

Death: Is that the end?

Open
Access

Nwanesi Peter Karubi^{1,*}, EthelDiana Lynn Andotion¹

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, University Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Article history:

Received 28 December 2016
Received in revised form 13 February 2017
Accepted 14 February 2017
Available online 27 February 2017

Death is an unavoidable compulsion. Besides, the discourse or even the issue of death transmits fear and cold goose pimples. Many people will rather pretend it does not matter than spend their precious time discussing it. Most people deemed it necessary if it happens close to home. Thus, this article explores the notion of death, and seeks answer(s) on the question; Is death an absolute end to an individual? On the periphery, this article seeks answer(s) on why the topic of death is hardly conferred? To arrive at a substantial level of logical explanation, a qualitative method was employed with an in-depth interview as the key research technique for data collection. Data from the field reveals, that death is a sad event of which human is helpless to control or provide a concrete explanation on the aftermath of death. But, there is understanding, that death is not necessarily the end of an individual as works and offspring keeps such individual alive. This understanding is based on the notion of symbolic immortality or post-self.

Keywords:

Death, Symbolic Immortality, Post-self,
Human

Copyright © 2017 PENERBIT AKADEMIA BARU - All rights reserved

1. Introduction

Notwithstanding the tremendous findings in this endeavour, the question, “why do we fear death” still persists. Neimeyer [1] asked, “what do we fear when we fear death”... The fear of pain, of destruction, or of mutilation... It is a fear of the unknown, of annihilation of self, of the process of dying with loss of function, depending on others, incapacity to tolerate the pain involved, a fear of being alone, and the fear of loss of beloved ones.” (Raphael 1998:21 cited in [1])

The first business of life is to stay alive [11]. That is absolutely true because no matter how tough life can be, often many people are hopeful of positive ending. As the saying goes; “there is always a light at the end of the tunnel”. However, the result of events does not always turn out

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: pknwanesi@unimas.my (Nwanesi Peter Karubi)

positively. Hence, death is an unavoidable compulsion². Even then, it is difficult to comprehend the meaning of death outside its traditional interpretation. In fact, research on the sociology of life tends to focus overwhelmingly on the transitions and trajectories of the social persona through various stages of life, leaving behind the demise part (see also [8]).

Over the years, researchers have explored the notion of 'death' but yet to divulge furtive issues of life and death. The fact remains, the notion of death is still shrouded in myth, mystery and fallacies. Although, various religions, cultures and social groups have coloured or interpreted 'the notion of death' differently, but none can tell with an empirical certainty of what comes after death. Most groups have hinged their interpretation in relation to belief or faith³. Through faith, most religions portray life and death as a process of moving from one realm to another. What is more, the dogmas of most religions usually beautify the notion of death as the beginning of a bounty life without pain or agony, and an endless happiness. Even with this beautification of opulence existence after death, most human abhors the thought of death as part of their life trajectory. Hence, it is a common saying that; *people want to go to heaven but don't want to die*. Although, on the surface, most humans have come to accept that death is part of human nature, this acceptance is superficial as they will do anything within their power to stay alive.

On the excessive side, the younger generation methodical disassociates the entire notion of death wholly out of their life. Perhaps out of fear, too infantile or simply ignorant. On the whole, [11] noted that many people participated in a systematic avoidance of death. Ironically, death and life are tenaciously interwoven in every breathing being. So, what is death? Is it the end of our lives or the beginning of a new chapter or an endless voyage of human?

Accordingly, [11] depicted death differently. These include the idea that; death is an enfeebled form of life; a continuation of life and a perpetual development. In other descriptions Kastenbaum noted that death is constantly waiting, a cycling and recycling of being [10]. In his sober state of mind, Kastenbaum observed that death is 'nothing', and it is virtual and therefore not really after all. To a certain extent, the understanding of death is shrouded nature. This is even more complicated because its understanding is entwined with sadness and a deep sense of a great lost.

But, is that all about death? Should we fear death or embrace it, hate it or appreciate it? As we journey through this research, our excitement is roped on slippery sundry because we have no iota of what to discover. Our excitement is further mute because we were apprehensive of what our respondents will make of us. Would they assume wacky of us. Even though death is a definite social reality, yet its discussion among intellectuals and the larger society are often coldly addressed, as if one is walking on a razor-sharp glass. During our pilot study, the responses from university students and lecturers were satirical at a point, and later, bizarre staring faces. We thought of calling the entire process off, but the excitement of discovery drove us deeper into the study. The summary of our pilot study shows that death is strongly linked with negativity, pessimism and dark end of beings.

Thus, this research examines the understanding of death, and seeks to determine if death is the final chapter for humans or can one be dead and still alive in some form(s) that is not necessarily being a 'Being'; for example, through creativity and close relatives left behind or a 'symbolic immortality' as [13] coined it. In part, the article explores reasons the topic death is hardly discussed by most people.

