

Sociology of death

[Life](#), [Death](#)



" It is possible to provide security against other ills, but as far as death is concerned, we men live in a city without walls. " There is no controlling it; death will come when it will. A wise statement by Epicurus but nonetheless, not entirely true in the present climate. Western civilization is unceasing in its desire to master that which nature has designed to be unconquerable, as evidenced by the rapid advancements that technology and medicine have made. If one values human life, after all, it is imperative to do all that one can to preserve it. For others, however, it is nonsensical to stretch the limits of the Homo sapiens species further than is possible through artificial means. How is it that two human societies can have such different views of the same concept? Interpretations of death vary greatly in societies all around the world. The variations in how societies view and treat death can be linked to the influences of technology, religion and the media as agents of socialization. Technology in society is an important agent that guides individuals in developing their views toward death and dying. For example, as technology developed, Western societies experienced mass urbanization. While 80% of Americans lived in rural agricultural areas at the start of the Civil War, that number is now down to 20%. As society moved away from nature, consequently death began to seem farther away. No longer did children grow up seeing exactly where meat came from- the entire concept became increasingly sequestered and foreign. Unlike tribes such as the Suri in Ethiopia that live in a hostile environment where they are faced with blood, pain and death every day, Westerners live in relative comfort, and rarely does one's mortality stare one in the face. This started to guide America and other such countries into becoming what are known as " death-

denying societies". With the medical institution growing increasingly more sophisticated in its methods, denying "premature" death and lengthening life has become the norm. To many it seems, with enough money and treatment, death can be postponed almost indefinitely. From 1900 to 2008, the life expectancy of Americans has gone from 47 years to 78 years. A common misconception is that this is all due to medicine when in fact most of this improvement came between 1900 and 1950, when simple measures such as improving sanitation and nutrition were taken. Not knowing this, many Americans thus have unreasonable expectations of the capacity of a physician to keep a patient alive. A patient death is considered to be a failure on the part of medicine as opposed to the natural course of nature. That is why relatives and physicians alike tend to push for as many treatments as possible, sometimes for little more than being able to say "We did all we could" and assuage the guilt. Other societies, like Hindu tribes for example, perceive the entire concept of death and dying very differently. For them, death is not so much a failure of an institution but a natural course of life that will bring an individual one step closer to being released from samsara, the cycle of rebirth. By modern standards, the level of technological development in these regions is low. These societies live in and embrace the natural world which modern society has distanced itself far from. Mother Nature is worshipped by the Hindus- the concepts of nature and Hinduism are so intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. They have a very great respect for nature and its power to give life and take it away, while many Western societies look upon nature as something that can be denied or at least held off with the power of technology. Therefore,

technology- or lack thereof- has a strong influence as an agent in socializing a society's views toward death. Another force that shapes how individuals perceive death and dying is religion. Tribal and traditional societies tend to be more religious than modern secular societies. Death is considered an important stage of life as the individual's spirit crosses from this life into the next. To bring back the example of the Hindus, death is ultimately an event that is celebrated because an individual leaves the material world which they believe to be simply an illusion and may continue to be reincarnated into more advanced forms or, if the individual lacks bad karma, may be freed from samsara altogether and reach a state of happiness known as nirvana. In order to collect good karma and be liberated upon death, an individual must live one's life in accordance with the religious doctrines and lack self-centredness and selfishness. In modern society, in which a steadily increasing number of people have no faith- 16% in Canada, according to the 2001 census- or else have limited adherence to their faith, with an estimated 38% of Canadians rarely or never attending church, the focus is on the individual. The only paradise that exists is the here and the now, and the quality of one's life is of paramount importance. Contrary to the beliefs of groups such as the Buddhists or Hindus, death leads to the unknown in which there may be nothing. This would mean that the life and death of an individual ultimately may be worth nothing. Humans need purpose to exist in the universe and themselves to be an expression of that purpose. When this belief is gone, death becomes a truly grim thing. Modern societies are inclined to hide away death by sequestering the elderly and ill in institutions. In 1850, 71% of elderly white adults lived with their children- that number is

