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Grief and Coping Strategies: The Impact of Culture and Age on Coping Strategies of
Bereaved Individuals

Master Thesis

by

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Abstract

Losing a significant other is a very stressful life event for people and all individuals engage in diverse coping ways in order to deal with the intense emotions caused by the bereavement. In the present study, it is examined if the age differences and cultural differences would have an effect on whether the bereaved individuals would engage in *positive reappraisal* or *escape-avoidance*. Bereaved individuals from Turkey and the United States who experienced the death of a significant other in the last 5 years have participated in this study. The correlation between age and coping strategies was found to be non-significant. There was no significant interaction effect of cultural background and age on coping strategies. The finding of the study has conflicted with the previous studies that suggested the age and cultural background of the bereaved would have an effect on coping strategies.

Keywords: bereaved, coping strategies, positive reappraisal, escape-avoidance, age, cultural background

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges in the human life is the loss of a loved one. Grief is a natural response to the death of a significant other and people in all over the world may experience many different emotions types and intensities of emotions during the grief process. As Thomas Eliot, a pioneer in grief and bereavement studies states: “grief is a universal experience of family life” and all cultures see grief and bereavement as very important in their customs (Eliot, 1930, p.545). People’s reaction to death and their way of coping with it are influenced by many factors. Mode of death, relationship to the person who died, age of the bereaved and social support are some of the aspects that affect the way the bereaved person copes with the distress after the loss.

Many studies suggest that the age of the bereaved person is a considerable factor in how he or she will react to the death of a beloved one. The existing literature on age as a factor in terms of reaction to death focuses on partner-loss and widowers as the bereaved persons. For example; the death of the spouse is usually more traumatic and the grief is stronger for young survivors (Ball, 1977). Ball also argues that the reason why younger people react to the death of their spouse more strongly is because of the suddenness of the death. However, we could rather say that the untimeliness could be the reason for that. For example; if a young person has been terminally ill for a long time and dies at the end, we cannot call it sudden. Therefore, it could rather be the aspect that we think young people would have more years until death. Similarly, the older spouses have higher awareness about the fact that the end of life is near and inevitable so they also grieve less compared to younger spouses (Sanders, 1981). On the other hand, the findings of the study conducted by Sanders (1981) showed that the older spouses had a harder time in terms of emotional and physical health especially since they mostly face loneliness and alienation because their children may live far away and are preoccupied with their own families. As mentioned above, the literature

does not provide enough evidence on age differences and reactions to death because it mostly contains research on partner-loss. Thus, the age difference as a factor needs further explanation even though including other relationships might complicate studying the connection between age of deceased and age of the bereaved.

Cultural and societal differences are other important factors determining the reactions and coping strategies towards the death of a significant one. Averill and Nunley (1988) suggested that expression of grief and how people experience it is influenced by the social context that they come from. Similarly, Rosenblatt et al. (1976) argued that there are differences among cultures in terms of openness, intensity and control of aggression in the grief process. Therefore, the coping strategies that people use to overcome the emotional pain after the loss can vary from culture to culture. A coping strategy for grief could be considered as 'normal' in one society whereas it could be deviant in another one. For example; the impoverished North-Eastern Brazilian mothers do not mourn more than few days when their child dies because they see the child deaths as inevitable (Scheper-Hughes, 1985). However, according to the study findings conducted by Bonanno et al., the majority of American bereaved parents showed chronic distress and poor perceived health (2005).

Another study conducted by Bjorck et al. (2001) showed that the Koreans were more prepared to accept the loss which might be the reason of Eastern cultural values that are based on accepting the fate and submission to the authority (Weisz, Rothbaum & Blackburn, 1984). On the other hand, the Caucasians had more tendency to deny and eliminate the appraisal of a loss which could be related to the individualistic values in Western culture (Bjorck et al., 2001).

Emotion regulation perspective suggests that there are two major ways of coping strategies: *reappraisal* and *suppression* (Gross & John, 2003). *Reappraisal* is defined as modifying the emotional effect of events by positive reconstructing and *suppression* can be

defined as inhibiting the emotion-related behavior by controlling it (Gross & John, 2003). Matsumoto et al. (2008) have found that collectivistic cultures have more tendency to engage in suppression as a coping strategy while individualistic countries had higher scores on reappraisal as the way of coping. *Escape-avoidance* could be another name for *suppression* which refers to denying the loss and avoiding the negative feelings after the loss (Bjorck et al., 2001).

