

The taboo subject of death



The Oxford English Dictionary defines Taboo as being a social or religious custom placing a ban or restriction on a particular thing or topic. The Adjective added to that definition was banned or restricted by social custom (Oxford University Press – 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006). For many people, death is a taboo subject in spite of the fact that it is of universal concern, but is this statement necessarily true across cultures and countries? This essay will explore both the topical statement and the question. We will look at death from a brief historical context and how, if at all, the passage of time has altered the perception and the acceptance of death. We will take a look at two research studies undertaken in the United Kingdom and in the United States and then look at New Zealand’s diverse multi – cultural society. Does a different cultural perspective of death change when absorbed into a western culture? We will also show that whilst death is still a taboo subject in some cultures, it is more the inability of people to be comfortable in dealing with the terminally ill and our awkwardness in accepting that death is the inevitable end to our physical life as we know it. Coupled with this, is the fear of the great unknown and these three factors combine to contribute to our unwillingness to talk about of death, rather than death being a taboo subject per say. The fact is, is that we just don’t know how.

Space is often described as the ‘ final frontier’. But could death be defined within the same context? Often, the subject of death is easier to discuss in general terms rather than on a personal level. Some of the factors that may give reason to this are as follows:

Death in the media may often be portrayed as being violent, traumatic or speedy. This image usually involves some disaster or trauma in order to

become 'newsworthy'. In contrast, most 'real-life' deaths are usually 'unnewsworthy', but this may lead to the developing of a stereotyped view of death that relates to the media image, rather than reality. Today death is not usually encountered on a personal level as frequently as history portrays, or in some other cultures outside of our western world. Science has reduced the incidence of infant mortality and there is a greater perception that technology will also prolong our life as well. There is a reduction in the spiritual belief of an afterlife. Death may now be seen as a final event and hence, becomes a more difficult subject to discuss. Families now tend to be separated and there are not the same support systems as in the past.

Different bereavements and factors can affect a person's acceptance. Denial protects the individual from the initial impact of the loss. Not just the individual, but whole groups and societies deny. From a historical perspective, one can begin to see how patterns of

Denial within societies changes over time and influences the present. *

Lendrum, S. & Syme, G. Gift of Tears, (second edition, 2004).

During the period of the great Roman Empire, death was common place and more often than not, a public spectacle. The question was not of when they would die; it was more one of how. Would it be through natural causes, or, if their crime was worthy of such a death, crucifixion or rotting in some Roman dungeon. Maybe they would be promoted to the position of Gladiator. At least then they would only have to face war chariots, lions, or the choice of a blood thirsty crowd if they survived at all. And the Roman Legion was not much better.

In Medieval times, death was perceived as a much greater presence than in today's societies. Not surprisingly, life expectancy was about half of that today. People had to be prepared to face death. And death was more likely to be violent, cruel and extremely painful. *Lendrum, S. & Syme, G. Gift of Tears, (second edition, 2004).

Death was unpredictable and uncontrollable. People had to live with a greater awareness of death around them and of their own mortality. There was always the constant reminder of death in the midst of life. One could not deny the existence of death and were forced to be more prepared to meet their deaths than today.

In the last century death crossed over two distinct boundaries. With the occurrence of World Wars 1 & 2, Vietnam, Korea, China, Afghanistan and China, you had the violent deaths of both combatants and civilians alike. Civilians had to try and carry on with their lives as best they could and at the same time, knowing that this day could be their last. And for those left at 'home', it wasn't overly better. Not that they were openly threatened with death, but had, to a certain extent, live with a 'living' death.... trying to live a reasonably normal life, yet constantly living in the fear of whether or not their loved one would return.

Admittedly, death within the context of the above is portrayed in somewhat violent and uncertain terms but throughout, there are three poignant observations that arise:

1/ There are those that live with death face to face on a daily basis.

2/ There are those that live in a somewhat removed position from the turmoil of what is happening. Not isolated but knowing that at some stage they will have to face reality.

3/ Death is something that we will all face head on. The question is, do we acknowledge our mortality and learn to be open about it, or do we hide from the reality and repress our innermost fears?