² Death can be said to be an obvious onus. As one of the characteristics of a living thing is 'death'. This is partly as a result of human biological metabolism or the nature of every living organisms.

³ Unfortunately, 'faith' is very subjective, since it demands absolute acceptance of idea or stories and abhors any questioning or empirical reasonings

During the pilot study for this article, we were in a dilemma whether to cogitate the understanding of death with biological logic⁴ or simply looped with religious⁵ infiniteness. Both presented elements of cul-de-sac. The search then focused on the question, what happens when the body dies in this social world?

2. Methodology

A wise man once asked: which is more important, the day a person was born or the day she/he died?

As earlier mentioned, venturing into this topic presented us with overwhelming queries and sometime improbability sensation as how people will receive our inquiry into this sensitive topic—death. To gain empirical insight into this topic, we prone the research question in the following: What is the meaning of death to the society today? To what extent do people assented that death is the definitive end of a woman/man? As [22] explained the social research is concerned with exploring, describing, and explaining social phenomena involving human behaviours. To thoroughly answer these two questions in relation to this study's subject matter, the study adopted the exploratory approach. As of the one of the three fundamentals of social science researchers, Babbie advice that exploratory approach is necessary where the subject of study itself is relatively new and have not been exhaustively studied [5]. Hence, the main objective of this research is to determine how contemporary society perceived the concept of death.

Perhaps, the outcome of this study will encourage larger discourse on the notion of death. This is because death is an intrigue, social reality and a chapter in the human's chronicle. It is a social fact, that is constantly entreating for a deeper exploration through empirical analysis rather than the dark pictures we have of it. To achieve the scientific flavour, we have employed specific scientific methodology. Thus, to carefully collect quality data, we employed qualitative method with interviews as the main research instrument (Ibid). Qualitative method was used because it captures what people say and do as a product of how they interpret the complexity of their living world in the real sense [6,24]. Essentially, the qualitative research method enables the researchers to comprehend the social events from the participants' perspective or understanding. This understanding played a vital role in both interpretation and analysing the data from the field. Also, this means, data were collected through interviews and observation. Through interviews, we provided our respondents a platform to freely talk and express their own ideas about death. Thus, providing this study with unlimited answers, ideas, and varying responses.

Even though, our data is rich, we would have preferred data collection activities extending beyond the study area. This may ensure the process of data collection attained a larger saturation level and a more feasible generalization. Nonetheless, we were able to acquire quality and excellent data from our respondents in Kuching and its surrounding. Mainly given the multinational and cultural components of greater Kuching. The choice of Kuching and its surroundings as our study area was because of the affluent nature of the city's multicultural composition. Its diverse ethnic groupings, and numerous religious sects provide the researchers with explicit and diverse understanding on the issue of death. This vibrant city bears both the identity of old and new metropolitan. What is more, the city and its surroundings are home to many higher institutions of learning with the ever presence of multidisciplinary researchers from both within and outside of Sarawak. The study area provided pertinent characteristics that made this research valuable.

⁴ Born, live and die.

⁵ That is the end of earthly journey and the beginning of a new voyage in an unknown sphere.

A non-probability sampling was earmarked from the onset of the study. This was because of the nature of our research population. To achieve pertinent and variation information, we imposed certain population criteria. First, respondents were chosen for their ability to clearly understand and answer our questions. This means the age of the respondents were necessary. The respondents ranged from 21 to 92 years old (two of the respondents were 90 and 91 years and 7 months at the time of data collection). Other, criterion include, life experience, education, religiosity and some degree of open-mindedness. We equally considered those that have lost close relatives in recent time. In view of this, the selection of the respondents was based on purposive sampling technique.

Six respondents were chosen from the nearby villages (Kpg Baru). The latter pool provided excellent data from a traditional perspective. At the end 23 respondents were interviewed in a period of two months and five days. Their age ranged from 21 to 92 years old. The wide range enhanced the diversity of the responses. Of the 23, 6 identified as Chinese⁶ (5 males and 1 female). One is a Christian (a practising Catholic), 4 identified as Buddhist/Taoist and the last identified with no religion. Also 7 Malays⁷ (5 males and 2 females) were interviewed, and they all identified as Muslim. The rest of the respondents identified as Dayaks, which include Iban (5), Bidayu (2), Orang Ulu 1 and Kalabit 1. The all identified as Christian, but from different Christian groups. There were only 3 females from the last group. All the respondents were interviewed at locations or places of their choice.

While carrying out this study, no research ethic was violated. Although, it is a sensitive topic, participants were thoroughly briefed on the subject matter. Even though, the sample size indicated 23, but those approached for the interview exceeded that figure. For instance, one of the people we approached for data, recently lost a very close relative, and could not hold back her tears in the middle of our interview, and the entire process was stopped and cancelled. Earlier data gathered from this particular respondent was not used, because we could not obtain a conclusive consent to use the her data. Furthermore, to protect respondents' privacy, names of participants were not used even though three gave their consent to it.

