Human Psychological Obsession with the Dead Body: The Integrative Cadaveric Confrontation and Triadic Defense Model

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Abstract. Death is a process that everyone ultimately faces, and the body, as a direct product of death, is often endowed with strong emotional and psychological significance by people. Existing research has explained this phenomenon from the perspectives of fear management theory, symbolic immortality theory, and psychological essentialism, but few have provided a unified and integrated theoretical framework. This article aims to propose and systematically expound an innovative integrated theoretical framework, namely the Integrated Corpse Confrontation and Triad Defense Model (ICCTDM). This article first reviews the relevant research on existential fear and fear management theory and demonstrates the psychological mechanism of the body as an existential threat; Secondly, introducing symbolic immortality as a common core for different forms of defense; Finally, based on this, three types of explicit consciousness are proposed, namely dualism, essentialism, and scientific rationality explicit consciousness, and their convergent nature in body handling behavior and emotional compensation is analyzed. The research results indicate that human psychological attachment to the body ultimately stems from the fear of the body, which forces humans to confront their animality and the immutability of death; Different people adopt different psychological defense methods, but these methods can be classified into three types of explicit consciousness, and their common subconscious is to believe that spiritual consciousness will not easily disappear. The conclusion of this article is that ICCTDM can integrate previously dispersed theoretical perspectives, provide a unified and verifiable explanatory framework for understanding human psychological attachment to the body, and provide a theoretical basis for end-of-life care, organ donation promotion, and funeral policy formulation.

Keywords: corpse confrontation, Triple Defense Model, Symbolic immortality.

1. Introduction

Everyone will have to face death at some time, and most people have strong feelings about death. The human body is an organism that has ceased all life functions and will eventually be subject to the laws of thermodynamics, a direct result of death. When the metabolic process ceases, this entity is unable to perform any cognitive functions or interact with the environment in an intelligent way. However, it is a well-known fact that the deceased are often associated with strong emotions and psychological states by those who have formed close relationships with them during their lifetime. Different scholars have put forward various reasons for this phenomenon in their research [2-4]. This paper believes that it is necessary to clarify and explore all sides of this universal phenomenon, as it is a basic problem of death in psychology, and the existing research has failed to provide a unified and integrated theoretical system.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to propose and systematically present a new integrated theoretical system, namely the Integrated Corpse Confrontation and Triad Defense Model (ICCTDM). First, review related research on existential fear and fear management theory in this paper, and then present the psychological mechanism of the body as an existential threat. Secondly, this paper proposes the idea of symbolic immortality as a general trait for all kinds of defence and puts forward three types of explicit consciousness based on it: dualism, essentialism, and scientific-rational explicit consciousness. Finally, the analysis in this paper has shown that the three types of consciousness are convergent in terms of body-handling behaviour and emotional regulation. The significance of this study is as follows: At the level of theory, ICCTDM seeks to combine multiple dispersed perspectives, such as fear management theory, symbolic immortality theory and psychological essentialism, and

construct a unified and verifiable explanatory system for understanding people's psychological attachment to their bodies; At the level of practice, this model can offer new insights into the psychological origins of various behaviours by different groups, such as body disposal behaviour, organ donation, and funeral selection, and provide theoretical support for end-of-life care, organ donation promotion, funeral policy formulation, etc.

The three types of explicit consciousness are binary, essentialist and scientifically rational; finally, they lead different people to behave differently but are in fact converging in body-handling behaviour and emotional compensation.

2. Body as a threat of existence

Human beings actually carry a fundamental and potential psychological conflict: the biological instinct to protect oneself and maintain survival, and the conflict between recognizing that death is an absolute and inevitable higher cognitive ability. Based on this, Greenberg et al. argue that this conflict generates a serious existential fear, which is deeply rooted in various complex cognitive structures and cultural values of humanity, including the symbolic conceptualization of shared reality, allowing order, predictability, meaning, and heritage to be endowed to the world environment in which people exist. This worldview endows humans with self-esteem while seeking defense and buffering against death anxiety and fear. The contemplation triggered by the body, even just seeing or hearing about the body, can directly undermine this defense structure and reactivate the salience of death.

