

Death and Dying: A Mediation Analysis of Fear

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In this paper, we shall describe the way in which some Vietnamese people cope with death and dying. Authors surveyed approximately 302 relative people in the north of Vietnam. The sample showed broad demographic variation. Among respondents, 73% were female and 27% were male. The instrument shows a good reliability of the total scores (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$). Both exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis are used. The model tested was a relatively simple model with three latent factors. They are belief, fear, and ritual and all of them are positive correlated. The relationships among factors are further analyzed and the mediating relationships are found.

Keywords: death and dying, belief, fear, ritual, mediator

Introduction

Death and dying are complex processes with implications for individuals, their families and friends, their care providers, and the health care system. Perception about death and dying may change over time (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

There is little agreement about what constitutes good death or successful dying (Meier et al., 2016). Dealing with death and dying is a personal process, influenced by culture, one's beliefs, how different health care providers communicate information and advice about prognosis, and many other individual and societal factors (Gruenewald & White, 2006). Some people and cultures discourage talk about the possibility of dying, even when faced with a terminal illness, perhaps because they, their families, or their care providers do not want to give up hope of recovery (Wright et al., 2008). Recently, death and dying remains a taboo topic in many social settings, and is underrepresented in health profession training (Nelson, Wright, Abshire, & Davidson, 2018).

In Vietnamese culture, religion dictates some of the rituals in the dying and bereavement process. In Buddhism, for older people who are ill and know they are going to die, death is acceptable and is not shocking for the family. Older Vietnamese people may prefer to be at home at the end of life with family members around them. If the older person has to die in the hospital or residential facility, they may wish that family members have the opportunity to stay with them. If a person does not die at home, it is regarded as causing bad luck for the family. Dying people who are Buddhist may wish that a small group of monks can stay with them during the last few hours of their life and pray (Chung, 1990).

Another point about death that is especially true in the Vietnamese community is that when someone dies, the family does not call upon emergency officials right away. First, they try to bring the monk to the scene. If the monk is not available, they try to bring some elderly people who can chant Vietnamese chanting. The prayer is done first, and then the officials are called. In the case of death, it is very important to contact the family and ask them what they want to do before the officials come. Some people believe that within the body, the brain may die but the heart is still working a little bit. This makes the last minutes of life a very important time for the person to settle down, to make ready for rebirth. Buddhists believe in rebirth, not reincarnation. The death is just one thing that occurs for a person to be reborn somewhere else, so mourning and burial are very important (Robben, 2017). The parents need to help the person to be reborn in the proper place by providing a peaceful and religious environment for death.

There are a number of cultural beliefs that are likely to affect decisions at the end of life for Vietnamese older adults and their families (Scherer, Jezewski, Graves, Wu, & Bu, 2006). These include:

1. An aversion to dying in the hospital because of the belief that souls of those who die outside the home wander with no place to rest.
2. An avoidance of death and dying in the home for fear opening up one's home to bad spirits.
3. The perception that consenting to end-of-life support for a terminally ill parent contributes to her death is an insult to one's ancestors and parent.
4. Buddhist beliefs in karma that interpret difficult deaths as punishment for bad deeds in former lives by the dying person or another family member.

Death is forever. Living is contemporary. This belief is influenced by Buddhism.

Life after death depends on how people lead their life now. The fear of death and dying is very common. Throughout human history, people have been concerned and preoccupied with the idea of death and dying. This can happen for several reasons, including your age, your religion, your level of anxiety, the experience of loss, and so on. The experience of death anxiety in patients with advanced cancer has been understudied partly because of the lack of a tailored measure for this population (Krause, Rydall, Hales, Rodin, & Lo, 2015). Our greatest fear is that when we die, we will become nothing. Many of us believe that our entire existence is only a life span beginning the moment we are born and ending the moment we die. The Buddha has a very different understanding of our existence. It is the understanding that birth and death are notions. They are not real. The fact that we think they are true makes a powerful illusion that causes our suffering. The Buddha taught that there is no birth, there is no death; there is no coming, there is no going; there is no same, there is no different; there is no permanent self, and there is no annihilation. We only think there is. When we understand that we cannot be destroyed, we are liberated from fear (Hanh, 2003). It is a great relief. We can enjoy life and appreciate it in a new way. The carrying-out of traditional death rituals is considered the most important act of filial piety among Vietnamese, from the rite of feeding the deceased to the rite of reburial, where bones of the deceased are collected, washed and preserved in a sacred jar for reburial. Ancestor worship is also important, and many Vietnamese people tend ancestral altars at home. Variations within the Vietnamese culture occur between regions, religious affiliations, ethnic backgrounds, etc. However, one common principle exists across subgroups: There is intensive and extensive family and community involvement throughout the whole process with the immediate family being gradually weaned off the support of family and friends over a period of two to three years.