3. Exploring the notion of death

Some explanation on the concept of death has been discussed in the introduction section of this article, thus, this section elaborates further. According to [25] (na) death comes to all creatures, but human beings are unique in realizing that they will die. Death is inevitable and non-negotiable. At some point in (-almost) every living organism, especially human, they must come to a simple realization it is a universal cipher that all living things will die. As Avatar Adi Da Samraj [3] wrote: Even in the moment of our conception, we are already cloaked in the mantle of bodily death, and we know it. But knowing that death is a universal requirement does not end our predicament. It only pushes our understanding what life is about, what its purpose is, to the fore... The knowledge of death, however it may come to you through life's experience, should become the wisdom of ego-transcending practice - because you understand that death is not any different from all the other limited conditions of existence.

Unfortunately, we do not completely consent with the above quote, because death is by far different from all the other limited conditions of existence. In fact, advancement technology has helped humanity to adjust many other limited conditions but not death.

On the basis that death is inescapable, Kastenbaum states; not thinking about death were pretty much a failure [11]. Yet, given that humanity is at the threshold of development,

⁶ These respondents were if its possible for the to identify with specific Chinese ethnic group but they declined.

⁷ One of these respondent is Malay from West Malaysia but has lived in Kuching for more than 11 years.

technological advancement and coupled with pleasurable lifestyle, many easily forget all about death and appeared to be living on an endless joy ride. History appeared to indicate that our ancestors are more prepared to accept death. Evidence has shown much of their ritual activities are concerned about death. Most of their rituals echoes reincarnation or rebirth. Perhaps, this could be attributed to the differences in the quality of life then and now.

Taking a positive view about death, [11] notes, 'what we do *here* in this life influences what will happen to us after death (p. 521)'. This is often the core foundation of many religions and recent art and other creative reminiscences. Most importantly, it is the mainstay in the notion of Symbolic Immortality or Post-Self (see next section).

Indeed, there is no straight answer for the question—what is death to you? This may be attributed to people non-interest-bearing or shallow understanding of death. According to a Blogger, simply identified as [18];

Death is the absence of life. The first known human expression came when '*Neanderthal Man*' began burying his dead. Some of his finery arrangements survive. But was this because he mourned, or was glad?

North argued that either way, appreciation of death seems to be tied up with our emotions. He maintained;

Death forms the central element of most religions. In the east, death is cyclical, in that we come back as another incarnation. In the west, death is a transition to another, immortal, world. Seems like an ethereal utopia to me. Most mystical traditions are based on death and rebirth. Interestingly, research has been done on deep fainted, which show we can experience images of the afterlife. This is akin to the near death experience.

According to North (Ibid), the Shamanic practices in tribal cultures involve fasting, dancing, and other devices bring on a hysterical deep faint, thus visiting the 'afterlife'. He further ponders aloud—Is death the end? Interestingly, he argues that science says energy cannot be destroyed, only transformed. Does this mean that death cannot be the end? In his final conclusion, North states;

Maybe death is a thing about the individual. Maybe it is pure arrogance to think of extinction of ourselves. Life goes on in the species. Perhaps nature, God, whatever, sees the species as continuance, and the individual a simple blink of an eye in its progression.

The flow of North, argument and presentation echoed aloud our earlier postulation that human has lived with death and it is an essential and unavoidable part of human nature yet we know little about it. Conversely, theorizing death provides a more fascinating understanding of this intricate social reality.

3.1. Theorizing death and human nature

As previously noted, the definitions of death have been debated for centuries, depending on culture, social conditions, religious affiliation and the role of the medical profession—Brain death. This study, however, merely explores the social interpretation of death, especially on the question: Is death the final and the absolute end? This study may not adequately encompass all of death's meanings, but it is a journey of discovery.

Theorizing death in relation to human nature is often thorny without running into a religion or spiritualisation of the entire discussion. Perhaps this is because most people fear death. According to Lanza [12], many of us fear death because we have been told—"we will die". We associate ourselves with the body, and we know that bodies die. However, Lanza noted that a new scientific theory suggests that death is not the terminal event we think. Lanza argument is based on a well-

known aspect of quantum physics, that certain observations cannot be predicted absolutely. Hence, there is a range of possible observations each with a different probability. Stressing this notion further, Lanza [12] explains:

One mainstream explanation, the "many-worlds" interpretation, states that each of these possible observations corresponds to a different universe (the 'multiverse'). A new scientific theory - called *biocentrism* - refines these ideas. There are an infinite number of universes, and everything that could possibly happen occurs in some universe. Death does not exist in any real sense in these scenarios. All possible universes exist simultaneously, regardless of what happens in any of them. Although individual bodies are destined to self-destruct, the alive feeling - the 'Who am I?' - is just a 20-watt fountain of energy operating in the brain. But this energy doesn't go away at death. One of the surest axioms of science is that energy never dies; it can neither be created nor destroyed.