In their book " Awareness of dying", Glaser and Strauss (2005), researched the average Americans' attitude to death and dying. One key point that they found was the strangely paradoxical attitude that revealed itself. Whilst Americans' were seemingly able to accept that death was an everyday affair in that on a daily basis, newspapers confronted the brutal fact of death directly - (from front page headlines to back page funeral notices, someone was always dying somewhere), they generally seemed to prefer to talk about a particular death rather than about death in the abstract.

Characteristically, Americans are unwilling to talk openly about the process of dying itself and also prone to not telling a dying person that they are dying. This, in part, is a moral

attitude - life is preferable to whatever may follow it. One should not look forward to death.

Feifel, H. Death, (as cited in Farberow, N. L., 1963).

Social and Psychological problems involved in terminality are perhaps most acute when the dying person knows that they are dying. For this reason,

Physicians in America are quite reluctant to disclose impending death to their patients. Fieifel, H. Death, (1961, p 17).

The problem of “ awareness” is crucial as to what happens both to the dying patient and to the people who give medical and nursing care, as well as those supporting the patient. Whilst one view of awareness is a technical one: should the patient be told they are dying and what is to be done if they don't know or only suspect, there is also a moral one involving professional ethics, social issues, and personal values. Should a dying person be denied the opportunity to make peace with their conscience and with their God, and to settle their affairs and provide for the future of their family? Do they have the right to control their style of dying, much as they controlled their style of living? Does anyone have the right to withhold such information? Fulton, R. Death and Self, (July 1964)

In their article titled “ Dying Conversation” - Death remains a taboo subject among Brits’ (25th Sept. 2002), Norwich Union wrote the following:

“ Death is a taboo subject when it comes to conversation. The topic is the most avoided conversation item for around 1 in 5 people nationwide. Women feel more at ease discussing the subject than men”.

Research also revealed that:

.... Death is seen as less of a taboo by the youngest (16 - 24) and oldest (65+), than all other age groups, while religion was the biggest conversational taboo among the 30 - something group.

.... Both death and sex are considered equally taboo subjects by woman.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-taboo-subject-of-death/>

.... Death is seen as the biggest taboo by 24% of Londoners – far more than anywhere else in Britain.

.... People in the Northwest are the most likely to openly discuss death – only 12% of people asked described death as the biggest taboo.

Forty eight percent of people questioned also said that they were treated differently by others after their friend or loved one died and nearly 54% said advice on how to support someone who has suffered bereavement would be useful.

“ Research showed that 2 out of every 3 people in the UK have lost either a close family member or a friend in the last 3 years – yet as a nation, we still find it extremely difficult to discuss death and to cope with bereavement”.

Does culture have any direct influence on how people handle death? In many cultures, there are ‘ taboos’ surrounding death – do not touch a dead body least you inherit the disease; do not cremate the body as then the spirit will not rest and will return to persecute (the family). But are these taboos about openly discussing death or merely cultural beliefs as to how to treat the deceased. And what happens to such culture when ‘ absorbed’ into another, larger culture? Such is the case within New Zealand where the country boasts one of the highest cross cultural populations in the western world.

For example and from a Maori perspective, serious illness, dying, death and grieving are among the most sacred and important in Maori life. Sanctity (tapu), Ceremony (kawa) and Language (reo), are intertwined in all of Maori life and traditions, and held in the highest regard. Unity, harmony and

balance are central to their culture and are maintained through the systems of customary practices and the law of Tapu.

For the Maori, serious illness or the process for a terminally ill person is very much a 'living', family (Whanau) affair. Relatives and friends gather daily beside the patient, either at home or at the hospital, each providing spiritual, moral, emotional and physical support for the patient and for the family. The interests of the patient and family are of paramount concern.

Karakia (prayers and incantations) are an integral part and often both traditional Maori and modern Christian beliefs are combined and whilst traditional healing practices are still practiced, acknowledgement is given for the place and role of scientific medicine.

