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Relating Psychological Measures to Anthropological Observations: Procrastination as a Field Proxy for Death Anxiety?

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Anthropologists frequently incorporate psychological concepts such as death anxiety into their sociocultural theorizing, but are reluctant to use the psychological instrumentation quantifying these concepts. Due to the needs of ethnographic fieldwork, behavioral proxies should be identified for psychological concepts wherever possible. Two exploratory studies investigate whether procrastination might serve as just such a proxy for death anxiety. In Study 1, 54 American students completed the Death Anxiety Scale and the General Form (G) Procrastination Scale. Results were weak but significant ($r = .29$; $p < .05$). In Study 2, 56 Brazilians completed the Escala de Ansiedade de Morte, which was correlated with a Motivation Scale and a behavioral measure of procrastination. Results for the first comparison were moderate ($r = .47$; $p < .001$), but negligible for the second ($r = .17$; ns). While significant results were found, they are too weak for the intended field application.

Anthropology has long expressed interest in the psychological construct of death anxiety, applying it most frequently when considering the function of religion (Brace, 1982; Malinowski, 1948; Donovan, 1994). The reasoning has been that religions are uniquely suited to address the existential concerns raised by the knowledge of one's own mortality. For instance, a supernatural religion might argue that fearing death is unwarranted, since the personality will survive in a spiritual afterlife.

Despite their prevalence, the use of this and other mental constructs is not unproblematic. Evans-Pritchard (1965, p. 44), critiquing these psychological theories of religion, raises a valid concern: "How does one know whether a person experiences awe or thrill of whatever it may be? How does one recognize it, and how does one measure it?"

Speculation on presumed relationships between death anxiety and any second variable is worthless if there is no way to quantify the level of

Author's Note: This paper is dedicated to the memory of my late partner, Jorge M. Vásconez. I also thank Ron Williams, who helped me—in ways he cannot know—to survive that death.

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relative anxiety. Traditional ethnographic techniques lack adequate power to make the required discriminations between low and high death anxious individuals. One cannot, after all, "see" death anxiety directly, nor can one, without a solid empirical basis which is presently lacking, reliably infer such psychological traits from observed behaviors.

If anthropology suffers from the limitations of an unoperationalized death anxiety, psychology has made more progress. Of special importance has been Templer's (1967, 1970) Death Anxiety Scale (DAS), the value of which has only increased with extended study (Lonetto & Templer, 1986). A principle utility of this and similar instruments is the sorting of subjects into high or low death anxious categories. This procedure permits the treatment of death anxiety as a predictor variable. Investigations into relationships between death anxiety and any number of criterion variables, including those related to religion, thereby become feasible.

Anthropology has been notably reluctant to borrow this psychological instrumentation for death anxiety, despite the accumulating evidence of the method's validity (Templer, 1970; Kastenbaum, 1992, p. 146). Reasons for this reticence may briefly be mentioned. First, ethnography, the principle component within anthropology's armamentarium, is best suited for description with a broad stroke and not for precise quantification. Thorough familiarity with the former can easily lead to aversion toward the latter as disciplinary territories are staked out and defended. In fact, the "commitment to measurement" is a fundamental feature distinguishing cross-cultural psychology from anthropology generally, and psychological anthropology specifically (Berry, 1980).

A second reason why anthropology has not often taken nonprojective psychological tests into the field would be its distaste for the questionnaire method. The first fear is that questionnaires "may not be adequate to tap more basic motivational levels" (Gorsuch, 1984, p. 235). These more basic levels are the ones most interesting to anthropologists.

Even were questionnaires adequate for anthropological questions, there still remain practical obstacles, such as the problems of instrument translation. Mere linguistic equivalence between two versions of a test is not sufficient; conceptual equivalence must also be ensured. What, one wonders, is the real meaning of asking !Kung hunters or Australian aborigines with limited outside contacts about their thoughts on World War III (DAS question 13). Or, if administration of a questionnaire—frequently a completely culture-alien exercise—is required to categorize informants, data are limited only to those persons one can test, (the opportunity factor), and who are able to be tested (e.g., literate). This sample would be more restricted than is customary within anthropology.

Finally, the sensitive fieldworker must consider the questionnaire's impact upon informants' perceptions of him or her. Participant-observation aims towards a mindset of inclusion, while the context of soliciting questionnaire responses reinforces an insider/outsider dichotomy. These opposing tensions are not easily reconciled.