Overall, Lanza argued that death does not exist in a timeless, spaceless world. Phrasing Einstein position on the issue of death and human nature, Lanza recalled one of the Einstein's famous accounts which states:

Now 'Besso' (an old friend) has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us... know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion." Immortality doesn't mean a perpetual existence in time without end, but rather resides outside of time altogether.

Nonetheless, to understand death, there is need to revisit it from the human nature. Even so, to understand human nature, there is need to comprehend a human reaction to death and perhaps their preparation and the object or symbolism human attached to death. The predicament is human are different and their perceptions and reaction to social realities differs too. So, how people react towards death differ from one person to another person. Corr et al. [7] explains:

... Not every individual and/or minority group within a given society shares every aspect of the social and death- related experiences that characterized that society as a whole. In fact, specific individuals and members of distinct groups within the society can be expected to have their own unique experiences with life and death.

Death has no common explanation, but each human society or even era tied a complex reality of the phenomena called death. Abdel-Khalek [1] work linked this complexity to the notion of death anxiety or fear. Abdel-Khalek findings were an outcome of his study of Arabic and mainly Muslim college students.

However, the works of Robert Lifton [13-15] located our understanding of death to symbolic immortality. Lifton argued that the knowledge that we will die forces us to confront and transcend our fears of finitude in symbolic ways, particularly through relying upon various modes of symbolic immortality. According to Lifton (cited in [23]), healthy individuals seek a sense of life continuity, or immortality, through symbolic means. When lacking a sense of continuity, people experience psychic numbing and profound emotional difficulty.

Central to Lifton's work is on how and why the attainment or the sense of symbolic immortality is an essential requisite for the realization of a vital and enduring self. These modes connect us to the past and present, linking us to those who have gone before us and to those who will live on after us and remember our contributions [23]. Essentially, Lifton argues that;

The pursuit of symbolic immortality gives meaning to our existence by preserving our connection to others in material ways in this life, while ensuring our continued symbolic connection to others once the mortal coil is severed.

In every human, there is a beginning and an end. The beginning is understandable as researches and studies have shown, but the end has remained mysterious. However, through the passage of life, most human have consciously or unconsciously perform roles or achieved accolades. These

roles and accolades are sometimes immortalized for the adoration of future generation. In this way, such individual(s) lives on even after death—referred here as symbolic immortality.

Williamson and Vigilant (n.a.), draw extensively from the work of Lifton in their attempt to make sense of the notion of symbolic immortality. Based on Lifton's work, symbolic immortality is achievable through five different modes. Indeed, Lifton proposes that human achieve this through drawing upon five modes of symbolic connectedness or immortality, which he identifies as: Biological; Creative; Transcendental; Natural, and Experiential transcendence.

According to Lifton [14], the first mode of achieving a sense of symbolic immortality is through the biological process. He maintained it is perhaps the most ubiquitous means of ensuring our connection to the future. This mode he argued connects us to the past through our family of orientation and to the present and the future through our family of procreation, both in its biological and social manifestations (significant others, children, friends, and kin).

The second mode of achieving symbolic immortality is through creative acts. Lifton observes that the creative expression of symbolic immortality is most commonly associated with art, literature, and music where the works of the artist lives on after his/her demise. This could be achieved through scientific enterprise and the building of cumulative knowledge, where the work of one researcher might be carried forward by someone else, as another expression of creative immortality.

The expression of theological or religious imagery grounded in the idea of life power, that is, the ability to overcome death through the power of religion or spirituality. Is arguably Lifton's third mode of achieving a sense of symbolic immortality. Lifton posits that all of the great worldly religions have this one thing in common: the quest to get beyond the inevitability of death. Lifton remarks [15]; "Whatever the imagery, there is at the heart of religion a sense of spiritual power. That power may be understood in a number of ways –dedication, capacity to love, moral energy – but its final meaning is a life-power and power over death—out eschatology beliefs in a kingdom to come and that death is not the end- is the cornerstone of all world religions."

The fourth mode of achieving a sense of symbolic immortality is through natural means. By natural means, Lifton [15] is referring to our connectedness to the natural world around us –the sense that after our mortal demise, the world itself, with its trees, its oceans and clouds, and all that constitutes the earth will remain.

The fifth and final mode of experiencing a sense of immortality is the most important for Lifton, and is referred to as the experience of transcendence. It is a mode 5 entirely different from the other four in that it is grounded on "a psychic state –one so intense and all-encompassing that time and death disappear" [14]. As a psychological state, the mode of experiential transcendence involves moving beyond or transcending the mundane and profane, and can be experienced in all of the aforementioned four modes. Thus, one might experience a sense of transcendence through a deep spiritual experience such as a baptism and being born again in the Christian sense, or being in a mystical trance -a signature feature of many worldly religions.

Lifton proposes that these five modes constitute the mechanism whereby humans are able to reduce the death-anxieties by achieving a sense of mastery over mortality, and this mastery is essential for psychological wellness.

