Relationship between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety in the elderly

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety in the elderly. A number of 120 elderly people were selected as the participants using cluster sampling. Arian's Religiosity Questionnaire, Satisfaction with Life Scale and Collet – Lester's Fear of Death Scale were used to collect the data. Pearson correlation formula and multiple regression analysis were run to analyze the data. The results showed a negative correlation between religious beliefs and death anxiety as well as between life satisfaction and death anxiety in the elderly. The results of regression analysis revealed that, from among the predictive variables, life satisfaction was the best predictor of death anxiety.

Keywords: religious beliefs, life satisfaction, death anxiety, ageing
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INTRODUCTION

Ageing is the evolutionary stage of human life embracing the last transformation in human growth. It is also an opportunity for maturity, experience and independence as well as seeking integration and addressing the self. Growth rate, in this stage, entails physiological and psychological variations and complexities. These variations affect thoughts, emotions, beliefs, values, personality and performance in dealing with others. Ageing is the collection of changes occurred in the organism or object over time [1]. The elderly may find abundant evidence of death due to physical changes, poor health, disability and loss of relatives. Therefore, the elderly think of death and talk about it. Death is part and parcel of human life per se [2]. It is not an accident but a reality associated with life so that the history of human thought cites the eternal fusion of life and death. Life and death are predominant forces determining the behavior of the living creatures for survival [3]. Death causes serious concerns in human and inspires creative and philosophical questions in all stages of life [4]. Thus, human cannot help thinking about death and seeking to understand it; however, it takes its toll of living a life under the shadow of death and its fear. Fear of death is not fear of the unknown; rather, it may also entail various fears and apprehensions one has experienced in life [5].

Death anxiety is a unique characteristic of human beings because they are the only creatures considering the inevitability of death [6,7] Many a researcher agrees with the multi-dimensional view of this construct [8]. Death anxiety is a concept used to refer to the apprehension felt about death awareness [9]. It is not a far-reaching sort of anxiety waiting for us at the end of the life route. Rather, it is a latent anxiety penetrating the depths of emotions as if we feel the taste of death in every phenomenon. Still, religiosity may significantly affect death anxiety in both the young and old [10]. Religion is a human practice that can be readily accepted only within the framework of reality

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that has given birth to it [11]. Religiosity brings about peace and comfort, guarantees individuals' safety, fills ethical, emotional and spiritual gaps in the individual and society, and provides us with a barrier against problems and deprivations.

In a meta-analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness, Donahue (1985) reviewed several studies that investigated the relationship between religiosity and death anxiety [12]. Some studies reported a positive correlations, some described a negative correlations and some reported no significant correlations . Several studies showed that individuals with strong inner religious beliefs experience lower levels of death anxiety [13]. Generally, establishing a spiritual relation ensures the individual that a strong power always supports them. Religious people withstand the calamities and sorrows more easily and suffer from less anxiety. Religion acts as a mediator to affect thought processes and evaluations of daily events in the individual. Thus, even negative incidents may be interpreted as positive so that the individual might attribute them a positive function. Religious teachings and services may affect satisfaction with life that is considered as an indicator of good life [14] and usually reflects individuals' attitudes towards past, present and future in terms of their psychological well-being [15]. Life satisfaction in the elderly is an important concept as it gives us an general view of the adjustment and also individual adaptability [16]. Life satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the elderly depends on the individual's review of their past. Ageing, as the last stage of growth, functions to review and shed light on the concept of life and on how the individual has lived a life. Developmental growth in this stage can be under way if the individual adapts to variations and losses through realism and flexibility and spends the last years of their life with a sense of self-worth. More importantly, the individual may reap the fruits of their past cultivations, whether in the presence of their children, human relations or cultural, social and economic productions and services so that the individual may consider their life as meaningful, hence a feeling of life satisfaction.

Considering the variables under investigation in this study, a number of studies have been carried out yet. Vafaii et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between sensation-seeking, sense of humor and religious orientations with death anxiety in university students. The results showed a negative correlation between sensation-seeking and death anxiety as well as between religious orientations and death anxiety. However, there was a significant positive correlation between sense of humor and death anxiety [17].

Ulya-Nasab (2010) investigated the relationship between attachment to God and death anxiety in the students at Qom Theological Seminary and the students at Qom Islamic Azad University. The results showed a significant negative correlation between death anxiety and attachment to God so that with increased attachment to God, death anxiety decreased in the participants. The results also revealed a significant positive correlation between avoidant and ambivalent attachment to God with death anxiety. The findings suggested that attachment to God may control psychological disorders such as death anxiety and its affiliate diseases [18].

Wen (2010) studied the relationship between religiosity and death anxiety. The results showed a positive correlation between inner religious motives, frequency of participation in religious services and strength of belief. The results showed a linear second-hand relationship between death anxiety and inner religious motive [13].

