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Concept Research Paper

Death: A Concept Shaped by Social Constructs

Death is predominantly viewed as a biological state, intertwining closely with the concept of life. Most of us fear death as much as we yearn for life. However, a series of social constructs have changed the way we view death wherein certain populations no longer fear it or avoid bringing it up. In some cases, it is the contentment that accepting inevitability while embracing the idea of living fully alleviates the fear of death; in other cases, people choose to deal with the inevitable through unique defense mechanisms shaped by their identities and surroundings.

The most widely accepted and used meaning of death is the cessation of living organisms. Specifically, it is a biological state that is characterized by the stopping of pulse, heartbeat, breathing, and other medical and biological criteria constituting the death of a person or animal (Sarbey 3). Documenting the history of the definition of death from the early 20th century and onward, Sarbey sets forth that the definition has been constantly renewed to accommodate various biological states that resemble death, such as a comatose state, people going through a heart transplant, and animals hibernating. It was not until the late 20th century that society reached a consensus on how to define death in order to serve proper medical and legal procedures. Therefore, nowadays when death is brought up in medical, legal, or even everyday, casual

settings, there is virtually no confusion over what the term refers to, though not everyone is aware of all the criteria constituting death.

Humans, across all cultures, tend to euphemize death, using terms such as “passed away”, “gone” or “walked” to refer to death because of respect for the deceased and wanting to avoid causing distress to the listener (Pitt 1). More importantly, the linguistic practice regarding the concept of death underlies much of how we make sense of death as humans and the notion that death is mysterious, negative, and uncontrollable. Especially in medical settings, the word “die” is usually avoided (Barlet 2). Hence, death is considered a taboo in nearly all cultures and settings. Humans are unconsciously affected by this social construct from birth.

Although pretty much everyone agrees on what death is as a social and biological concept, it can also carry profound connotations in certain contexts, such as religion. In Buddhism, death is not viewed as a cease of everything; rather, it symbolizes the end of this life and the beginning of the next one (Ratanakul 12). Due to the teaching inherent to Buddhism that our existence is a never-ending cycle that goes around through the means of rebirth, Buddhists usually fear death less. Besides, Buddhist teaching values the state of being indifferent to the cycle of life and death, producing believers who hold different views of death than non-believers. Similar positive views toward death are observed in Christian teaching as well. Instead of conceptualizing death as the hopeless end, Christianity holds that those who believe in God, despite being deceased physically, will live spiritually and ascend to heaven (Choudry 4). Motivated by the desire to become unafraid of death, religious participants are

generally less anxious about death (Jong et al. 1). Interestingly, certain cultures and artworks have also portray death drastically different than how society in general views it. For example, the song 'Join Me in Death' by a rock band HIM promotes the idea of suicide, seeing it as the way to fulfilling eternal love, as seen in the lyrics below:

*We are so young
Our lives have just begun
But already, we are considering
Escape from this world
And we've waited for so long
For this moment to come
We're so anxious to be together
Together in death
Won't you die tonight for love?
Baby, join me in death*

Certain metal bands, especially death metal bands, also embrace the idea of dying, going to great lengths to depict death as the ultimate form of self-expression. In Japanese culture, people are generally more tolerant of suicide than in other cultures, and committing suicide is actually considered honorable in some cases (Fusé 1). Thus, people belonging to certain cultures or influenced by ideologies that embrace the idea of death can have differing attitudes toward death.

In summary, death goes beyond the mere biological and medical interpretation of the deceased organisms to where its conceptualization is influenced by social constructs such as religion, artwork, and sociocultural norms. While many people are fearful of death and avoid discussing it, it might well be the opposite for some people.

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