Example of research paper on psychology of parents and children in the black deat...

Parts of the World, Europe

The Black Death was one of the most incredibly disastrous events in human history, killing more than 100 million people, over half the population of Europe. In addition to that, the Black Death brought about significant economic and social changes throughout European society, mostly as a result of the devastating population loss for all classes and areas the Black Death demonstrated. One of the most terrifying and fascinating consequences of such a society-altering event was the relationships between parents and children as a result of such a quickly spreading, apocalyptic disease, something which is unfathomable in today's technological, medically advanced society.

The already treacherous life expectancies of European society made survival difficult enough already; the addition of the Black Death made child loss nearly a certainty, and one that took a devastating psychological toll on the parents and children who survived the death of their family. Given the precarious chances of survival at the time, the idea that parents would continue to have children during this time of grief and psychological trauma may have been unethical on the part of the entire family. By examining how parents and children react to the loss of the other in a similar disaster, we can best examine how to treat these psychological traumas in the event it were to happen in the future.

Even before the Black Plague, Medieval Europe was a place where death was a constant. Malnutrition was a regular thing among the poor and middle peasants of the time - poors would often have less than 2, 000 kilocalories a day, while the rich would eat 4, 000 kcal (Jankauskas, p. 467). The majority

of the population would regularly almost starve on the lack of food that was available. Infectious diseases would then result through the poor living conditions and immune systems present in these malnourished bodies.

Because of these and other factors, living in the Middle Ages simply meant you were, on average, at a 75% chance to survive your birthday, and a 50% chance of reaching adulthood (Jankauskas & Urbanavicius, p. 474). On the whole, it was a very risky venture to have a child during the Middle Ages in general; one out of every four children died before they were born, and only two of them would become fully grown before dying. This led to a culture that was very much used to death. As a result, the Black Plague, while terrifying, was not wholly unprecedented, nor was death an uncommon thing in the poor villages that it ravaged. Emotional attachment was not as pronounced as it became with the advent of modern medicine, when there was a higher, reasonable expectation that your child would live to grow to an old age.

When the Black Plague hit, this cheapness to life was even more pronounced. Due to the sheer mass of deaths that occurred at that time, crime reached an all time high. Warfare was also much more prominent. The " Violent Tenor of Life" is an attribute that many who had to suffer through the Black Death are very familiar with; people simply became less reticent to take chances and enact violence on other people. Life was cheaper due to the mass mortality rates that were occurring; people inferred that, since people were likely to die of the plague anyway, they were not robbing the world of any significant figures unjustly (Cohn, 2002).

While the loss of a child is tragic, it does not explain the phenomenon of continuing to have children when there is a good chance of losing them. This overly cavalier outlook on life found in the Middle Ages contributed to the lessened attachment parents had to their children. Children were very quick to die during the Black Death; they did not develop the same level of immunities that many of the adults had, and so they were more susceptible to the plague - there was a 75% child mortality rate in Siena, Italy (Cohn, 2002). This left a mass of children that the parents had to bury; they also had to do it alone, because all the children would be gone. In this way, the fast deaths of their children is exactly what inspired more parents to have more children - they imagined that at least more of them would have a chance of surviving the plague and passing on their legacy and family name. There was a small rise in fertility during the Black Death; this population rise is likely what kept the population from falling even further than it did already (Cohn, 2002).

Parents burying their children was, nonetheless, a devastating event; parents were struck with incredible grief and despair at the prospect of their entire family being killed. In the social chaos that ensued during the Black Death, parents would often abandon children for various reasons, either from fear of getting the plague themselves or through simple misinformation or misdirection (Wray, 2011). What likely exacerbated the psychological trauma that the parents experienced was the lack of a proper ability to bury their children in a singular space. Often, because of safety concerns, mass graves would become repositories for masses of children, a severe indignity that

robbed parents of the ability to say goodbye to their child. This led to the Black Death taking the name " the plague of children,"; 80% of the deaths recorded in many small and medium-sized European towns were children (Cohn, 2002).

The average medieval European women birthed 5 children in the course of their lifetimes; statistically speaking, two or three of those children would be taken by the Black Death (Jankauskas, p . 474). Why, then, would they have so many, only to condemn some of their children to death and bring grief to their own lives? The answer is deceptively simple; many medieval women in Europe played the numbers game, hoping that those two or three children that survived would live on past the Black Death. While parents were grief-stricken, the combination of a deeply religious lifestyle, which favored an afterlife that provided them solace from the troubles of the material world, with a lifestyle that brought death to their door on a regular basis, meant that behavioral patterns did not change dramatically through the Black Plague. They would still have children, regardless of the risks.