Anxiety, denial and acceptance are not the only death attitudes that we encounter, although most research has concentrated on these concepts. People often experience depression and a sense of loss when death is near [11]. Death creates anxiety and fear. It is a common and unpleasant human experience. But in many instances human take solace on the assumption that life goes on or there is a continuity even after death. Lifton's work primarily illustrates human action or activities that depicts human believe in the existence of life after death. These actions are

sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, but religiously pursued. Perhaps that is why Kastenbaum in his study, argued that the concept of *death system* is a “socio-physical network by which we mediate and express our relationship to mortality” [7]. He concluded that elements of death are the people, places, times, objects and symbols. Nonetheless, death has always attracted a sense of lost or hollow.

Kastenbaum maintains, as a society, we have tried not to think about death. And most of us completed our school days without being exposed to substantial readings and discussions about dying, death, grief and suicide [11]. It is true when he said that most of us completed our studies without even knowing ‘the surrounding of death and human nature’. Even with mass media or electronic, as human main stream of communication exposes less about death and human nature. Often many people are left behind when it comes to a deep understanding of death, we are only exposed to the lives we have today.

It is obvious from Lifton argument and this present study strongly holds, human do not actually or completely die. This is because it is the mere body⁸ or human flesh that physically expires. Individual lives on through the arts, discoveries and other worthy contributions they contributed to human history.

3.2. Post-Self

The notion of Post-self developed by Shneidman’s [20] has lots similarities with the Symbolic immortality. In that Shneidman work states Post-self is concerned with a person’s reputation and continued influence after death. Shneidman, outlined five ways that the self can live on after physical death. These include, the memory of those who are still living, the interactions, others will have with your creative works (art, music, books, etc., the bodies of others as in the case of organ transplants, the genes of your progeny, and the cosmos. In sum Post-self is based on the notion that;

Individuals seek to solidify their reputations or post-selves through their everyday actions. However, once his/her has terminated, the individual forfeits control over his or her post-self to those remaining. Thus, the construction of post-self occurs not only individually, but socially as well, for it remains malleable after the individual has passed [20].

This exploration of death provides an apparent interrelationship between human behaviours and effort to remain immortal. We do not delve into the fascinating topics of the rituals and ancient practice of life and death, because the focus of this paper is how the current human cohort perceived and treat death and human nature.

Nonetheless, we may conclude that the view of death is a repudiation of any ontological dualism. Between death and life, the people’s perception differs and often coloured by the individual’s stand and principles that guide such individual. The literatures show that even though there is frequent cynical responses to death, human action, act or deed have instituted an unknown process to ensure we remain immortal-symbolic, immortality or post-self.

4. Data analysis

Section 3.1 and 3.2 provided an illuminating on the notion of death. This section, analysis data from the field in relation the above mentioned sections. As expected, the data from the field yield vary, yet in some instances parallel responses. One of the most fascinating responses we

⁸ The ‘human body’ is a mere vessel showcasing human diverse differences and attributes. Yet, outside the physical layer of human body, other things are almost the same.

considered, sombre and yet, comical related to one of the respondents are in their 90s. When we visited for the interview, he (respondent P.) was not feeling too good. But he did answer our question. According to him, death is new phase, and one needs to prepare well for it. As the conversation went on, one of his daughter who has been assisting us said; “he’s a little upset, because his coffin has not been bought yet... he doesn’t want to be buried in an old plywood coffin”. With tears in her eyes, she said, “Is there a joy in dying... maybe there is, because he (her father) talks about it, like a homecoming journey, but... we will miss him soooo(sic) much if pass on”. The same ‘lost’ was echoed by a number of respondents, especially those in their 20s to 40s. Some of the views that illustrate that feeling include:

If you have ever lost a loved one, then you know exactly how it feels. And if you have not, then you cannot possibly imagine it. Death leaves a heartache no one can heal (A respondent).

Another added:

Death is no good news and no one loves the idea of dying or death, because when death occurs, people effected feel empty and a strong sense of lost, especially if it involves loved ones.

And, another added:

“people around here don’t like to discuss about death, because it’s like wishing for it to occur and no ones it... only evil people do.

Two of our frontline fieldwork questions to our respondents was, “What is your understanding about death? And, why is it an esay topic to discuss? The above quotations from respondents summed up many informants’ view on the conception of death. But one interesting respondent simply said, “Death is death... Dead people disappeared and gone forever”. After a change of thought this respondent added, “maybe the dead hangs around us or go to heaven or somewhere... death is a simply a mystry.”

Speaking before judges, Socrates pointed out that it is hard for humans to really know what death is [7]. Socrates argues, humans “cannot” be known instead of “do not” know what death is. The same position appeared to be the situation of most respondents in this study. These respondents’ view appeared to reflect Socrates argument of “cannot” know rather than “do not know”. In sum, most of the 23 respondents’ responses are clouded or shrouded as they cannot plausibly explain death outside the fact it is the end of every living organism. Our study established that death is a topic few want to discuss especially the younger generation. As two respondents revealed:

Many people do not know much about death until it comes into their homes. In many instances, friends lose family members, but they hardly talk about it or the aspect of dying. I guess it has to do with our norms or culture, and to protect one another - and perhaps our loved one's dignity or even ours. Talking about death is like asking for it.