Many grief studies examine how the age of the bereaved person determines the psychological and physical symptoms and the severity of emotional and behavioral responses to the death of a significant one (DeVries, 2013; Maddison & Walker, 1967) but there is not enough evidence in the literature about the relationship between age and coping strategies. Additionally, most of the studies examining age differences in grief responses and coping strategies we discussed above have focused on the partner-loss and took the widowers as participants. It would be important to emphasize other types of loss such as child-loss or friend-loss in terms of ages of the bereaved persons.

There is a gap in the literature about how different age groups in various cultures would perceive loss of a loved one. Since there is a difference among cultures in how to cope with grief, further studies could investigate both how different age groups and cultural backgrounds would have an interactive effect on people's coping strategies. A study conducted by Gross and John (2004) has found that suppression as a coping strategy was related to physical and psychological problems. Similarly, Maddison and Walker (1967) have found that the age of the bereaved person is highly associated with illness scores and younger people had higher illness scores. Therefore, we infer that research on the relationship between age and cultural difference and coping strategies would also be useful in terms of helping bereaved people.

In this study, it will be examined if the age differences and cultural differences (individualism vs. collectivism) would have an interactive effect on two ways of coping: escape-avoidance and positive reappraisal. It is hypothesized that the age of the bereaved would be positively correlated with positive reappraisal. Since the existing literature on grief provides evidence that older people are more aware of the end of life, they are expected to have higher scores on appraising the loss. Therefore, it is predicted that younger people will have higher scores on suppression. Secondly, it is predicted that the older people from individualistic cultures will report more positive reappraisal compared to the older people from collectivistic cultures because both the awareness and readiness to the end of life and Western values towards death would have an interactive effect on their coping strategies.

Methods

Participants

The sample in this study consisted of 172 bereaved individuals all of whom have experienced the loss of someone significant in the past five years. All participants in the study were either from Turkey or the United States. Participants who dropped out at the very beginning of the survey or who did not answer most of the questions have been excluded from this study. 5 people haven't answered if they lost someone significant in the last 5 years and 2 people indicated the time since loss as more than 5 years. These participants have been excluded from the study as well. The participants consisted of 104 females and 24 males from Turkey, and 41 females and 3 males from United States. In total, 84.3% of the participants were females and 15.7% were males.

Turkey and the United States were selected as representatives of individualistic and collectivistic countries. In individualistic countries, the autonomous individual is the organizing theme and in the collectivistic countries, the collective (e.g., family, religious

group, ethnic group, tribe etc.) has the centrality (Triandis, 1993). Hofstede (1980) argues that United States and other English-speaking countries are individualistic. Turkey is categorized as a collectivistic country (Triandis, 1993). Therefore, comparing Turkish and US American participants gave us a clear picture of the differences in the coping ways of individualistic and collectivistic countries.

Background Information

The age range was between 18 and 68. The mean age of Turkish participants was 28.7 (SD=11) and 41.61 (SD=15.06) for US American participants. We have also investigated some other demographic and background information of the participants in order to see in which the participants of the two countries differ from each other. For example; in terms of marital status, there were 98 Turkish participants who were single and only 14 from United States. While there was 45 participants from Turkey who lost a significant one caused by a sudden illness, only 4 US American participants lost their significant one by the same reason. Likewise, while there were 83 participants from Turkey lost a second-degree relative, among US Americans there were only 5 participants. We also found while there were no Turkish participants who lost their children, in US American sample, there were 10. (see *Table 1*). Such difference could be explained by the number of young people in the Turkish sample. Since most of the Turkish participants were in their 20s, it is not expected that they lost their children.

Materials

The instrument that was used to measure the coping strategies was the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WAYS) which is used in measuring the coping strategies that people engage in when they cope with stressful experiences (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986). The

WAYS is a 66-item questionnaire, consisting of 8 subscales with items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with values ranging from 0 (not used) to 3 (used a great deal).