The psychological issues that ran rampant throughout the Black Death were also manifest in parents and children. The Flagellant movement stemmed from religious morbidity and the need for parents who lost children to see some kind of reason for the terrible things that happened to them. Many men and women who lost children to the Black Death would start flagellating themselves, whipping themselves with reeds, switches and chains in order to feel the punishment they felt they deserved; they thought that God was punishing them for their misdeeds (Thompson, 1921). As a result, a

tremendous guilt took place among parents who survived children of the Black Death, since they thought the loss was their fault, and the plague was God's punishment for the wicked.

The psychological effects of parents and children extended past the era of the Black Death as well. Children were hit just as hard with grief and troubled minds within the plague years, as well. The aftermath period, the years immediately following the Black Death, were fraught with an incredible loss of life. Families were either completely eliminated or partially wiped out, with either grief-stricken parents or children left to pick up the pieces. Children without parents fared as poorly as parents who lost children; the kids were forced to resort to pickpocketing in order to support themselves, sticking together or living solitary lifestyles. This led to substantial abandonment issues, as well as development of high-risk behaviors in order to feel alive (Thompson, 1921). As a result, it was doubly unethical to attempt to have children during the Black Death, given the lives they would lead in case their parents were killed by the plague. There were also those children who would receive the good fortune of being granted their parents' estates; if their parents were wealthy, so much the better for their livelihoods. However, no matter how much money they made, emotional excitement and crowd psychology would often result from groups of orphaned children, who would use that to compensate for the presence of distinct family groups (Thompson, 1921).

Given the choice to have more children during the Black Plague, there are ethical issues abound that must be addressed. There is the argument that,

given just how many children died during the plague, there was a duty to perform on the parts of these parents. In their minds, they needed to continue the family line through any means possible; in order to have at least one child who lived on to carry on the father's name, medieval Europeans had many more children than normal, or at least continued their typical breeding patterns. The presence of a strong Catholic sentiment among the societies of western Europe, plus the lack of a reliable birth control, also meant that more babies were being conceived and carried to term (Wray, 2011).

However, the Catholic church's hold on the people, particularly the lower class, weakened dramatically as a result of the Black Death. Because so many people were dying left and right, and because so few clergy could help them through the power of prayer, many parents would leave the church after so many of their children would die without any answer to their prayers. This led to an increased secularism that was a hallmark of the Black Death. While some turned closer to God for solace, or became flagellants to atone for their sins, others turned from the church. An added sense of pessimism and morbidity arose from families who lost members, both parent and child (Rees, 1923).

The family was the heart of medieval European society, regardless of how cavalierly they treated their children or the possibility of death. Despite knowing that there would be tremendous consequences for many of their family members, parents wanted to have children, and take the chance that at least some of them would live. In order to care for these children, many

parents would make sure to set up their testaments and wills in order to bequeath their belongings to their children. The Black Death led to a hastening in will-making, as parents were never quite sure when their time would come (Wray, 2011). While this kept the children provided for, it still made the choice to leave them without parents a somewhat precarious dilemma.

In medieval Europe, the Black Death only brought more death on the already-harsh lifestyle that the European family was living. In the context of a similarly devastating plague on a modern society, similar psychological effects may be seen in parents and children of the day. Because of the somewhat higher expectations of survival that today's first-world children experience, given modern medical technology, the grief and guilt experienced may be even more pronounced.

In conclusion, the psychological effects of the Black Death parents and children were immense, if surprising. The existing poor conditions of medieval Europe during the Black Death were such that emotional attachment to children was less pronounced than in a technological, modern society. Parents, as a result, had more children so that they could make sure that someone survived to carry on the family line, especially as the Black Death raged through Europe. This is not to say that parents were completely callous; they still held deep attachments to their children, which led their grief at their deaths to be so great as to often lead to flagellation and religious morbidity. On the part of orphaned children, they would often lead into unstructured, grouped lives of vandalism in crime as they took to the

streets to survive. Given the state of these children, the choice to have children who had a good chance of growing up on the streets - if they survived at all - was a risky one, if not unethical.

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