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ABSTRACT

Past research has demonstrated the prevalence of 11 attitudes toward personal suffering among retirees: punitive, testing, personal growth, bad luck, resignation to the will of God, redemptive, divine perspective, minimizing, submission to the laws of nature, acceptance of the human condition, and defensive attitude. This study examined attitudes toward suffering in 50 young adult college students and 50 middle aged adults, all of whom were in good health and none of whom had just been afflicted with appreciable suffering. The 99-item questionnaire devised for the study on retirees was administered to the young and middle aged subjects. The results revealed significant differences between young and middle aged respondents on the personal growth attitude, the bad luck attitude, the punitive attitude, and the testing attitude. No significant difference was found between males and females on any of the 11 attitudes. All significant changes in attitude were negative (subjects dropped aspects of their attitudes as they reached middle age) except in the case of middle aged men who grew in their redemptive attitude toward suffering. (NB)

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Young Adulthood

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ATTITUDES TOWARD SUFFERING
IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD AND MIDDLE LIFE

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Abstract

A literature and journal search yielded 11 attitudes assumed by people experiencing suffering in their lives. A 99-item questionnaire was administered to 50 young adults and to 50 people in middle life. Results indicated the prevalence of each attitude among all groups. In testing, significant effects were revealed on specific attitudes for age but not for sex. Significant differences were found on specific attitudes both between men in their twenties and in their forties, and between women in their twenties and in their forties. The latter generation dropped parts of ten attitudes and added to only one attitude.

ATTITUDES TOWARD SUFFERING
IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD AND MIDDLE LIFE

Estimates vary, depending on how a pain clinic is defined, but as many as 900 pain clinics have sprung up in cities and medical centers in the United States as of 1973 (Stark, 1985). More than 80 million people suffer from chronic pain in the United States, and chronic pain costs the American people over \$10 billion annually (Bonica, 1973). On closer inspection into the diversity of methods employed at these chronic pain centers most of the treatments are not medical but are psychological in nature. The medical profession center their treatment on pain, the sensation of noxious stimuli, while the interdisciplinary approach of other professions focus on the affective response, usually a consequence to the sensation of pain (Melzack, 1983). Because pain in popular usage is extended to this affective response of suffering, the two psychological experiences are not carefully differentiated.

Clinicians are beginning to stop treating pain and suffering as synonymous as they observe frequently a cause-and-effect order between pain and suffering, and, on other occasions, the mere sequence of pain and suffering describes the relationship between these variables. In fact, suffering sometimes is reported without any pain whatsoever. Therefore, the referent of the attitudes

under investigation is suffering, the affective response to the sensation of pain.

Human personalities structure attitudes to facilitate their adjusting to various people, objects, and issues (Carlson, 1984). Through the centuries preaching and religious instructions of the churches have tried to prepare their members for death. In the last fifty years, business firms have inaugurated preretirement programs for their employees to make the transition into retirement less abrupt and terminal. Yet today only after human persons are afflicted with actual suffering or after entering a hospice or receiving a diagnosis of terminal cancer do they prepare for suffering. They typically assume an attitude toward suffering by searching for its meaning or accepting an explanation of suffering from their family, friends or clergy.

One study (Foley, 1985) has shown the prevalence of 11 attitudes toward personal suffering among retirees. Retirees were selected for this study since they were the most likely group to have attitudes toward suffering either due to personal encounter or to exposure to society's attitudes toward suffering. In order to better identify the sources of people's attitudes the present investigation proposed to tap the attitudes of people in young adulthood. This group has little thought of death, and minimal contact with the suffering of other people. The source

of their attitudes would be attributed to specific parental teaching and exposure to explanations of suffering given in school or church. By administering the attitude scale to people in middle life who had some experience of suffering, some thought of death, either their own or another person's, and more exposure to society's attitudes toward suffering, the comparison would show whether the experience over a generation positively or negatively reinforced the learned attitudes of youth. Did the attitudes of youth continue to dominate their interpretation of suffering or were their minds activated to search for new interpretations of personal suffering?

Method

Subjects

These young adults (N = 50) were recruited from university day and evening classes: 25 of them were men and 25 of them were women; their ages ranged between 20.0 and 29.9. The comparison group (N = 50) of people in middle life were drawn from college graduates, most of whom had an occupation outside the home, but a few had the full-time job of raising a family; 25 of the men held jobs outside the home, but 3 of the 25 women had the job of raising the family at home. All of the respondents were in good health and none of them had just been afflicted with suffering of any appreciable kind.