Therefore, conscious thinking and unconscious processing of the body or death can activate both proximal and distal defenses, causing people to shift their focus away from such thoughts and attempt to strengthen conceptual defenses through actively reinforcing worldviews, integrating into groups, seeking symbolic immortality, and other means, thereby attempting to deny the essential biological connections of humans and using dehumanization to maintain psychological protective shells [9] [10]. Therefore, ICCTDM believes that although the fear brought by facing the body - that is, the unshakable nature of humans facing their own animality and death - is the ultimate source of human psychological attachment to the body, people often do not want to place it in conscious awareness, so different types of psychological defenses emerge.

Table 1. Overview of the Three Types of Manifest Consciousness

Type of Manifest Consciousness	Core Belief	Typical Behavioral Manifestations
Dualistic	The soul or spirit continues to exist after bodily death	Caring for and properly disposing of the body, believing the deceased can still be affected by how the body is treated
Essentialist	Body and soul form an inseparable organic whole	Emphasizing bodily integrity, resisting autopsy, and opposing body part donation
Scientific-rational	The spirit ends with the body, yet the body can be endowed with moral meaning	Supporting organ donation, scientific donation, and green burial

This table 1 summarizes the core beliefs and typical behavioral manifestations of the three types of manifest consciousness in the ICCTDM, showing that they share the same underlying belief that spiritual consciousness will not easily perish.

3. As a symbolic immortality of common defense

ICCTDM believes that although the specific manifestations of psychological defense are different, they share a common feature, which is the belief that spiritual consciousness will not easily disappear. This fundamental understanding led to a series of seemingly different actions targeting the remains that followed. Lifton and Olson believe that because the body and death are terrifying reminders of

human animality, humans tend to seek a symbolic immortality, where they use vibrant connections and imagery to buffer the sense of separation that arises from recognizing their own vulnerability and the inevitability of death. Lifton claims that this symbolic immortality is achieved through five main modes. Firstly, individuals actively participate in mating behavior, allowing endless chains of biological dependence or symbolic groups such as families, tribes, and nations to emerge, and enabling individual symbolic elements to survive beyond death. Secondly, individuals create myths about reincarnation, extraterrestrial worlds, or spiritual souls, and collectively believe in and worship them, thereby enabling symbolic elements and even individuals themselves (existing independently of the body) to achieve eternal life. Thirdly, individuals create emerging things such as art, literature, scientific discoveries, and events with moral influence in order to transcend death and continue moving forward spiritually. Fourthly, individuals believe that after death they can rededicate themselves to the earth, allowing the particles that make up their bodies to return to the earth and nourish new life, thus surviving forever. Fifth, individuals believe that they do not truly exist, and that their actual spirit or soul can transcend and integrate into all things, thus believing that experiencing reality is an eternal experience that will not disappear due to death. The three categories of defensive consciousness in ICCTDM were born from this, but it attempts to reclassify and elaborate on the originally disordered five patterns in the field of modern psychology, in order to make related research and discussions clearer and more organized.

4. Dualistic explicit consciousness

The first type of defensive consciousness is binary, which encompasses all human individuals who insist on believing that their spiritual essence continues to exist after physical death. Research has shown that the human brain is naturally capable of separating thoughts and consciousness from the physical body for analysis and judgment, which means that inferences about the afterlife and consciousness after death are more likely to be a convergent and spontaneous collective creation, and are less likely to come solely from postnatal cultural indoctrination. Their argument comes from experiments: individual human children aged 4 to 6 who have not yet undergone extensive cultural indoctrination are typically able to understand that biological processes stop at death, but most of them also indicate that emotional and cognitive processes should continue after death. Older children and adults are able to apply the materialist framework to biological functions, but many of them still hold an intuitive assumption that psychological states will continue to exist after death [13].