Cohen et al. (2005) reported that religion regulated the relationship between inner and outer religiosity with death anxiety and belief in the afterlife [19].

There have been a few studies on the relationship between life satisfaction and death anxiety so far. Abdel-khalek and Al-Sabwah (2005) studied a number of 568 undergraduate nursing students in Egypt. The results showed a relationship between life satisfaction scores with the scores on Death Anxiety Scale, Arabic Death Anxiety Scale, Revised Death Depression Scale and Death Obsession Scale. The Pearson correlation formula yielded a significant but small coefficient value [20].

Given and Range (1990) investigated the relationship between satisfaction with life and death anxiety in two groups of elderly: those who lived in the nursing home and those who lived at their own home. The results revealed that the elderly with higher life satisfaction had lower levels of death anxiety and held a more positive attitude towards ageing. However, their living location seemed to play no role in life satisfaction and death anxiety [21].
Considering the discussed issues and the increasing population of elderly as well as the fact that they are more concerned with thinking of death, it seems necessary to heed the factors that may reduce death anxiety in the elderly.

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Consequently, the present study aims to investigate whether or not there is a relationship between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety in the elderly.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method of the study is descriptive-correlational whereby the relationship between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety is investigated in the elderly in Ahwaz city.

Participants

The participants of the study consisted of a number of 120 elderly in Ahwaz city ranging in age from 65 and over and were selected using cluster sampling. In this regard, four municipality districts were randomly selected from among the eight districts in Ahwaz. Of the pensioner associations in the selected districts, four associations were randomly chosen. The lists of pensioners who were members of each association were collected and the participants were randomly selected.

Instruments

Arian's Religiosity Questionnaire: using Allport's Religious Orientation Questionnaire and considering the religious and cultural characteristics of Iranian society, Arian developed Religiosity scale [22]. The questionnaire is a self-report scale to examine religiousness and includes 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from little (1) to very much (5). Arian administered the questionnaire to a sample of students at Allameh Tabatabaie University and reported the reliability of the scale to be 0.92, which shows an acceptable index of reliability. In the present study, the reliability of the scale was calculated to be 0.60 and 0.52 using Cronbach alpha formula and split-half method, respectively.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS): the scale was developed by Diener et al. (1985) to measure satisfaction with life [23]. It consists of 5 items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Schimmack et al. (2002) reported the correlation between this scale with extroversion and introversion to be 0.46 and 0.48, respectively. They also reported the reliability of the scale in American, German, Japanese, Mexican and Chinese people to be 0.90, 0.82, 0.79, 0.76 and 0.61, respectively [24]. Esmaili (2008) examined the concurrent validity of the scale against The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, which yielded a validity coefficient of 0.66 for either questionnaire. Esmaili (2008) also investigated the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach alpha formula and reported a reliability coefficient of 0.80, which is an acceptable index of reliability [25]. In the present study, the reliability of the scale was calculated using Cronbach alpha formula and split-half method, which yielded reliability coefficients of 0.82 and 0.81, respectively.

Fear of Death Scale: The Revised Collet-Lester questionnaire is a self-report scale consisting of 32 items measuring the level of fear and apprehension towards death. The original scale was developed by Collet and Lester (1969) [26]. Esmaili (2008) administered the revised version of the questionnaire to a number of 200 students at Ahwaz Islamic Azad University and reported the reliability of the scale to be 0.89 and 0.68 using Cronbach alpha formula and split-half method, respectively. The concurrent validity of the scale set against Templer's Death Anxiety Scale was shown to be 0.57, indicating an acceptable validity coefficient for the scale (P≤0/0001) [25]. In the present study, the reliability of the scale was calculated using Cronbach alpha formula and split-half method, which yielded reliability coefficients of 0.93 and 0.84, respectively.

RESULTS

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, maximum and minimum scores. As shown in the table, the mean scores and standard deviations of death anxiety, religious beliefs and life satisfaction are 122.775±19.845, 158.308±9.09 and 25.275±5.342, respectively.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of death anxiety, religious beliefs and life satisfaction

Variables	Mean	SD	Minimum score	Maximum score
Death anxiety	122.775	19.845	81	160
Religious beliefs	158.308	9.090	130	173
Life satisfaction	25.275	5.342	16	35

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Table 2 illustrates the simple correlation coefficients between religious beliefs and death anxiety. As shown in the table, the correlation coefficient between religious beliefs and death anxiety was shown to be -0.234 (P<0.01). In other words, there is a significant negative correlation between religious beliefs and death anxiety so that with stronger religious beliefs, death anxiety reduces.