For Vietnamese, arranging a proper funeral for a loved one is one of the most filial things a person can do. In reality, a culturally proper funeral is more than an empty gesture to the dead, it helps the living to grieve and

go on with life. Death rituals can also recreate social order by communicating, through the rules of whom does what in the rituals, which is now to take the place of the deceased. Death rituals also serve as tools for humankind to transform death from a defeat of life to a stepping stone to another, perhaps better, place, and thus create a continuity beyond death itself. Finally, death rituals give the bereaved one last opportunity to make amends and say “I love you” and “goodbye forever”.

Method

Participants

After removing cases with a significant amount of missing data, participants included 302 relative people in the north of Vietnam. The sample showed broad demographic variation. Among respondents, 73% were female and 27% were male.

Materials

To investigate relationship among belief, fear, and ritual, the authors designed a questionnaire to be answered by relatives of dead and dying person in the north of Vietnam. This questionnaire sought: (a) demographic information about the respondent; and (b) the answers of relatives including belief, fear, and ritual. The questionnaire contained 30 5-point likert-type scale items. Some examples of items are as follow:

Item 10: Difficult death as punishment Item 16: Death as a fearful

Item 25: Praying together as a community

Within the framework of closed-form items, for the 30 items, the scale ranged from 1 = “Strongly disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree”. Most relatives completed the questionnaire in about 45 minutes. The data are analysed by using SPSS and AMOS version 23.

Reliability. The reliability of this instrument is extraordinary. It shows a good reliability of the total scores (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.93$). This supports the first hypothesis, which stated that the survey would show adequate reliability as a measure of belief, fear, and ritual.

Validity. In the classical model of test validity, construct validity is one of three main types of validity evidence. We now discuss the construct validity of our instrument.

Construct validity. Construct validity is “the degree to which a test measures what it claims, or purports, to be measuring”. Evidence for construct validity and reliability for the scores obtained from this instrument and sample can be assessed by examining correlations among scores from the dimensions of belief, fear, and ritual.

Both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis were conducted on the total scores in order to examine how many factors are found, if they cluster together in the way we categorized when designing the scale in the present research.

For both of the exploratory factor analyses, principal component analysis was used as an extraction method. Varimax with Kaiser Normalization was used as a rotation method.

Results

Assuming that identifying latent variables that account for the correlations among measured variables is the goal of the research. As researchers, authors decided to use the structural equation modelling analysis (Gefen, Straub, & Boudreau, 2000) in this research. Both exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis are used. The model tested was a relatively simple model with three latent factors (belief, fear, and ritual) and 30 measured variables.

Correlations and descriptive statistics for the factors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Factors	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Belief	3.38	0.52			
2. Fear	3.25	0.57	0.75**		
3. Ritual	3.38	0.54	0.62*	0.54**	

Notes. All data are approximate. * $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed); ** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed). $N = 302$.

As indicated in the Table 1, fear score is lower in comparison to other factors: belief and ritual. In other words, belief and ritual levels were significantly higher than fear levels. The mean level of belief was 3.38; for fear, 3.25; and for ritual, 3.38. There are no region and gender differences in ritual of the relatives.

As the correlations in Table 1 show, ritual was positively correlated with each of the other factors. The correlations ranged from a low of 0.54 to a high of 0.75. The correlation between belief and ritual was 0.62. This indicates that when the belief quality was good, relatives tend to apply it to the reality.

Mediating Relationships

The important point for mediating relationship is that a third variable plays an important role in governing the relationship between two other variables. Hayes (2009) argued that for us to claim a mediating relationship, we need to first show that there is a significant relationship in the direct pathway (Hayes, 2009) between the independent variable (belief) and the dependent variable (ritual).

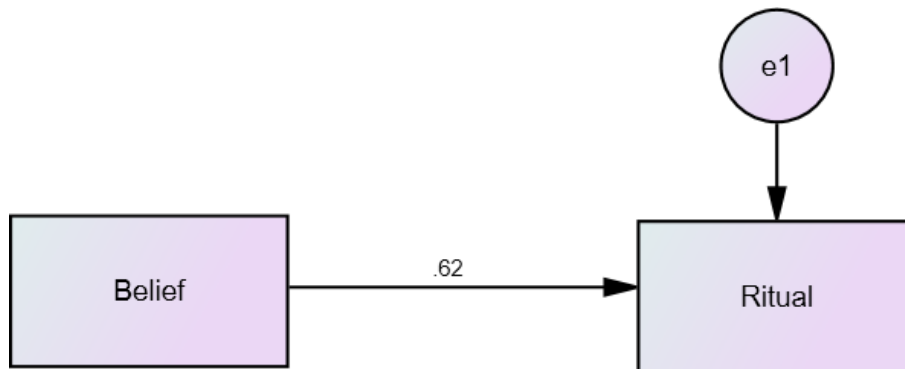


Figure 1. The relationship between belief and ritual.

