The Wearing of Death – Fear of Death and Social Deviance

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Abstract

The research unfolds the relationship between fear of death and mental health. It deals with this question on social theory background. My purpose is to explore the functions of social mechanisms concerning the fear of death in the Western societies. These mechanisms have been likely to weaken the resistance against it recently. According to my assumptions the demolition of these social mechanisms may at the same time weaken social integration in absence of adequate replacement, and it raises the level of fear of death by improving the risk of deviant behaviour. Religions and atheism meet the requirements of the functions for the protective role, but the afterlife-denying persuasion can also be treated as religious attitude or a belief due to its unprovable nature. Accordingly, the strength of the belief or non-belief in the existence after death seems to be in an inverse correlation with the intensity of fear of death as it is proved by empirical researches. Hence, not the object of the belief counts primarily but the belief itself. However, the atheist approach seems to be less effective in dissolving anxiety on particular subfields. The overall extension of the scientific conviction can weaken the belief in afterlife in the society at large. It follows that general spread of the afterlife-denying criticism can be much more harmful from a sociological point of view than its protective role provided to its followers. The increasing fear of death in any society also raises the emergence of social deviance, principally mental deviances. Consequently, the protection against the fear of death is such a social function that the science can never surpass and will never be able to take it away from the religions.

Key Words: death, fear, integration, afterlife, atheism, science, unsure, deviances, Yalom

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1. People, Society, Death

This paper is a short summary of my Master’s thesis. The aim of my research was to explore the social mechanisms concerning the fear of death and anxiety caused by mortality, and the effects of the weakening of these mechanisms in the Western societies, focusing primarily on social deviances. Though the research deals the question from a sociological point of view, it is clearly theoretical. Therefore no empirical survey has been made yet.

Although the exploration of death might never come to a satisfying end, many attempts were done in the history of human thought to explain this most personal yet deeply social phenomenon. It is personal because the homo sociologicus must
experience the moment of death in absolute solitude and loneliness – if it is appropriate to speak about ‘experience’ in such circumstances. As Béla Buda wrote: ‘Death is the loneliest event of existence.’\(^1\) Death is social too, because the community of the passed away also dies a bit, even in case of a widely atomised society – it becomes less with the loss of its members, loses potential physical and mental resources, that faces the society with its own fragility.

My research hypothesis states the following: the demolition of the social mechanisms and rites protecting from the threat of death weakens social integration and raises the level of fear of death in the society in absence of adequate replacement that leads to improved risk of deviant behaviour.

This hypothesis is based upon relevant and widely accepted sociological and psychological works from authors like Adrian Tomer, Grafton Eliason, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Tomer and Eliason showed in their well-known study\(^2\) that considering death as absurd and meaningless could result raised level of fear of death, whilst considering it as a meaningful phenomenon could lower the level of fear of death. Moreover, Berger and Luckmann states that the protection against the fear of death is a duty of the institutional order.\(^3\) Consequently, if a society cannot provide adequate or at least seemingly adequate explanation(s) on death, a sense of meaningless death and life arise that could reduce the probability of conformist behaviour. It increases the probability of deviant behaviour and could break social integration.

Death has a dual effect on the society: integrates and disintegrates at the same time. Norbert Elias,\(^4\) Elemér Hankiss,\(^5\) Sigmund Freud,\(^6\) Peter Berger\(^7\) and many others agree that fear of death plays an essential role in the formation of human societies. As Freud speculated, ‘the basic human group, the molecules of social life were (...) formed out of the fear of death (...). We perpetuate the group in order to perpetuate ourselves’\(^8\). Berger states in *The Sacred Canopy* that ‘Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death.’\(^9\) Based on these assumptions people’s fear of death is one of the most important forces that forms and maintains societies. But death also has a disintegrating effect on the society. ‘Death radically challenges all socially objectivated definitions of reality – of the world, of others, of self.’\(^10\) It questions obeying social norms and rules, and the meaningfulness of living in the society and life on the whole.

2. Mechanisms protecting from the fear of death

How a society fulfils its duties concerning the protection against fear of death? It seems obvious that every society needs mechanisms and rites that could make its members’ lives meaningful and makes their mortality and death explainable to themselves and for the significant others. Usually the great worldviews or world-explanation attempts are playing this role, because they claim to explain reality in its entirety, so they must have theories on death too. These world-explanation attempts can be divided in two major types: religions and philosophies. This paper
excludes the discussion of the role of the various philosophies – not questioning their achievements and significance in the history of human thought – because of the sociological aspect of the study. Philosophies are usually addressed to a narrow intellectual elite group, therefore they rarely have serious impact on societies on the whole. On the contrary, religions are usually addressed to large groups of people, so they meet the requirements of the sociological analysis. It doesn’t mean that religions can’t have philosophically elaborated doctrines on death and mortality, but they are also willing to express their doctrines on ways that are understandable not only for the highly educated, but also for the common people.