But another respondent argued:

Everybody knows, but everybody is keeping it as a secret from others. Often, people assumed, one that speaks about death all the time is crazy, abnormal or suicidal prone. So, everyone keeps quiet and only talk about it when it occurs or when a larger population speak about it.

Another respondent simply said; “Only weird people talk about death, what is in death to talk about”. About 10 respondents, echoed; “we are going to die anyway, and it’s the saddest moment in our life, why talk about it in the first place”. What is more, some common responses from respondents from different age brackets read as follows; "What's the point of thinking about it? There's nothing you can do! Death is not cool! These sets of answers were obtained from mainly young adults. But there are some responses that are coated the topic of ‘death’ with lots of philosophies or reflects the ideas discussed in the earlier sections—symbolic immortality. Three respondents aged 60s, noted; “what is there to live for when the old ways is gradually giving way

for the new ways... new ways are often confusing. But one did say; “when I go, I’ll not have much to regret because I have done my part and my deed will be remembered for a very long time to come”. Two other respondents in age category were critical with their answers. One respondent states:

We create our belief. This can change from time to time depending on one’s experience(s). Yes, many believe in eternal life or never ending life, and some don’t. I guess the disparity is because no one has ever returned from beyond under an empirical setting to provide a satisfactory account from which we can arrive at a scientific conclusion.

And another adds:

If one believes that life was created by an Intelligent being (God) for a purpose, there is probably a very good reason for withholding that piece of knowledge - maybe to encourage us to search, and fear unknown.

With these perceptions on “death, it is obvious why Socrates argued that, humans “cannot know” instead of “do not” know what death is. However, some differ from the Socrates’ argument enlisting one of Lifton’s symbolic immortality models. According to one respondent:

Spiritually, based on Christianity, death is only a process of resting physically, and spiritually just to prepare for resurrection.

This respondent maintains that:

Scientifically, death is a full stop of the living, no more energy or activity—the end. A living talk less about death because they are weak and death, of course under Satan, will rule her/his life. If you’re really a God’s agent, you should not fear death. I believe religion is not for the blind faith or the faint hearted.

The understanding of death by this respondent is a reflection of the respondent’s religious belief that is built on the premises of continuity somewhere better than the present earth. Ironically, the same respondent appeared unhappy with the notion of dying. She argues:

“It is a beautiful place based on our faith, but since no one has died and come back to explain what is on the other side, it is very depressing and agonizing to lose a loved one or friend”.

There is no doubt that death is a dreaded event and most of our respondents perceived it as malevolence, but some argued it is a necessary evil. They argued it is the “beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with the ‘Creator’, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds”. One respondent’s view is similar to last view, but differ due to the word ‘responsibility’. This respondent states:

Death is the last responsibility for all human beings set by God... Death is the last responsibility for human on earth, set by God. It is a must for humans that live on earth. The earth is just a temporary place for all human beings, even for other creatures. Death can happen anytime and anywhere. Like the earlier respondents, the above answer is based on the respondent’s religious dogma. But, it differs with the connotation of death as the last responsibility for all human on earth.

Accordingly, earth is seen as a temporary home, while waiting for death to come. The similarity in both responses is the use of religion as a base for death, and the fact that death is not the final call for human. These two respondents make sense of death, based on their own religions’ understanding. What is more, they explained the function of death as ‘responsibility’ for everyone. As Corr et al. [7] argued, we believed that death is bad. However, we were bound by our own belief and religious thought; only courageous people talk about death. Not surprisingly, attitudes are likely to be complex when concerned with any subject that is as central to human life and death.

Some explanations are handed down from generation to generation in the form of philosophical statements, poetry and commentaries on the Holy Scriptures [11]. Holy Scriptures here referred to

the holdings of human understanding on their own religions and what do the religions had taught them about death. Thus, religions do reflect our respondents' perspectives about death. In Islam, death is believed to be set by Allah (God), and this can be referred in *Surah Al- Mu'min – The Believer (40:68)* "It is He Who gives Life and Death: and He decides upon an affair. He says to it "Be" and "It is". This respondent relates his understanding of death to his faith. He explains:

The fact is, everyone is going to die and leave the world. Based on my religion, death is known as "Ajal". Death is when your soul is separated from your physical body. It is the breaking of humans' relationship living on earth. Humans, based on the facts of life are afraid of death because they are afraid to live their pleasant lives and the happiness living on the earth.

This great religion noted that the physical body is lifeless, but the soul is always alive, but in the other side of the world—"*Alam Barzakh*", the place where the souls of dead people wait until they are resurrected. When this respondent ended his answer with "pleasant lives and the happiness living", the phrase "people wish to go to heaven but hate to die", vibrates in our memory. Ironically, almost all religion described the '*World After*' as full of luxury and painless, yet the fear of the unknown remains deep rooted in every human brain.