Table 1. Demographics and background information of the participants

Variables	United States (n=44)				Turkey (n=128)				p
	N	M	%	SD	N	M	%	SD	
1. Gender									
Female	41		93.2		104		81.3		.061
Male	3		6.8		24		18.8		
2. Age									
		41.61		10.9		28.7		11	.000
3. Marital status									
Married/Living	21		47.7		26		20.3		.000
Widowed	2		4.5		3		2.3		
Divorced	7		15.9		1		0.8		
Single	14		31.8		98		76.6		
4. Time since the loss (month)									
		24.36		18.33		26.02		18.08	.929
5. Relationship with the deceased									
Spouse/partner	4		9.1		2		1.6		.000
Parent	13		29.5		17		13.3		
Child	10		22.7		0		-		
Sibling	0		0		1		0.8		
Grandchild	1		2.3		0		-		
Second-degree relative	5		11.4		83		64.8		
Friend	10		22.7		16		12.5		
Other	1		2.3		9		7		
6. Cause of death									
A long illness/health	21		47.7		59		46.1		.000
A sudden illness/health	4		9.1		45		35.2		
Accident	12		27.3		10		7.8		
Suicide	7		15.9		7		5.5		
Other/Unknown	0		-		4		3.1		
7. Closeness with the deceased									
		4.38		.88		4.22		.76	.579

Note: $N = 172$. Using chi-square analysis, gender, marital status, relationship with the deceased and cause of death were compared per country. For the mean age, time since loss and closeness with the deceased, independent t-test analysis was conducted.

Since the present study aims to investigate the two major ways of coping, *reappraisal* and *suppression*, we did not include all the items in WAYS. We included 13 items which were under the subscales of *escape-avoidance* ($\alpha=.72$) and *positive reappraisal* ($\alpha=.79$) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986). The reliability analysis we have conducted has showed that WAYS was reliable for our research and data set as well. *Escape-avoidance* subscale had a reliability of .76 and *positive reappraisal* had a reliability of .78. The construct validity and concurrent validity of WAYS have been proven to be good (Vitaliano et al., 1985).

The first 8 questions measured *escape-avoidance* and the last 5 questions measured *positive-reappraisal*. A higher score indicates the participant used the coping strategy (either *positive reappraisal* or *escape-avoidance*) in a great deal.

Design

In order to test the hypotheses, a correlational study with a cross-sectional design was conducted. This way, quantitative data were gathered, enabling for the strength of relationship between variables to be assessed. Age was expected to correlate positively with the dependent variable, ways of coping in response to bereavement and was tested for moderation by cultural differences and other demographic and background variables such as gender, time since the loss and the cause of death.

Procedure

The survey included other questionnaires than the WAYS as well because it was part of a larger study on cultural differences in grief and bereavement which was conducted by 17 researchers in total. The survey was constructed on the online program *Qualtrics* and was distributed through Facebook and e-mail between January and March 2018. We reached the

participants through social media or e-mail by sharing a link where they would be able to reach the online survey. The link to the questionnaire was posted on Facebook and sent by e-mail to the people who do not have social media accounts. The people whom were mailed were friends, family members, relatives and acquaintances. People from many different age groups showed interest in the study and some of them shared the link on their own profiles as well. Filling out the survey lasted 25 minutes maximally in total. The survey started with a section where the participants would choose their country and then the language of the survey would be in their native language. Then, they were asked whether they had lost a significant person in past five years or not. There was a consent form in which the participants were informed about the study and they were told to feel free to stop their participation anytime if they would like to. At the end of the survey, the participants were thanked for participating in the study.

Results

In order to examine whether there was a correlation between the age of the bereaved and the coping strategy that is used, Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted. The analysis revealed that there was no significant correlation between the age of the bereaved and the coping strategy that the bereaved individual engaged in after the loss.

The correlation between age and the coping strategy bereaved individual engaged in was not significant for both *escape-avoidance* ($r = -.054, p = .479$) and *positive reappraisal* ($r = -.123, p = .107$). For Turkish participants ($n = 128$), there was a mere positive correlation between *escape-avoidance* and age which was not significant ($r = -.081, p = .364$). There was a negative correlation between *positive reappraisal* and age it was not significant either ($r = -.151, p = .089$). For US participants, there was an insignificant negative correlation between *escape-avoidance* and age ($r = -.170, p = .270$) and an insignificant positive correlation

between *positive reappraisal* and age ($r = .011, p = .944$) (see *Table 2*). Therefore, our first hypothesis was rejected.