There are four main functions of the social mechanisms protecting against the fear of death:

1. Awakening people to the fact of death and mortality

You could ask why is it important, why wake the sleeping lion? It might sound strange but being aware of death and mortality and accepting it leads to a more complete and more joyful life, according to Irvin D. Yalom or Zsuzsanna Kulcsár. Kulcsár wrote that accepting death is a requisite of happiness, because the individual can appreciate the pleasures of life only this way. Yalom agrees with Kulcsár when he states that

\[ \text{death is inextricably a part of life, and that lifelong consideration enriches rather than impoverishes life. Although the physicality of death destroys man, the idea of death saves him.}^{11} \]

The integration of the idea of death saves us; rather than sentence us to existences of terror or bleak pessimism, it acts as a catalyst to plunge us into more authentic life modes, and it enhances our pleasure in the living of life.\(^{12}\)

Awareness of death and mortality generates a ‘personal growth’\(^{13}\) and on the whole it has a positive effect on the individuals’ life.

2. Dissolving the stress by giving meaning to life and death

The necessity of this function is much more obvious than the previous one. The protecting mechanisms give protection through providing solid knowledge about death and life to the society. These explanations and knowledge must reach the intellectual level that is commonly required in the particular society in order to be believable. They must give meaning to not only the death of the individual itself but to the death of the significant others too.

3. Protecting from desire for death

Picturing an overly attractive afterlife could be contraproducive – although it dissolves fear of death, but it could also result a desire for death. Its consequences could be the devaluation of life and even the spread of suicid attitudes that could
lead to fundamental social disasters. Hence the teachings on death should be elaborated on a way that maintains a certain level of fear of death to protect the society from self-destruction. All of the major religions contain such elements, such as purgatory in Christianity or even the reincarnation to a lower form of existence in Buddhism.

4. Wide and deep social embeddedness

The importance of this criterion lies principally in this paper’s sociological point of view. For the entirety of a society only theories or structures that have considerable social support could become socially really effective in the protection against fear of death.

To sum up, these four functions define the fundamental requirements that every social mechanism must meet to struggle successfully against the fear of death.

It seems that two major types of worldviews have socially relevant support and embeddedness nowadays: religions and atheism. I can’t show a detailed picture on the religious approaches in this paper, not even the great world religions. It would take too much space to properly present their teachings on death and afterlife, but these details are easily accessible in many valuable works. But we can’t avoid the discussion of atheism because of its special characteristics.

There are many studies on the connection between the fear of death and religiosity. Relevant empirical psychological researches show a curvilinear relationship – it means that both strong afterlife-believing and afterlife-denying persuasion leads to lower levels of death anxiety than the ones who are unsure of their opinions on afterlife. James M. Donovan has a really expressive interpretation of this phenomenon: ‘The certainty of hell is often better endured than doubts about heaven.’ Based on these to lessen death anxiety one should have a solid attitude towards death and afterlife. He or she should have a strong intrinsic belief in a kind of afterlife or a firmly denying conviction. It turns out that atheist and ‘strident materialist’ folks – in the western meaning of the word ‘atheist’, not counting for example Buddhism which is a so-called ‘atheist religion’ – could get the same protection from their worldview as the deeply believing religious people. But Donovan has a striking solution for this problem. He claims that the afterlife-denying, atheist persuasion could be taken as a religious attitude too, because

They, like theists, possess a firm solution to existential problems, in their case the absolute knowledge that with death the person dissipates into dust and that is the end of that.

He suggests that we should treat the firm atheist-materialist persuasion as a non-theistic religious form called ‘implicit religion’. Thus the curvilinear
relationship transforms into inverse correlation. The firmer the commitment to some solution (either believing or denying), the lower death anxiety is. The more unsure one’s attitude towards afterlife-related questions, the higher the intensity of death anxiety is. If we investigate the problem thoroughly, we find that his solution seems to be correct. Afterlife-denying persuasion and its statement about there is nothing after death is unprovable just like any other idea on afterlife. This is a tricky situation, because you can prove only the existence of a phenomenon. Nonexistence can’t be proved by any scientific methods – you can only state that ‘it is not yet proved’. Consequently atheist-materialist afterlife-denying persuasion could be nothing else than a belief.

Hence, not the object of the belief counts primarily but the belief itself. However, the atheist approach seems to be less effective in dissolving anxiety on particular subfields. It might be useful to accept one’s own death, but it can’t give any help at the loss of significant others. Believing in afterlife helps to cope with the loss of a loved one and it lessens the intensified fear of death relatively fast. Afterlife-denying belief doesn’t have these benefits, so it will always be imperfect compared to believing in some sort of afterlife. It becomes clearly visible in cases when someone loses a progeny – child or grandchild. A mental disorder called Kadmos-syndrome arises in such situations. Coping with this is an almost impossible mental challenge. Although there are just a very few studies on this topic, it is clear that only a religious persuasion, particularly those that contain the possibility of meeting again in the afterlife or in an other life seems to be considerably effective to help accepting the unacceptable.