As earlier mentioned, religion influences most respondents' perspective about death. We believed that, religion is the nearest approachable tool that humanity clings to take solace if the issue of death props up. One may not understand the term death outside the scientific realm but religious minds perceived death to be a phase of a new beginning. Ironically, many people in this category avoid the topic as it is assumed to be emotionally draining topic. In fact, specific individuals and members of distinct groups within a society can be expected to have their own unique experiences of death [7]. However, due to unpleasant practice of lifestyle, death as a part of human nature is often better forgotten rather than discussed.

Nonetheless, there were a few respondents that stated, "well, we don't actually die completely since we left family members behind or some history or legacy.... Those we left behind remember us through prayers, pictures, memories of past events, achievements and when names and works dead relatives are associated with developments or progress. Yet, death is still a sad event". Those that gave this explanation were mainly people in the age range of 45 years and above and have achieved certain accolades. A respondent sums up this group views like this:

We watch our loved ones age and die over time, but those they left behind only succeed because they are building on what they left behind. So, they are alive but in different ways or form.

Another respondent adds:

I mean, Hmmm... Death is.... But why do you have to research about death... haaaaa, Ok, first, the idea of talking about death or dying is frightening. It's not an every hour or day discussion.... Death makes working so hard as a waste of time and fruitless, but come to think about, at least, one is least assured that his/her children wouldn't suffer. They, will be the ones to visit my grave, hang my pictures on the wall or show my grandchildren what I look like or behave. It's not a bad idea when you think about it in this way. And death may be indispensable, because the earth cannot support generation and generation of human existence and activities.

Another respondent simply said; "life is a cycle. Everything repeats itself. What had happened before will happen gain and gain". Yet, another contradict him by arguing; "Past is past, we must leave the past, but still remember it, and move on boldly. For me, life moves on a straight line".

The logic behind all the answers shows human are constantly questioning the issue of death and what become of human after that. But one answer appeared to summaries this study's theoretical position and simplified the question of death and its aftermath in the following statement:

I too believe in the eternity of life, for a man or woman does not die even from a materialistic perspective, for when a man or woman dies physically, his/her body is indeed immersed in the

things of nature, and indeed he may die in body but not in nature. As they quote in physics, atom cannot be created or destroyed. We are all part of nature, dead or alive.

Even so, there were four respondents that made reference to our actions as mindful human having a direct or indirect relationship to the nature around us. According to these four respondents these actions often leave a footprint of our deeds for the next generation to see and build upon. One of the respondents even mentioned of durian trees his late father planted. And these trees bear the hard work of his father in ensuring that; they, his children will continue to benefit from his labour even after he has passed away. He concluded by saying; "although he has passed away, but still feel his presence in everything we do, because he taught us well". A similar reason could be found in the work of [17].

One apparent revelation from this study many respondents avoid the topic of death, is the issue of fear. Almost all our respondents acknowledged that fear is the main architect on why people shy away from the subject death. Despite this acknowledgement, about half of our respondents could not clearly state why they fear death or the topic—death. As Neimeyer (1988 cited in [1]) posed "What do we fear when we fear death?" Some of our respondents gave an insight on why people fear death. These include the fear of the unknown after death; fear of dying, fear of ending up at the wrong side of their beliefs, fear of losing their wealth and children after death, fear that love ones may suffer after they cease to exist and fear of solitude.

5. Conclusion

Data from the field indicates that although many people often distance themselves on the discussion surrounding death, many hold life does not end with death, but continue in another realm; or lives on in a different form(s) —symbolic immortality. In fact, our data and literature discussion show the concepts of "death" and "life" are not mutually exclusive concepts. This is because human existence is a dynamic process of different levels of life and death.

Baker [25] observed, there are many conception of an afterlife. She continues, to say that there is an afterlife (of any kind) is to say that biological biological death is not the permanent end of a human beings' existence: at least some people continue to exist and to have experiences after death. As one African religious scholar Placide Tempels described:

Death does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual, but only causes a change in its conditions. This is expressed in the concept of "ancestors," people who have died but who continue to "live" in the community and communicate with their families.

However, it is important to establish that it was hard to find one common explanation of death and why people choose to discuss it or not. What is more, there are many different ideas about the "place" human departed to or go when they die. We found also the concept of reincarnation and transmigration⁹ is widespread among many respondents, but interpretations vary. Part of our data revealed multi-dimensional factors on why people avoid discussion on death.

