corpse would begin to rot, and then slowly maggot bred after death”, “feel the gradual disappearance of consciousness, unable to control the action”. It indicates that Chinese undergraduates have a certain understanding of the body changes at the time of death. They think that consciousness would gradually disappear as dying, and loss of body control in this process. This shows that Chinese undergraduates’ cognition of death process not only is the cognition of the natural decline of the body, but also mix with some subjective experience.

A considerable number of participants made statements such as that “after death, my consciousness or soul would be separated from my body”. “I can look down on my own body”. “I can always be flying and flying, feel the things that I still regret, and meet the people I want to see”. They talks of a certain spiritual immortality concept in their statements, that is, there may be an alternative form of life extension after the death of human body. This is consistent with the hypothesis of “literal immortality” in TMT. It is an appropriate way to relieve mortality anxiety, terror and pain, which essence is rationalization and sublimation (Li, Du, Zhang et al., 2019b).

Although there are no cultural differences in mortality cognition, especially in body cognition, the subjects’ specific language expression has Chinese cultural characteristics, which is to describe the changes of body and spirit according to the common cognition and description of Chinese people when mortality salience is primed. In addition, the cognition of the process of spiritual change has more obvious Chinese cultural color than that of body change, which is consistent with Taoist and Buddhist thoughts in traditional Chinese culture. We can distinctly see from above discussion that the positive thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in China are of great significance and value to life education.

5. Conclusion

- 1) The mortality concept of Chinese undergraduates has obvious Chinese cultural characteristics.
- 2) The statement of Chinese undergraduates’ cognition of death is of Chinese cultural nature.
- 3) The mortality concept of Chinese culture has the value of mortality anxiety management, which has a positive effect on relieving and sublimating mortality anxiety and terror.
- 4) The positive thought in Chinese culture is the important way or method of life education.

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