Without great expansion on Maori culture and even given the current cultural climate, Maori traditions and practices continue to be an integral part of Maori life and will undoubtedly continue to be so. It is, perhaps, one of the truly sacred and time honoured cultures that have withstood the test of time in what is basically, a strong western culture. Maori do not appear to have any taboos when it comes to the overall aspect of sickness and

Death. In fact, they seem to embrace and encompass it within their Tapu and Kawa.

Keene, L. A race nearly lost, (1989, June). Ngata, N. P. Death, dying and grief: a Maori perspective, (1986).

Other cultural groups within New Zealand have very similar views and practices in their attitude towards death and dying. In the case of either

<https://assignbuster.com/the-taboo-subject-of-death/>

serious illness and/or in dealing with the terminally ill, it is very much a strong family time with both practical and spiritual/moral support being on constant avail.

Of one major exception is that of the Niueans. For them, death is regarded as taboo. Discussion of death amongst themselves or with the dying is forbidden unless the dying raises their impending death. However though, within the same context, the family and friends of the dying/seriously ill person will maintain a constant bedside vigil.

People have always grappled with the meaning of death. This was probably mitigated during the Middle Ages by a belief in an afterlife – a belief that death was not the end and that the soul moved to another place. Christianity and other faiths expand on this belief.

This discomfort about death has led to shame and embarrassment and an avoidance of talking or writing about death. Euphemisms are often used, especially when talking to children. Such euphemisms as: Snuffed it; Kicked the bucket; Passed away/on; Pushing up daisies; all serve to distance ourselves from the effects of death. We experience great uncomfortableness in attempting to talk to the terminally ill, even if they are family. Out of sheer awkwardness, we may say nothing at all and in doing so deprive both ourselves and the dying person of physical touch, words of comfort, and the recognition and emotional connectedness that we all desire. The very words and the valuable proof of our affection and tenderness go unsaid. Hockey, J. (1990, as cited in Lendrum, S. & Syme, G., 2004).

Freud et al, (as cited in Lendrum, S. & Syme, G. 2004), pointed out the connection between the fear of death and the feeling of guilt. Putting into a simple example, Adam and Eve were immortal in Paradise but once they had sinned, became mortal and were condemned to die. That death was punishment for evil committed. The notion that death is a punishment could be used as a way of trying to make sense of death. This same notion could also have contributed to our fear of death and in turn, our guilt.

Guilt is a strong emotion that is almost always experienced both by the dying and by those who survive. Not only are the feelings of “ if only I had.....,” “ I only wish that I,” experienced, but even in death, the deceased can be tainted with guilt by those who can find no better way of dealing with their own guilt and fears..... Aids is caused by promiscuity..... serves them right! An awareness of this might allow us to understand the value of confession and forgiveness.

As a personal comment, I have experienced more than 15 deaths in my 53 years of life. These include both of my birth Parents (I was adopted at birth), My Parents, My first ‘ real girlfriend’ (as a result of a plane crash), and numerous motor vehicle accidents involving death where I just ‘ happened’ to be first on the scene. In particular, I recall the deaths of my Father and Mother.

My Father died as a result of lung cancer, at home in 1968. I was 12 years old. Throughout the period of 8 months including major lung surgery, my Mother never once said anything to myself or my brother about Dads’

impending death. In fact we didn't really comprehend it until the day that Dad wasn't at home anymore and the house was totally silent.

My mother died from cancer in a Hospice at Lower Hutt. I was 34 and in my first marriage. Mum had been living with my then wife and me for 6 months prior and when she finally died, I wasn't even present. I had struggled to talk to her or even my wife of her death and took solace in alcohol big time.

In conclusion, throughout the research of this topic I have found that there are certainly some situations and circumstances in which the subject of death is taboo. However, I am personally of the belief that it is not that the subject is taboo per say; it is more the case of that we just don't know how to speak of, let alone handle death. Society is slowly changing in both the dialogue of, and the acceptance of death on deaths' terms, but in saying that, I firmly believe that we, as New Zealand Europeans, can learn a lot from the vast array of other cultures within our country. The question is..... Do we want to??