Death is scary. Therefore, people try to live their lives, not even giving a second thought about what is going to happen to them, they live as-though they are not going to die. Most maintained that it is natural for people to act like it is not going to happen, they don't want it to, and they do not understand it and most agreed, it is a sad topic and there is no joy in engaging in it. And most respondents assert, discussion creates upsets and depression. Another reason is that death is not a big part of most people's lives these days. Indeed, the notion of death is daunting and people choose to avoid the topic, and not to understand it. In fact, it is easier to avoid the subject than to

⁹ Transmigration is also called metempsychosis—the changing of a person into an animal.

discuss or talk about it. Nonetheless, people think about it, and most people are not open to talking about it. It is entwined with the culture that says it is an unspoken taboo. And most people are afraid to face death.

It is empirical to state that humans are born, they live and they will eventually die, but the depiction of events after death is purely socially constructed. Nonetheless, one empirical certainty is death is not always the final curtain of human on earth (the literatures above have logical explanation to that). Most human will leave a bequest that will live on, long after they have long gone. Thus, given the varying views on death, whereby most people dread it, and a few others simply resigned to fate, constructing a new model on how to think about death is necessary. Outside the religious frame, we noted that seeing death in a positive light through the notion of symbolic immortality; provide individuals a new vigour that death is not the dread end human perceived very often. Because our work and the people we left behind keep us alive or immortalised. A typical example of people we celebrates include Karl Marx, Leonardo da Vinci, Mother Teresa, Charles Darwin, Nelson Mandela, our grandparents and numerous others we hold at a high esteem. People still keep material and none material objects of these to remind them of their ever presence in their life.

Reference

- [1] Abdel-Khalek, Ahmed M. "Why do we fear death? The construction and validation of the reasons for death fear scale." *Death Studies* 26, no. 8 (2002): 669-680.
- [2] Abdel-Khalek, Ahmed M. "Death anxiety in Egyptian samples." *Personality and Individual Differences* 7, no. 4 (1986): 479-483.
- [3] Adi Da Samraj. *I am the one would awaken*, 2012. Retrived on 23/12/2015 from: www.adidam.org/
- [4] Adler, A. *Understanding Human Nature*. The Guernsey Press, Great Britain, 1992.
- [5] Babbie, E. *The Practice of Social Research*. Wadsworth, United States of America, 2010.
- [6] Bryman, A., and Bell, E. The Nature of Quantitive Research. In: *Business Research Methods*, Oxford University Press (2007): 154-177.
- [7] Armstrong-Coster, Angela. "Death and dying, life and living." *Mortality* 5, no. 3 (2000): 325.
- [8] Hagestad G. O. 1990. "Social Perspectives on the Life Course." In R. Binstock and L. George (1993) (Eds.) *Handbook of Aging and Social Sciences*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- [9] Kastenbaum, Robert, *The psychology of death (2nd ed.)* Springer, 1992.
- [10] Kastenbaum, Robert, and Paul T. Costa Jr. "Psychological perspectives on death." *Annual review of psychology* 28, no. 1 (1977): 225-249.
- [11] Kastenbaum, R.J., *Death, Society and Human Nature: 10th Ed.* Pearson Education, 2009.
- [12] Lanza, R. M.D. *Does Death Exist? New Theory Says 'No'*, 2009. Retrieved on 2/4/2012 from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-lanza/does-death-exist-new-theo_b_384515.html
- [13] Lifton, Robert Jay. "On death and the continuity of life: a" new" paradigm." *The Journal of Psychohistory* 1, no. 4 (1974): 681.
- [14] Lifton, Robert J., *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life*. American Psychiatric Press, 1979.
- [15] Lifton, Robert J., *The Life of the Self*. Touchstone, 1976.
- [16] Lifton, Robert J. *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. Basic Books, 1993.
- [17] Lifton, Robert J., Kato, Shuichi, and Michael R. Reich. *Six Lives, Six Deaths: Portraits from Modern Japan*. Yale University Press, 1979.
- [18] North, A. *How To Understand Death*, 2011. Accessed on 12/6/2016 at: beyondtheblog.wordpress.com/2008/04/02/tt-5-how-to-understand-death/
- [19] Raphael, B. *The anatomy of bereavement: A handbook for the caring professions*. Routledge, 1984.
- [20] Schneidman E, Edwin S., "The Postself" in J. Williamson and E. Schneidman, (eds.) *Death: Current Perspectives*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1995.
- [21] Somekh, B. Lewin, C. *Research Methods In the Social Sciences*. Tejeshwar Singh, New Delhi, 2005. Retrieved on 03/12/ 2015 from: www.near-death.com/muslim.html

- [22] Sufian Mohammad Abu Jafar, *Methods and Techniques of Social Research*, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1998: p-3.
- [23] Vigilant, L. G. and Williamson, J. B. (na) Symbolic Immortality and Social Theory: The Relevance of an Underutilized Concept (To be published in *Handbook of Thanatology: Essays on the Social Study of Death*, edited by Clifton D. Bryant, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, (forthcoming).
- [24] Welman, C., Kruger, F. and Mitchell, B., *Research Methodology (3rd Ed.)*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- [25] Wainwright W.J. (2009) (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*: Baker L. R., Death and the Afterlife. Metaphysics Online Publication, 2007.