Whatever the reasons, the present state of affairs is that some anthropologists are interested in psychological variables which they themselves can neither measure nor describe ethnographically. If the demand characteristics of anthropological fieldwork preclude the easy carrying of psychological instruments into the field, a feasible alternative may be to use scales such as the Death Anxiety Scale to identify behavioral (as opposed to personality) correlates; to identify, in other words, behavioral "proxies" (Naroll, Michik, & Naroll, 1980). Fieldworkers could then observe patterns of behavior which signify the presence or absence of the psychological construct of interest with a known level of confidence.

The remainder of this paper illustrates how one might search for a behavioral proxy, taking death anxiety as a case in point.

Procrastination

When casting about for possible behavioral correlates of death anxiety, a first impulse may be to sift through those found for general anxiety. Many could be suggested. Unfortunately, Kastenbaum (1992, p. 166) holds that "At the most, death and generic anxiety share about a 20% equivalence." In that case, a better strategy would be to search for something specific to the theory of death anxiety itself.

Many influential articulations of death anxiety highlight its effect on a person's motivation to continue in the rhythms of daily living (e.g., Becker, 1973). Too full an awareness of the inevitability of death (i.e., high death anxiety), it is argued, saps one of the will to overcome life's obstacles. Since you are doomed to death and oblivion, what would be the point of the fight?

This depiction of death anxiety derives largely from the schools of psychoanalysis (e.g., Zilboorg, 1943) and existentialism (e.g., Yalom, 1989), but should not be confused with Freud's (1961) musings on a possible "death instinct." If this description is accurate, then those who are high in death anxiety should evince difficulty completing tasks in a timely manner. This lack of motivation, in other words, which has its roots in unrepressed awareness of personal death, could reveal itself behaviorally as chronic procrastination.

Pure theory is not the only rationale to predict a correlation between death anxiety and procrastination. Experimental findings also point in this direction. For instance, procrastination is frequently argued to be

associated with "problematic levels of anxiety" (Rothblum, Solomon, & Murakami, 1986; Ferrari, 1991).

Perceptions of time units provide particularly suggestive links between these two variables. Lonetto and Templer (1986), when reviewing the literature, point out that "Whenever a perception of time permits 'the time lived' to be seen as much greater than 'the time left to live,' death anxiety increases." Procrastination also involves altered judgments of time: "Procrastinators underestimate the duration of time needed to complete...tasks" (Lay, 1986, p.493; Lay, 1988; Lay & Schouwenburg, 1993; McCown, Petzel, & Rupert, 1987). In their details, these two perceptions are disparate phenomena. With death anxiety the time span itself appears to be contracting, while procrastination causes the misperception of the time-consuming potential of a given task. At a broader level, however, they share the similarity of judging future time to be unsatisfactorily short.

If death anxiety and procrastination are indeed significantly and positively correlated, this information could ultimately be used to enable anthropologists to estimate an individual's level of death anxiety, at least into High vs. Low categories. While procrastination is itself an abstract concept, it is considerably more observable than death anxiety. Using skills which they already possess, fieldworking anthropologists ought to be able to draw direct conclusions about the former, which they could then use to make valid inferences about the latter.

The following two studies seek to test this theorized relationship between death anxiety and procrastination.

STUDY 1

Method

Subjects

Respondents were 54 undergraduates (24 males, 30 females) enrolled in summer term anthropology and psychology courses.

Instruments

Questions from the 15-item Death Anxiety Scale and Lay's (1986) 20-item, true-false format General Form (G) Procrastination Scale were randomly integrated into a single 35-item true-false format questionnaire.

Results

Reliability coefficients were calculated for each of the two instruments: α (DAS) = .54; α (Form G) = .83. Total correlation between DAS and Form G was a weak but significant .28 ($p < .05$). Although no

differences existed between males and females for Form G scores ($t = .40$, $p > .1$), females tested significantly higher on death anxiety ($t = -2.53$, $p < .05$).

STUDY 2

Method

Subjects

Fifty-six Brazilians (25 females, 31 males, Mean age of 36.7) in Rio de Janeiro individually completed the questionnaire packet. With the exception described below, these respondents were recruited through friendship networks.

Instruments

To measure death anxiety, the Escala de Ansiedade de Morte (EAM), a validated Portuguese version of the Death Anxiety Scale (DAS; Donovan, 1993) was used.

Two procrastination measures were employed. First, the full sample completed a specially constructed 12-item Motivation Scale (Donovan, 1994, Appendix VI).

Respondents rated themselves on how accurately each item applied to themselves. Items included, "I often ask myself if most things are really worth the trouble," and "People generally accuse me of leaving things to the last minute." High motivation should work against death anxiety, so a negative correlation is expected between this measure and the EAM.