Procedure

The attitude scale toward suffering devised to measure the attitudes of the retired people (Foley, 1985) were administered in this investigation to 100 respondents who were young adults and in middle life. It was judged to be an equally appropriate instrument to profile the attitude structure of both younger generations. The 99 items on this scale reveal 11 attitudes toward suffering. There are on it nine statements for each attitude dealing with the perceptual, affective, and action-tendential components of that attitude (Brechler, 1984). Assuming an attitude toward suffering entails having a way of perceiving one's suffering, some affective responses to that interpretation of the suffering, and action-tendencies. This perception of interpretation arouses the affective responses, and, in turn, the perceptual and affective responses to suffering generate the action-tendencies (Millar, 1986).

Measures

Only the attitude scale toward suffering with its 99 items was employed to identify the attitudes of the two groups. A score was found by summing each statement endorsed by the respondents of the nine statements indicative of a particular attitude. The scale contained 11 attitudes toward suffering.

A brief description of each of the 11 attitudes is made by listing three of the nine statements from the attitude scale. The first statement indicates the perceptual component of that particular attitude; the second statement expresses the affective component; the third statement taps the action-tendential component.

1. Punitive attitude. I think that this suffering in my life is a just punishment from God. I feel angry at myself for having brought this suffering into my life through my sins. I tend to think of God as unjust, not because he is punishing me for my sins, but because he has afflicted innocent people with suffering.

2. Testing attitude. I am inclined to exclaim "God is testing me" in sending suffering into my life. I regret being a person of strong faith, for that faith was the basis of God's selection of me to test my loyalty to him during suffering. I am inclined to question God's perfect knowledge because he has misjudged many people who have failed his loyalty test while suffering.

3. Personal-growth attitude. I am likely to exclaim concerning definite suffering in my life, "I will grow through the experience of suffering." I become angry at people who, ignoring my suffering, presume to explain the lesson God is

teaching me by indicating the good outcome. I tend to bribe God in praying for the strength to bear my suffering by promising to stop sinning and to start some good project.

4. Bad-luck attitude. I am inclined to exclaim, "Just my luck!" when I begin to experience suffering. I feel some confusion about the reason for my unfortunate luck, even though I realize my suffering resulted from a random occurrence of events in my life. I am changing my concept of almighty God to a God of limited power, since some pockets of reality like suffering are independent of him.

5. Resignation-to-the-will-of-God attitude. I am inclined to exclaim, "This is the will of God," when I begin to experience suffering. I have feelings of despair over my suffering, because I have no control over the suffering since it is God's will. I am not moved to pray for an end to my suffering, since God has some purpose in sending suffering into my life.

6. Redemptive attitude. I perceive my suffering as contributing to the work of redemption because I unite it to the suffering of Christ. I feel uplifted because by offering up my suffering it has been raised to the redemptive level of Christ's sufferings. I tend to make my suffering useful by offering it up to God in order that he might grant some favor in answer to my prayer.

7. Divine-perspective attitude. I am likely to exclaim about suffering in my life that "it is a blessing in disguise." I feel the futility of searching for meaning by focusing in on my suffering, since its meaning can only be grasped in a broad frame of reference. I am inclined to perceive nothing as really evil, including suffering, because evil is no longer a privation of something good but a minimal amount of that good.

8. Minimizing attitude. I am inclined to exclaim, "It could have been much worse," after suffering has happened to me. I have a sense of relief after noticing that my suffering is not as bad as it could be. I am always looking for new comparisons to minimize suffering; for example, death would not seem so bad if it occurred after someone had resolved a crisis in his/her life.

9. Submission-to-the-laws-of-nature attitude. I am likely to declare during suffering that "I must be resigned while nature takes its course." I feel humble in my suffering, as I must submit to the inevitable working of the laws of my nature composed of body and spirit. I intend to take better care of my health and to respect the laws of my nature to prevent suffering coming into my life.

10. Acceptance-of-the-human-condition attitude. I accept suffering in my life and even expect it since it is part of the human condition. I feel that I squarely face up to my suffering

without being bound by it, since at the same time I optimistically reach for what is beyond it. I sometimes pray for a miracle which I am quite willing to accept in the same spirit that I initially accepted suffering in my life.

