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Death obsession and rumination in the context of political instability in Muslim young adults

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Abstract

The present study explored death obsession and rumination amidst political instability and violence Karachi, Pakistan. A convenience sample of 125 participants was selected from ages 18 to 25 to test the hypothesis that there will be a direct correlation between death obsession and rumination. Death Obsession Scale (Abdel-Khalek, 1998) and Rumination scale (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999) were administered along with an enquiry about the participant's perception of safety in Karachi. The results supported the hypothesis ($r= 0.275, p< 0.000$). The destructive impacts of external threats to safety are explored in the context of the recent political uproar in Muslim countries.

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1. Introduction

With the growing rate of political instability and imbalance coupled with constant external threats to safety and security, there is a need to understand if the political unrest is causing an adverse effect on its population or if people have become desensitized to the state of uncertainty. Specifically, in the city of Karachi it was found that due to ethnic, sectarian and politically linked violence at least 740 people had been killed from the starting of 2012 till June, 2012. In 2011 a total of 1,715 people were killed due to violence in the city with a population of 17 million people (Daily Times, 2012). The pre and post election related violence in the city of Karachi was also very integral to the present study as it depicted the violence that people in Karachi face on daily basis that may be causing

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uncertainty about their mortality. The election of 2013 has made itself known to be the most historic in Pakistan's history with the majority of population deeply involved in the process however, on the day of election, four bomb blasts hit Karachi killing 14 voters and wounding dozens and in Pakistan a total of 29 people were killed (Smith-Spark, Mohsin & Kassim, 2013). This violence was followed by claims of rigging of the election process which ended up in protests in Karachi. Therefore, the situation right prior to, during, and after election was very unstable (Khan, 2013).

Terror management theory proposes that the awareness of one's mortality brings about a terror and the need to manage this terror is a fundamental motivation of people (Tomer, 2013). The need to defend or protect oneself from this awareness increases when one's mortality is reminded or one's culture threatened. This is very relevant to the current study as it was conducted amidst political unrest and would have supposedly resulted in awareness of the participants' mortality.

Existentialists believe that upon finding meaning and purpose in one's life – they can finally accept the inevitability of death. Positive Existentialism asserts that the concept of death should be confronted to making one's life authentic and meaningful (Yalom, 2008) Similarly Wong's meaning management theory (2008) focused on understanding and accepting death as inevitable. In doing so, it is believed that meaning in life would be enhanced and would lead to self-actualization and transcendence (Kuhl, 2002; Wong, 2008). In Islam, the concept of death is taught as inevitable and happening by God's permission – this is similar to the existentialistic view which emphasizes on death acceptance (Sachedina, 2005). Since the participants were Muslims, it is important to note that in Islam life is considered sacred, hence one can assume that betterment of life is the main focus of Islam rather than challenging or avoiding the concept of death.

Death obsession which was introduced by Abdel-Khalek and it is defined as repetitive thoughts or ruminations, persistent ideas, or intrusive images that are centered around death of the self or significant others (Abdel-Khalek, 1998). A study explored whether due to continued violence, Palestinians living in war conditions would get desensitized or would they still suffer adverse effects of the violence - it was found that Palestinians scored lower death obsession scores than participants from Arab countries. The low scores depict the adaptation to violence in Palestinians (Abdel-Khalek, Al-Arja & Abdalla, 2006). Hence, it's imperative to understand if these findings can be applied to Karachi, Pakistan and whether the people of Karachi have become desensitized.

Along with death obsession, rumination was explored as well. Rumination is defined as self attentiveness motivated by perceived threats, losses or injustices to the self (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). It is considered to be a cognitive vulnerability, which is linked to depression (Hyde, Mezulis, & Abramson, 2008).

The relationship between death obsession and rumination was the consequence of Rogers (1961) proposing that people who self actualize are fully functioning people and they are open to experiences without distortion and free from threat (McLeod, 2007). The fully functioning person also has an existential mode of living, which is based on flexibility and adaptability and is away from rigidity and ruminative thoughts (Patterson, 1977). Therefore, it can be said that distortion of any experience, such as the violent experiences of death witnessed constantly in Karachi, would take away from adaptability and openness to experience and would bring forth defensiveness, rigidity and ruminative thoughts.

The aim of this research was to understand the relationship between death obsession and rumination, to explore how perception of safety plays a part in both the variables.

Based on the quoted findings and researches one hypothesis was formulated:

- 1) There will be a direct relationship between death obsession and rumination in Muslim young adults.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

A sample of 125 Muslim young adults from ages 18 to 25 was selected from various universities in Karachi, Pakistan. The participants comprised of 64 females and 61 males.

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