done to 16% in America today. 80% of deaths in America occur in institutions, despite the repeated study findings that individuals would prefer to die at home. From a functionalist point of view this is beneficial- the functionalist theory of disengagement dictates that it is natural for ageing adults to withdraw from society. The roles they once held will then be filled by the younger generation and in this way, society continues to function smoothly. However, with this view comes a detachment from elderly individuals in general and the sequestering of these people into institutions again separates death and dying from the eyes of the younger generation. Many elderly and ill individuals tend to suffer social deaths before they do biological ones. This comes in strong contrast to Mexican society, for example, where people do not typically make use of the nursing home system and where elders tend to live at home. Religion has a strong influence in this society, and nearly every home has crosses, rosaries and candles honouring Jesus or Our Lady of Guadalupe. It is traditional to pray during meals or in separate rooms. The majority of Mexicans are Roman Catholics and they do believe in salvation and eternal life after death. In this society, death is neither shied away from nor ignored; it is very much the forefront of their lives. This is evidenced during festivals such as Dia de los Muertos, otherwise known as the Day of the Dead. Therefore, the influence of religion- or lack thereof- is an important agent of socialization that affects how societies view death and dying. The next factor that will be discussed is the contribution of various forms of media as an agency of socialization in regards to death. Goshua, 3 Surprising though it may be, death often has a prominent position in media in virtually every society. That does include

modern American and Canadian society, despite the reputation that they have of being death-denying. From highly popular games like Grand Theft Auto IV or Saint`s Row 3 to huge money-maker movies like Jaws, violence and death seem to have become an integral part of popular culture. Rap music represents 10. 1% of all music sales in America while rock, which can also contain various messages promoting drugs and violence, comes in at 32. 5%. Tabloids tend to report only extraordinary deaths and catastrophes. Medical shows like Gray`s Anatomy are wildly popular. The underlying factor common to all of these is that they distort the viewer`s perception of death by dramatizing death. Rather than desensitizing viewers to death, these exaggerations commonly tend to do the opposite and paint a wild, violent and frightening picture of death in the minds of people. Thus, the population is socialized to believe that death is a more brutal event than it usually is and inspires the perception that it is some unnatural demon. From the interactionist perspective, death becomes a symbol of all that is fearsome and to be avoided. This stimulates changes in behaviour, leading individuals to actively avoid death and resulting in the sequestering of the elderly and ill that can be observed today in American society, for example. This is grossly different from Mexican society in which media is used to give respect to death and the dead. During the Day of the Dead, the Mexicans paint and build little sculptures to honour the deceased, who are to return on this day. The art is structured to represent the identity of the individual before his death. For example, if one`s uncle was a barber, one would make a skeleton figure of a barber. Death is not construed as an event that is unnatural or out of the ordinary; rather, it is yet another stage in life. There can also be

images of the living sharing a head or even entire body with the dead, again emphasizing that birth, life and death are all interconnected. Especially during this time, death is shown everywhere, from ceramic tiles to figurines to paintings and even the icing on cakes. However, unlike in modern American culture, death is not portrayed as harsh or monstrous. For this society, death is a symbol of the progression of nature and ascension to a higher level of spirituality and existence than is possible on earth. When media is used in this way, it aids in socializing children to grow to view death as simply another essence of life. Goshua, 4 For the many different societies that exist in the world, there are an equivalent number of interpretations of various concepts. Some societies celebrate death and look toward it almost joyously, awaiting the day that one can be freed of earthly constraints and move on toward a higher level of existence, of spiritual nirvana. Others grasp the time they have now and do not wish to ever let it go, until they are forced to by the sheer limits of their humanity. The potent forces of technology, religion and media work together to socialize societal members into viewing death and dying a certain way, and also account for the variations in how these concepts are looked at. The children in these societies may then grow to embrace their humanity or otherwise fear it. One word can do much to hamper an individual from living a full life. That is why, unfortunately, there are so many more that are dead than alive. Works Cited

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