11. Defensive attitude. I know that I should promptly banish from consciousness the first experience of suffering, so I will not experience its full impact. I become depressed when I direct anger over my suffering away from God and other people toward myself, an acceptable target of my anger. I tend to deny more and more the unpleasant in my life, to overlook the ugly side of life, and to avoid suffering before I encounter it.

This investigation hypothesized statistically significant changes in the 11 attitudes toward suffering from young adulthood to middle life, between men and women, between men in their twenties and men in their forties, and, finally, between women in their twenties and in their forties.

Results

A series of t tests were run on the various comparison groups. They showed that significant differences were found between people in their twenties and people in their forties on the personal-growth attitude, $t(98) = 3.23$, $p < .01$; on the bad-luck attitude, $t(98) = 3.20$, $p < .01$; on the punitive attitude, $t(98) = 4.71$, $p < .001$; and on the testing attitude, $t(98) =$

3.98, $p < .001$. (See Table 1.)

Insert Table 1 about here

Between men and women no significant differences were found on any of the 11 attitudes

The failure to find sex differences on any of the 11 attitudes shows that society influences men and women indiscriminately and/or men come upon their attitudes toward suffering in the same way women do. What attitudes toward suffering a human person has does not depend upon being a man or a woman. The attitudes are not sex-specific.

The results show that changes in four attitudes of people in their twenties and of people in their forties were always negative changes, since people dropped some aspects of the attitudes. Two attitudes probably were derived from sacred scripture (punitive from Job's calamities and testing from Abraham's sacrificing of Isaac) and the realization came that they probably should not have been applied to non-biblical human persons. Less reliance on the bad-luck attitude happened as the respondents were able to attribute suffering to specific causes. The personal-growth attitude may have diminished because older people move away from listening to the explanations of other people to doing their own thinking through about suffering in their lives.

Table 1
t Values of Differences Between Means on 11 Attitudes
Toward Suffering for Four Groups

Attitudes	20s-40s	Men-Women	Men 20s-40s	Women 20s-40s
Will-of-God	1.84	.22	.23	2.38*
Divine-perceptive	1.41	1.30	.27	1.83
Personal-growth	3.23**	1.55	1.75	3.05**
Laws-of-nature	1.09	.48	1.12	.49
Bad-luck	3.20**	.29	3.68***	1.20
Minimizing	1.16	.84	.48	1.20
Human-condition	.48	.49	.62	.00
Redemptive	1.80	1.16	2.49*	.11
Punitive	4.71***	.18	2.67*	3.90***
Defensive	.27	.59	.94	.52
Testing	3.98***	.59	1.91	3.31**

*p < .05.

**p < .01.

***p < .001.

Men in their twenties, however, were found to change positively in their redemptive attitude from men in their forties, $t(48) = -2.49$, $p < .05$, but significant negative change occurred for men in their forties on the punitive attitude, $t(48) = 2.67$, $p < .05$, and on the bad-luck attitude, $t(48) = 3.68$, $p < .001$. Women in their twenties, on the other hand, dropped significantly by the time they reached their forties on the punitive attitude, $t(48) = 3.90$, $p < .001$; on the testing attitude, $t(48) = 3.31$, $p < .01$; on the personal-growth attitude, $t(48) = 3.05$, $p < .01$; and on the resignation-to-the-will-of-God attitude, $t(48) = 2.38$, $p < .05$. All significant changes in attitudes were negative (people in twenties dropped aspects of their attitudes by the time they reached their forties) except in the case of men in their forties who grew in their redemptive attitude toward suffering.

It is not surprising to find that men in their twenties experienced negative change in the punitive and bad-luck attitudes since this was what happened to the combined group of men and women. Nor was it surprising to find that women in their twenties experienced negative change in the punitive, testing, and personal-growth attitudes since the same kind of change was found for the combined group of men and women. Men in their twenties, however, experienced positive change in the redemptive attitude,

since men seem to grow religiously more than women over the two-decade period. On the other hand, women in their twenties were found to have changed negatively on resignation-to-the-will-of-God attitude, because they have become less satisfied with the pious, simplistic interpretation of suffering.

Conclusion

In conclusion, changes in attitudes toward personal suffering cannot be attributed to the sex variable, but aging over a generation both for the men and for the women was a source of attitudes toward personal suffering tending to lessen. All significant changes in attitudes, however, were negative (people dropped aspects of their attitudes by the time they reached their forties) except in the case of men in their forties who grew in their redemptive attitude toward suffering.

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