3. Problems with the rational approaches

According to Philippe Ariès, rationalization and science began to take control over life and death since the eighteenth century through the accelerating advancement of the medical sciences. Besides this the process of rationalization had a weakening effect on the traditional protecting mechanisms such as rites and religions. Their self-appointed successor, the scientific worldview posed – and still has a tendency to pose – as it could give a complete explanation of all the phenomena in the world without any need of religiosity. For example one of the well-known founding fathers of sociology, Émile Durkheim stated in The elementary forms of the religious life that science will eventually replace religion in all of its cognitive and mental functions. He – and many other scientists and so-called rationalists since then – missed the fact that there are certain problems that are beyond the boundaries of science. There are questions that science can’t deal with because of its own methodology like ‘what had been before the Big Bang’, ‘what is the purpose of life’ or ‘what happens after death’ and so on. Death in particular is an empirically inexaminable phenomenon, because no one ever came back to tell us what happens in and after it (near death experiences are only near death, so we can’t take them as scientific proofs for afterlife or anything else
related to the problem of soul and body\textsuperscript{22}). Thus every statement related to death or afterlife could only be based on belief. Therefore the scientific-rationalist worldview that has been replacing religions in many fields of human knowledge is unable to form similarly effective protective mechanisms against the fear of death because the belief that it provides is incomplete and ineffective in certain cases as showed above (now we set aside the fact that from a proper scientific point of view we could only say that ‘we can’t say anything about death’, not that ‘there is nothing after death’). The main problem with the popularization of scientific-rationalist worldview is the fact that it spread out the requirement of scientific scepticism. Everything must be scientifically proved to be taken as valid and assured knowledge. Scientific approach has stepped over its boundaries and doubted areas like afterlife that formerly belonged to faith and belief. Unproved knowledge became ambiguous, doubtful, unsure. It raised the number of people infirm towards the death-related questions, which is the hotbed of intensification of fear of death and death anxiety, as it can be seen above.

To sum up, there are certain questions that science is unable to answer, for example those related to death and afterlife. Therefore the overall extension of the scientific conviction can weaken the belief in afterlife in the society at large. Moreover, it weakens or it could even eliminate traditional social mechanisms protecting against the terror of death. In this way the boundless extension of scientific conviction breaks social integration and can’t close this hole. Because scientific approach is unable to generate adequate replacements since afterlife-denying persuasion can’t be taken as a scientifically proved statement but a belief (and it is inadequate in particular subfields as shown above). So sciences should ‘withdraw’ behind their borders and give up the universalistic claim of their explanatory power.

4. Fear of death and social deviance

Irvin D. Yalom wrote that ‘Death is a primordial source of anxiety and, as such, is the primary fount of psychopathology.’\textsuperscript{23} According to him death anxiety caused by malfunctioning intrapersonal defense mechanisms is related – on either conscious or unconscious level – to neuroticism, suicidal aptitude and – in certain cases – even to criminal behaviour. Most of these intrapersonal defense mechanisms are interiorized knowledges, provided by the social mechanisms under discussion here. Thus these intrapersonal defense mechanisms are socially transmitted, acquired through the process of socialization. In addition to this, according to Béla Buda the lack of afterlife concept weakens communities, interpersonal relationships and deepens estrangedment. It promotes self-destructing personality mechanisms, self-destructing stress management practices and lifestyles such as depression, addictions, movement disorders.\textsuperscript{24}

As a consequence of all, it seems that improperly treated and so increasing fear of death in any society also raises the emergence of social deviance, principally
mental deviances. It follows that – from a sociological point of view – the general spread of the afterlife-denying criticism can be much more harmful than its protective role provided to its followers.

What should we do then? Scientific-rationalist approaches should ‘withdraw’ and respect the borders of beliefs as mentioned above. The scientific scepticism should be replaced in case of death- and afterlife-related topics with ‘metasciences’ – religions, philosophies etc. – using intuitive, empathic, constructive methods instead of doubting or destructing the existing solutions. So the social mechanisms concerning the fear of death could be strengthened. Rephrasing the well-known phrase of Max Weber: we need ‘The reenchantment of this and the other world’ or in the original German: ‘die wiederzauberung der Welt un Jenseits.’

Notes

3 Peter Ludwig Berger and Thomas Luckmann, A valóság társadalmi felépítése: tudásszociológiai értekezés (Budapest, Jószöveg Műhely Kiadó, 1998), 144.
4 Norbert Elias, A haldoklók magányossága (Helikon Kiadó, 2000), 11.
5 Elemér Hankiss, Félelmek és szimbólumok – Egy civilizációelmélet vázlata (Budapest, Osiris, 2006), 59.
8 Yalom, Existential Psychotherapy, 41.
9 Berger The Sacred Canopy, 51. Italics in the original
10 Ibid., 43. Italics in the original
11 Yalom, Existential Psychotherapy, 30.
12 Ibid., 33. Italics in the original
13 Ibid., 35.


Békés, ‘Ki fél a haláltól?’


Émile Durkheim, *A vallási élet elemi formái* (Budapest, L’Harmattan Kiadó, 2003), 388.

There are certain scientific attempts that try to explain NDE-s, but until now none of those appear to be completely correct.


Buda ‘A halál és haldoklás szociálpszichológiai tényezői és folyamatai’

**Bibliography**


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