Table 2. Simple correlation coefficient between religious beliefs and death anxiety

Criterion variable	Predictive variable	R	P	N
Death anxiety	Religious beliefs	-0.234	0.010	120

Table 3 illustrates the results of testing the second research hypothesis whereby the relationship between life satisfaction and death anxiety is investigated. As shown in the table, the correlation coefficient between life satisfaction and death anxiety is -0.262 (P<0.004). In other words, there is a significant negative correlation between life satisfaction and death anxiety so that with increased life satisfaction, death anxiety decreases.

Table 3. Simple correlation coefficient between life satisfaction and death anxiety

Criterion variable	Predictive variable	R	P	N
Death anxiety	Life satisfaction	-0.262	0.004	120

Regression analysis was carried out using both entry and stepwise methods. Table 4 illustrates the results of regression analysis using entry method. As shown in the table, there are multiple relationships between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety.

Table 4. Multiple regression coefficients between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety scores using entry method

Criterion variable	Predictive variable	MR	RS	F for P	Regression coefficients (B)			
					1	2	3	
Death anxiety	Life satisfaction	0.262	0.069	8.693	-0.262			B
				0.004	-2.948			T
					0.004			P
	Religious beliefs	0.296	0.088	5.619	-0.199	-0.152		B
				0.005	-2.049	-1.561		T
					0.043	0.121		P

Table 5 illustrates the results of stepwise regression analysis indicating that life satisfaction is the best predictor of death anxiety comparing with other variables investigated in the present study.

Table 5. Multiple regression coefficients between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety scores using stepwise method

Criterion variable	Predictive variable	MR	RS	F for P	Regression coefficients (B)	
Death anxiety	Life satisfaction	0.262	0.069	8.693	-0.262	B
				0.004	-2.948	T
					0.004	P

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study set to investigate the relationship between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety in the elderly. The results of statistical analysis supported the first hypothesis so that a significant negative correlation was found between religious beliefs and death anxiety (r=-0.234, P≤0.010). In other words, with stronger religious beliefs, death anxiety decreased. This is consistent with the findings of Vafaii et al. (2011), Ulya-Nasab (2010), Wen (2010) and Cohen et al. (2005).

Attachment to a supreme source and worship has been one of the most ancient demonstrations of human life. Historical research has shown that even primitive human ancestors, before the emergence of any civilization, had deep religious beliefs such as belief in the transcendental souls and the afterlife. Contemplation about and fear of death has been an inseparable part of human existence. It has contributed to the creation of superstitious beliefs. Human has resorted to religion and philosophy to account for this unknown phenomenon and drawn on arts and science to help tolerate its inevitability. Thinking about death is common in the elderly and they usually come in terms with the termination of their life. Some researchers have emphasized the role of religious beliefs in the way

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people come in terms with their concerns about death and annihilation [27]. Researchers have also emphasized the effect of religiosity in the young and elderly [10] as well as having a personal philosophy of death [28] on the levels of death anxiety they experience. Therefore, inappropriate understanding of religion and God as well as wrong conceptions and shaky religious beliefs make human think of death as entering a world of pain and suffering, which causes death apprehension.

The results supported the second research hypothesis so that a significant negative correlation was found between life satisfaction and death anxiety (r=-0.262, P<0.004). In other words, with increased life satisfaction, death anxiety decreased. This is consistent with the findings of Abdel-Khalek and Al-Sabwah (2005) and Given and Range (1990).

Human and life are interrelated concepts. Satisfaction with life, as the big hope of human life, has always attracted the attention of human being due to its effect on the formation of human's personality. In the elderly, life satisfaction is subject to the individual's evaluation of the past life. With ageing, the individual tends to withdraw from the active society and prepares for a farewell to life and acceptance of death. In this stage, the individual tends to summarize and evaluate their evolutionary progress in the past. They may come in terms with death more easily if the results of evaluation bring about satisfaction with integrity of existence. This is because the individual reaches a degree of integrity whereby they consider the continuation of their individual life in the products of their creations and in the life of next generations.

The results of multiple regression analysis showed multiple relationships between religious beliefs and life satisfaction with death anxiety. In accounting for this hypothesis, ageing can be considered as a stage of life that every living creature experiences and as a period that individuals have more reasons to think of death [28]. Gradual as it happens, it will not be peculiar to think of death in this stage. Progressive withdrawal from bonds attaching the individual to life, tendency for introspection, attention to self and individual needs are more common in the elderly. Evidence shows that ageing and poor health increasingly adds up to religious orientations. Fully-grown religious beliefs and appropriate religious teachings can reduce anxiety in the individual. Besides, ageing is a stage where the individual evaluates the results of their achievements over their lifespan. The individual reviews their past. When they see the virtues of their achievements, they feel satisfied and experience lower levels of death anxiety. This is because the individual may reach a stage of integrity where they see the continuation of their individual life in their creative productions and in the life of next generations. However, when the individual has lived a life fraught with pains and unfulfilled expectations, the ageing may bring about a mental crisis so that the individual may fail to grasp the wholesomeness of existence and suffer from death anxiety.

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