Direct pathway. The regression coefficient for the direct pathway belief on Ritual is 0.62. In this case, it is also correlation between belief and ritual (see Figure 1).

Indirect pathway. The next step is to show that there is a significant relationship between the independent variable and the mediator (fear). Then, we need to show that there is a significant relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable.

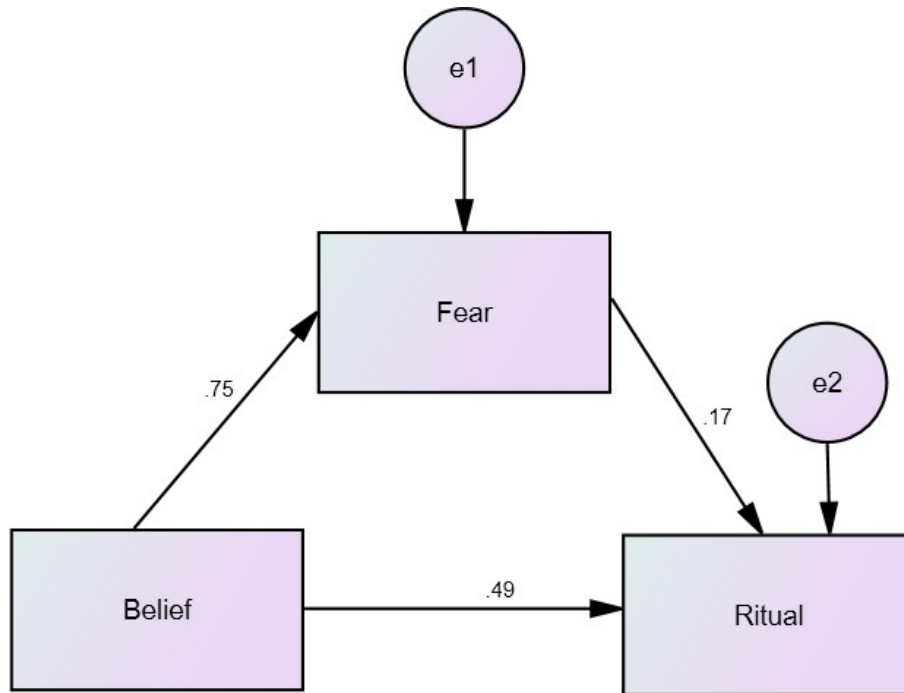


Figure 2. Mediating role of fear in explaining the relation between belief and ritual.

The regression coefficient for the direct path belief on fear is 0.75, whereas the regression coefficient for the direct path fear on ritual is 0.17. Then, the regression coefficient for the indirect path belief on ritual as product of single paths: $0.75 \times 0.17 = 0.13$. If belief changes by one standard deviation, ritual changes by 0.13 standard deviations via fear. The total path as product of sum up direct path and indirect path: $0.49 + 0.13 = 0.62$ (see Figure 2).

These three conditions require that the three paths (involving belief, fear, and ritual) are all individually significant. The final step consists of demonstrating that when the mediator and the independent variable are used simultaneously to predict the dependent variable, the previously significant path between the independent and dependent variables is now reduced (partially mediating relationship), if not non-significant. We have conclusive evidence to conclude that the effect of belief on ritual is partially mediated by fear.

Discussion

Reliability

In this research, the results show adequate reliability as a measure of belief, fear, and ritual. We used this questionnaire to gather data in the sample and the data were analyzed by using SPSS and AMOS software.

Validity

Evidence for construct validity and reliability for the scores obtained from this instrument and sample can be assessed by examining correlations among scores from the dimensions of belief, fear, and ritual. Belief was positively correlated with each of the two factors and fear has an important role in the relationship between belief and ritual.

Mediating Relationships

The effect of belief on ritual is partially mediated by fear.

Conclusion

Our findings in this research on death and dying are three latent factors. They are belief, fear, and ritual of Vietnamese people in the north of Vietnam. There are positive correlations among belief, fear and ritual. Structural equation modeling is used to analyze the mediation role of fear. As hypothesized, fear mediated partially the relationship between belief and ritual. In other words, the effect of belief on ritual is partially mediated by fear.

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