This indicates that the human brain is difficult to simulate the death of its own consciousness, as consciousness lacks phenomenological experience of its own death [13] [14]. Ultimately, these underlying mechanisms transform into a macroscopic phenomenon: many human individuals tend to believe that consciousness or soul will continue to exist after death, as it is binary and opposed to material remains. And due to the belief in the continued existence of the spirit and soul, the handling of the material remains that were once connected to them becomes meaningful and even crucial, because the "soul" is likely to still "gaze" at its own body and form an opinion on how it is treated, which leads to the need for continuous social care for the body and ultimately transforms into psychological attachment to the body after death.

5. Essentialist explicit consciousness

The second type of defensive consciousness is essentialist, which encompasses all human individuals who believe that the body and soul are inseparable organic entities and downplay biological facts. Psychological essentialism holds that humans tend to conceptualize certain types of things as possessing some underlying, deeply rooted essence, and believe that these essences are the reasons for their observable surface properties, and this logic profoundly determines how people perceive and understand the human body.

From a strict materialist perspective, if the human body is viewed through the essentialist framework, that is, if the mind and consciousness are seen as an inseparable organic whole from the material body, then in principle, the complete cessation of brain physiological activity should mean that the person no longer exists, and therefore the body should have no meaning or value. However, many human individuals hold the belief that if something is human at one point in time, it cannot exist as non-human at another point in time, and therefore this clinical separation is not accepted by these individuals psychologically and philosophically.

Therefore, although their strong obsession with the body still stems from an essential fear of death, the focus of their explicit consciousness lies in the indelible connection between the individual's spiritual soul and physical form. The concern for the integrity of the body during burial, resistance to autopsy, and opposition to donating body parts may all stem from the belief that the body and mind are essentially the same entity, and therefore harming the body is actually harming the essence of the person, including dignity, identity, and soul.

6. Scientific rationality explicit consciousness

The third kind of defensive consciousness is scientific and rational; such people do not believe in the existence of a soul and are prone to essentialist psychology, but at the same time respect and firmly believe in biological, physical and environmental facts. These people can rationally understand that the human spirit and the material body are inseparably linked, and the stopping of physical processes in the body means the complete disappearance of the individual spirit. However, ICCTDM believes that many of them still need to use some explicit consciousness to replace the actual subconscious reason for their obsession with the body, which is the fear of death. Therefore, they tend to use methods such as organ donation and green burial to realize moral values and give meaning to life after death. Research has shown that organ donation and scientific donation can provide deep psychological support for the donor and those who support the donation by achieving symbolic immortality, and promotional messages about the donor's continued life in the recipient's body enhance this benefit [20].

At the same time, death anxiety and the inevitability of death promote altruistic behaviour by encouraging body donation as a contribution to scientific progress and organ donation as helping others, as individuals feel that they are contributing to something more significant than themselves and thereby affirming a heroic cultural worldview. In addition, more environmentally friendly funeral models, such as green or natural burials, alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction, are also more readily accepted by these people because these models suggest contributing to the overall living environment of humanity, and individuals use a global system of meaning that consists of core beliefs, goals and subjective feelings to understand the world and affirm their own values. In this way, people can feel that the remains and decay after death are a sacred gift to be honoured, rather than the fearful end of life hidden by embalming fluid and concrete tomb. In this way, due to the continuous inheritance of moral connotations and values, one's sense of the spirit will also be immortal.

7. Conclusion

In order to explore the psychological reasons for people's strong desire to maintain good health after death in an orderly manner, this paper introduces ICCTDM. Based on previous studies, this model believes that people's psychological obsession with corpses is ultimately rooted in their fear of death; thus, they are compelled to confront their own animalistic side and the inevitability of death head-on. There are several forms of psychological defence for people, and among these are three types of conscious defence: dualism, essentialism and scientific rationality.

However, the subconscious beneath these conscious states is the same: the belief that the spiritual consciousness will not easily vanish, and it is precisely this that leads to people's behaviour and emotional compensation in dealing with corpses.

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