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Gender Differences in Death Obsession

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Abstract

The present study aimed to establish and explore the relationship between gender differences and death obsession to understand increasing suicide statistics, and discuss the impact of marital status, religion and political instability found in Pakistan on death obsession. A convenience sample of 125 participants was selected and Death Obsession Scale (DOS) was administered (Abdel-Khalek, 1998). The results found significant gender differences in death obsession, with males obtaining a higher mean score ($t = -1.625$, $p < 0.019$, $M = 0.47290$) than females ($M = 0.39734$). The study demonstrates reasons for such results, along with the significance of current findings and avenues for further research.

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1. Introduction

One of the basic propositions of the death awareness movement (1969) was acceptance of an inevitable death to reduce conflict and anxiety (Kubler-Ross, 1969). There is a general consensus of accepting death as a reality to enhance life. Sigmund Freud's theory proposed that a death instinct causes an unconscious desire to die whereas a life instinct pertains to survival, an internalized death instinct could cause aggression within self leading to self-destructive behaviors (Cherry, 2013). Therefore, a balance is again sought between these dual instincts to provide a better understanding of the human process. Ernest Becker suggested that death is one of the main causes of psychological concerns for human beings, and this could be lessened by a good maternal upbringing which would lead to a positive attitude towards death (Becker, 1973). This again suggests that a positive attitude about death is imperative for developing a healthy balance within self.

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Positive Existentialists provide a comprehensive picture suggesting that death should be confronted and not avoided – and in doing so one would be able to make their life authentic and meaningful (Yalom, 2008). Wong's meaning management theory (2008) proposed that by understanding and accepting death as inevitable – meaning in life would be enhanced (Wong, 2008). Therefore, it can be assumed that a psychological balance is needed and that can be done by bringing attention towards the concept of death which is usually shunned aside for being anxiety provoking. In bringing it to light, it could result in enhancing meaning in life.

The current study explored Death obsession, which was introduced by Abdel-Khalek (1998) (Salmanpour & Issazadegan, 2012). 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). Death obsession was found to be the best predictor of suicidal ideation in both Kuwaiti and American samples (Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2006). Another research found a significant positive relationship between neuroticism and death obsession (Salmanpour & Issazadegan, 2012).

In the current study, gender differences were studied. Prior research established the existence of gender differences in death obsession in non-clinical samples (Abdel-Khalek, Al-Arja & Abdalla, 2006; Rajabi, 2009). Another study found that females had a higher death obsession score than males in normal populations, anxiety disorder patients, and schizophrenic patients. These findings suggested that women are high in neuroticism than men (Abdel-Khalek, 2002). The general pattern of gender differences in death obsession have been females scoring significantly higher than males (Abdel-Khalek, 1998).

However, this is not the case in Pakistan. In Pakistan, 306 suicides were reported in two years where men outnumbered women in committing suicide due to predominantly domestic problems (Khan & Reza, 2002). Since there is a relationship between death obsession and suicidal ideation and attempts - this proposes a contradiction to earlier researches where females had higher death obsession scores, whereas in Pakistan – males seem to have higher death obsession.

Due to this contradiction, gender differences need to be explored in order to explain the dynamics of males and females in Pakistan where the predominant population are Muslims, for whom; religiously, suicide is considered to be forbidden.

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

- 1) There will be a significant difference in death obsession for males and females

2. Method

2.1 Participants

A sample of 125 young adults from ages 18 to 25 were selected from Karachi, Pakistan – the sample was then divided according to their gender with 64 females and 61 males.

2.2 Materials

The Death Obsession Scale (DOS) by Abdel-Khalek (1998) was administered. The scale contains a 15 item Likert scale which has Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of .90, .91 and .91 and one week test-retest reliabilities were found to be .91, .92, .92. for males and females depicting high internal consistency and stability. DOS has good face, construct, discriminant validity (Abdel-Khalek, 1998).

2.3 Procedure

Participants were selected from various universities across Karachi. An informed consent form was used to obtain their permission concerning their participation in the research, it provided information about confidentiality, the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw without any penalty. Furthermore, after their consent, a semi-structured interview form was used to access information such as age, marital status, religion and gender along with their psychiatric history or any physical handicap. This was done to ensure that all participants were Muslim

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