The second measure is behavioral, and applies to only a subset of the sample. The Motivation Scale and EAM were included in a packet distributed to individuals randomly selected from the Rio de Janeiro telephone directory. Of the 120 sent out, 15 usable questionnaires were returned.¹ The dates of both mailing and return were noted. The longer it took for a packet to be returned, the more the respondent is assumed to have procrastinated on this task. This design is a variation of that used by Lay (1986).

Results

Reliability coefficients were calculated for the two questionnaires: α (EAM) = .78; α (Motivation Scale) = .54. Total correlation between EAM and the Motivation Scale was moderately negative at $-.47$ ($p < .001$). For the sample subset, the correlation between the EAM and the length of time it took to return the questionnaire was a negligible $.17$.

¹ This return rate is low by American standards. But because this type of methodology is unfamiliar in Brazil (cf. Perlman, 1976, p. xvii), it was actually gratifyingly high.

DISCUSSION

Two of the three tests yielded results in the expected directions. That is, those characterized by high death anxiety tended to be procrastinators. However, even though this finding is of some theoretical and experimental interest, the strength of the correlations does not warrant enthusiasm over the use of procrastination as a field proxy for death anxiety.

Two conclusions are possible. First, the fault might lie with the theory. These weak results reflect the weakness of the model, and hence warrant its rejection. Procrastination, despite its theoretical appeal, may not be the desired behavioral proxy for death anxiety. In this case, other avenues should be pursued toward this same end, as the objections to taking the Death Anxiety Scale into the field still remain.

In another situation, sociolinguistic variables were deemed of potential use to discern an informant's true beliefs (Donovan, 1994). For instance, the degree of certainty which a speaker holds for a proposition's truth-value can influence his choice of verb forms. It is possible that similar dimensions could reflect upon one's level of death anxiety. As one possibility, Templer (1967) has suggested that death anxiety correlates with the use of affective words like "worry," "lonely," and "hope."

A second possible conclusion for these results is that the concept of procrastination, especially as measured by Form G, is overly broad. The fault, in other words, lies not with theoretical conceptualization, but with methodological operationalization. A relationship was suspected between death anxiety and procrastination because the former theoretically drains motivation, the lack of which allegedly causes the latter. However, lack of motivation is not the only cause of procrastinatory behaviors.

Milgram, Sroloff, and Rosenbaum (1988, p. 207) state that "We procrastinate on things we don't like doing and we tend to dislike tasks that we regard as imposed upon us by others or by external circumstances." Other factors leading to observed patterns of procrastinatory behaviors may be problems of a full schedule, chronic forgetfulness, or even hypermotivation, so that in one's planning for perfect execution, one fails to actually do the deed. These explanations for procrastination are conceptually different from one based upon a lack of motivation to complete the task, despite optimal circumstances on other dimensions (e.g., remembering to do the task, time to do it, liking to do it, etc.). To the extent that these other factors are present, the relationship of a global procrastination measure with death anxiety would be weakened.

For procrastination to become a field measure of death anxiety, this concept would have to be much refined, distilled even, to only that type brought on by lack of motivation. But unless motivationless procrastination manifests a different behavior set than procrastination for other

reasons—an empirical question, to be sure—the type of procrastination which interests us would become defined by unobservable psychological states and no longer open to direct field observation. At this point, little seems to be gained by the substitution of the one for the other.

All things considered, the prospects for procrastination as a field proxy for death anxiety fail.

SUMMARY

The reluctance of anthropologists to apply survey methods in the field are not wholly unjustified. Wherever possible, alternatives should be found which are more compatible with the nature of the fieldwork enterprise. This strategy requires linkage between observable behaviors to unobservable but inferred psychological states and traits.

Theoretical reasons exist to suspect that the psychological trait of high death anxiety might manifest itself as behavioral procrastination. Using Templer's Death Anxiety Scale and Lay's Form G Procrastination Scale, a significant and positive relationship was found to exist between these two variables. A similarly predicted outcome was seen when a Portuguese version of the DAS, the Escala de Ansiedade de Morte, was negatively correlated with self-rated measures of personal motivation. No such relationship was found, however, between the EAM and the time it took to complete and return the questionnaire packet.

While these results may be of interest for experimental psychology, they are too weak to be successfully transferred to the field. The methodological refinements necessary to generate stronger experimental results would most likely remove procrastination from the realm of readily observable behaviors, which again mitigates against its utility in the field.

This first attempt, then, to find a reliable and valid field proxy for death anxiety was not successful. But this research is the type which needs to be undertaken if psychological concepts are to be fully incorporated into some anthropological theorizing.

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