Table 2. Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD) and Pearson correlations for all variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Positive Reappraisal	2.47	.74	(.77)						
2. Escape Avoidance	2.04	.62	.10	(.79)					
3. Time since loss (in months)	25.6	18.1	.18*	.09	(-)				
4. Country (individualism)	.25	.44	-.08	.11	-.04	(-)			
5. Gender	.84	.36	.03	.25**	.02	.14	(-)		
6. Age	32.0	13.4	-.12	-.05	.01	.42**	-.01	(-)	

* *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level* ** *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level*

To be able to investigate our second hypothesis which argued that older people from individualistic countries would score higher in *positive reappraisal* than older people from collectivistic countries, it was needed to split the participants as ‘younger’ and ‘older’. Since the mean age of the Turkish participants was 28.7 and the mean age of US participants was 41.61, the two samples were very different from each other. The Turkish sample included mostly younger participants when compared to the US sample. Similarly, the age of the oldest participant was only 68. Therefore, we have conducted a median split. The median split has showed that the median age was 24.5. Then, we name the participants aged above 24.5 as ‘relatively older’ since it would not be reasonable to consider someone in their 20s as ‘older’ and participants aged 24.5 and below were named ‘younger’.

An ANCOVA was conducted to test the interactive effect of the age and cultural background of the bereaved on coping strategies used. The covariates included in the analysis

were gender, time since loss in months and cause of death. The reason for including time since loss and cause of death is that we aimed to investigate if these two variables affect the coping strategy that the bereaved individual engages in and to control for different alternative explanations. The results have revealed that there was no effect of the age or cultural background on coping strategies. The mean score of the Turkish participants who were 'relatively older' on *positive reappraisal* was 2.38 (SD=.70) and for US participants who were 'relatively older' it was 2.30 (SD=.79). Therefore, the analysis indicated that there was no effect of cultural background. Likewise, there was no significant difference between the 'younger' (M=2.58, SD=.72) and 'relatively older' (M=2.35, SD=.74) participants in total in *positive reappraisal* scores either ($F=.778, p=.50$). There was an interaction effect of age and cultural background on *positive reappraisal*. However, it was not significant ($F=.120, p=.730$). Thus, our second hypothesis was also rejected.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between cultural background and age of the bereaved individuals and their coping strategies to deal with the pain and grief after losing a significant one. The literature on grief suggests that the age and the cultural background of the bereaved are factors in how he or she reacts and copes with the grief. Therefore, we expected that they would also have an effect on the coping strategies that the individuals engage in to deal with the bereavement. We hypothesized that age would be positively correlated with *positive reappraisal* and negatively correlated with *escape avoidance*. Our second hypothesis was that cultural background and age would have an interactive effect on the coping strategies and that older people from individualistic cultures would score higher on *positive reappraisal* than older people from collectivistic cultures.

The results revealed that there was no significant correlation between the age of the bereaved and the coping strategy that he or she engages in. In US Americans, there was a correlation between age and *positive reappraisal* and a correlation between age and *escape avoidance* as we predicted, however, they were not significant. For Turkish participants, we found correlation between age and the two coping strategies as well but again not significant. The second hypothesis was also rejected because there was a non-significant interaction between age and cultural background and the ‘relatively older’ participants of Turkish and US Americans did not differ in terms of their *positive reappraisal* scores. Even though our hypothesis aimed to examine only the ‘relatively older’ participants, the results have also revealed that there was no significant difference between the ‘younger’ and ‘relatively older’ participants’ scores in *positive reappraisal* either.

The findings clearly contradict with the literature that has argued that bereaved people from individualistic cultures would have more tendency to accept the loss and to engage in positive reconstructing and that bereaved people from collectivistic countries would have more tendency to deny the loss and suppress their feelings (Matsumoto et al., 2008). Similarly, some of the earlier research that has supported the notion that older people would respond to death in a more accepting and positive way compared to younger people (Ball 1977; Sanders 1981) conflicted with our results as well.

On the other hand, we do not have an idea about the families (especially the parents) of the participants. Since the family of the individual is the training ground for the individuals to socialize and learn how to react and cope with grief, there can be conflicts and differences in individuals’ coping styles (Martin & Doka, 2000), even if they are from the same cultural background. Furthermore, the fact that there were more female participants in our study, the findings might be mostly reflecting women’s coping strategies.

As we discussed before, the Western cultures react to death in a more accepting way and they focus on readjusting the life without the deceased. However, the individualistic values of the Western cultures might cause the bereaved individuals to get less support from their surroundings if they try to maintain a connectedness to the deceased so it might be even harder for them to engage in *positive reappraisal* and continue their life without the deceased. However, since the collectivistic cultures' values focus more on social support and connectedness, the bereaved individual could adapt to the absence of the deceased more easily. Thus, our findings might have been influenced by these cases.

Limitations

There were limitations that may have influenced the outcomes. First of all, the number of participants from Turkey and United States were not proportional. Second, the number of male and female participants was also quite different in the samples of both countries. For example; there were only 3 males and 42 females from United States. Third, the age distributions of Turkish sample and US American sample were not similar. Even though the aim of the study included comparing younger and older bereaved individuals, there were not many old participants and the oldest participant was only 68. Fourth, we had only one individualistic and one collectivistic country. If we would have participants from more countries, the results could have been more significant and representative. Lastly, even though the reliability test of WAYS questionnaire has been found to be high, there were 13 items in our questionnaire and it might not be representative enough to get a very significant result for the difference in coping strategies. Such demographic and background differences between the two groups must have influenced the outcomes our research. The limitations listed could be considered as obstacles in our research project to have significant outcomes.

The present study did not support the notion that age and cultural background would have effect on the coping strategies that bereaved individuals engage in. However, even though we found that there was no interaction effect of age and cultural background on coping strategies after the death of a significant other, we think that the main effects of these two variables are very important in grief and bereavement research in terms of having better knowledge on bereaved people's experiences and providing better clinical help. Besides, it still remains as a gap in the literature and it needs to be investigated more. Further research could examine it by including more individualistic and collectivistic countries. Investigating other demographic and background information such as education, religion and income of the bereaved would also shed light on the differences in coping strategy that is used. Having broader knowledge on bereaved individuals and their coping strategies would be important in terms of providing better psychological help for them.

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Appendix

Ways of Coping (WAYS)

Please read each item below and indicate, by using the following rating scale, to what extent you used it in the situation you have just described.

Not Used= 0

Used Somewhat= 1

Used Quite A Bit= 2

Used A Great Deal= 3

1. Wished that the situation would go away or somehow be over with.
2. Hoped a miracle would happen.
3. Had fantasies or wishes about how things might turn out.
4. Tried to make myself feel better by eating, drinking, smoking, using drugs or medication, etc.
5. Avoided being with people in general.
6. Refused to believe that it had happened.
7. Took it out on other people.
8. Slept more than usual.
9. Changed or grew as a person in a good way.
10. I came out of the experience better than when I went in.
11. Rediscovered what is important in life.
12. I changed something about myself.
13. I was inspired to do something creative.

Ways of Coping (WAYS) (Turkish)

Lütfen aşağıdaki cümleleri tek tek okuyunuz. Sizin için önemli olan bu kişiyi kaybettiğiniz zamanı ve sonrasını düşününüz ve bu cümlelerde belirtilenlerin sizin için ne kadar geçerli olduğunuz belirtiniz.

Hiç = 0

Biraz= 1

Epeyce= 2

Oldukça Çok= 3

1. Bu durumun ortadan kalkmasını veya bir şekilde bunu atlatabilmeyi diledim.
2. Bir mucizenin gerçekleşmesini ümit ettim.
3. Bu durumun nasıl tersine dönebileceğiyle ilgili hayaller kurdum.
4. Yemek, içki, sigara, uyarıcı maddeler, ilaçlar vb. ile kendimi daha iyi hissettirmeye çalıştım.
5. İnsanlardan uzak durdum.
6. Bu durumun gerçekleştiğine inanmayı reddettim.
7. Acısını başkalarından çıkardım.
8. Normalden daha fazla uyudum.
9. Olgunlaştım veya iyi anlamda değiştim.
10. Bu durumu yaşadığım zamankinden daha iyi bir haldeyim.
11. Hayatta neyin önemli olduğunu yeniden keşfettim.
12. Kendimle ilgili bazı şeyleri değiştirdim.
13. Bu durum yaratıcı bir şeyler yapmam için bana ilham verdi.