

When Life Hurts... On the Verge of Death

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Abstract: In this study, anchored in the theory of social representations, we intended to ascertain the existence of risk-taking and self-harm behaviours, as well as situations of imminent death, in a population of adolescents (boys and girls between 15 and 19). It was also our aim to understand how these behaviours might be associated to the social representations of life, death and to musical preferences. Our findings indicate that boys are the ones who tend to find themselves more often engaged in all of the three forms of endanger behaviours. It is also among the adolescents between 17 and 19 years old that these situations are more common. A preference for feminine pop is associated to self-harm behaviour and classic pop is linked to risk behaviour. Personal fulfilment seems to be the greatest indicator of both risk behaviour and self harm: the lower the perception of fulfilment, the greater the chance to adopt these kind of behaviours. Results also support that negative perceptions of well-being, and love for life are linked to risk and self harm behaviours, mainly in girls. Adolescents who shown risk behaviours represented death as a ritual and so did girls who had already found themselves on the verge of dying.

Keywords: Adolescence, Risk Behaviours, Self Harm, Death, Dying, Life, Music, Social Representations.

1. Introduction

Mortality, our own mortality, is barely conceivable for us. And still, 'to die is the human condition and reflection concerning death exists practically among all people' (Feifel, 1990, p. 537).

According to Lifton (1979), to represent life and death as one unit, as a two faced coin, is to assume that thoughts regarding death are constant in every human being since birth. Since it is a unique experience, human brain cannot process the idea of death and is unable to learn and apprehend how to deal with it. Although conscious of our fear of dying, the single existence of this thought within our brain would be enough to threaten our preservation instinct. The only option is to hide it in a subconscious level, using a huge variety of stimuli and impulses to fill in the void which is left. To say that we do not fear death is, itself a fallacy, since we are describing a reaction to something that we have never witnessed and that goes beyond our own knowledge (Reaney, 1991).

Although aware of human mortality, adolescents often do not accept their own finitude as factual. To most adolescents, death is a distant and unlikely event, just as old age (Petter, 2001). To others, though, it is an adversary that must be defeated in order to continue to live within what is expected. That is what can be referred as establishing immortality (Reaney, 2001). To rule over death means to rule over life, to give it its upmost significant meaning (Petter, 2001).

It is due to their natural tendency and need to experiment, feel and live everything as intensely as possible, that adolescents sometimes find themselves so close to death. Crossing limits frequently implies incurring in some risk behaviours such as alcohol or drug abuse, reckless driving, unprotected sexuality, self-harm behaviour (cuts and burns mainly in the arms and upper legs) and even suicide attempts (Oliveira, Amâncio & Sampaio, 2001; Crepet, 2002; Donnellan, 2004; Saraiva, 1999).

Amongst the most significant activities throughout adolescence, it is quite straightforward to place music, since it plays a relevant part in identity's structuring (Barros, 1993) providing relief from boredom, filling in the silence and facilitating expression of feelings and identification towards a particular sound or lyrics (Strasburger, 1995) and because music is, for itself, an agent of socialization (Abreu, 2000), influencing, therefore, thoughts, and behaviours (Gard, 1997).

Death and Life, are the two most intricate phenomenon's within (or beyond) our reach, which we may only understand through social representations (Bradbury, 1999).

Moscovici's (1961/1976) theory postulates representations as social constructions through which it is possible to modulate our perceptions and conceptions of an object and reality itself, since 'that what is unknown and strange comes as a threat because there is no category to fit that in' (Farr, 1984, p. 386).

According to Moscovici, whenever we are socially representing something, more than revealing opinions, images or attitudes, we are uncovering a complete system of values and knowledge that assists our organization of reality. It is this system that allows us to control our environment and communicate throughout a code that becomes collectively shared. Social representations are, hence, common and shared, in a group and social level, since they are collectively produced, resulting from the interaction and communication among groups on our daily life (Jodelet, 2004).

The present study aims to:

- 1) Ascertain the existence of risk-taking and self-harm behaviours, as well as situations of imminent death, in a population of adolescents from 15 to 19 years old.
- 2) Understand how these behaviours might be associated to the social representations of life, death and to musical preferences.

2. Previous studies

In order to understand what we present in this paper, it is important to say that the present study is part of one larger survey, in which was intended to apprehend and analyse the social representations (SR) of life and death as well as the musical preferences amongst an adolescent population; to understand how SR varied according to gender and age and to verify how SR of life and death might be associated with musical preferences and with the opinion of others.

From a list of several items, participants were to indicate the extent to which every item represented their thoughts, images and feelings about life (e.g., hope, family, joy, freedom, happiness) and death (e.g., accident, sadness, curiosity, immortality, coffin). Then, a list of 31 bands/composers - among the most popular among Portuguese adolescents - was presented (e.g., Metallica, Beethoven, Ben Harper, Amy Winehouse, Queen, U2) to evaluate the musical preferences of the adolescents. And finally, our participants were asked to indicate in which extent their feelings, thoughts and images about life, death and musical preferences were influenced by others (e.g.: parents, best friend, colleagues, teachers). All answers were measured in a 1-5 scale. The data was analysed using Factor Analysis (FA) with the items considered for each theme – in order to reduce and reveal the internal structure of the data –, and Variance Analysis on the factors obtained.

For what musical preferences are concerned, FA revealed an eight factor solution: rock/metal; north-American rock; English metal/indie; hip-hop/new metal; reggae/pop; classic/pop; emotional rock and feminine pop. Regarding SR of life, a five dimension solution was found: well-being; will to live; personal fulfilment; attachment to others and feelings of malaise. For the SR of death we obtained a four dimension solution: malaise; ritualism/causes of death; closeness to death; questioning/transcendence.

A final set of questions comprehended three items regarding threatening behaviours. In that sense, it was asked: 1) whether participants had ever had any risk behaviours (e.g., reckless driving, drug abuse, unprotected sexual encounters); 2) if they had ever faced a situation of imminent death; and 3) whether adolescents had incurred in any self-harm conduct (e.g., cutting, bruising, burning).

These three items are, in this present study, our dependent variables and the ones we will be associating with SR of life and death, and with musical preferences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Population

Our sample consisted of 262 adolescents, 54% male, 46% female; 61% between the ages of 15 and 16 years old and 39% between 17 and 19 years old, from Lisbon.

3.2. Instrument of Measure and Procedure

We developed a questionnaire with six groups of items on closed questions, followed of ordinal scales (1 to 5), based on the results collected on another research (Oliveira, 2008a) and on a previous focus-group – involving talking to

adolescents about life, death and music. The data was collected in a class context, having each student answered it anonymously, in an individual protocol.

4. Findings

Our first objective was to understand whether risk behaviour, imminent death and self harm conduct varied according to gender and age. For that, several ANOVAs were conducted. Results indicate that boys tend to incur into risk behaviours, as well as self-harm behaviours, more often than girls. Furthermore, boys are also who seem to have been on the verge of dying, which is also the case of the adolescents between 17 and 19 years old (cf. Table 1).

Table 1
Effects of gender and age in the risk-taking and self-harm behaviours,
and the imminence of death

	Gender	Age
Risk-taking behaviours	$F(1, 255) = 4,830 *$	
Self-harm behaviours	$F(1, 253) = 6,628 **$	
Imminence of death	$F(1, 255) = 6,172 **$	$F(1, 255) = 6,469 **$

* $p < 0,05$ ** $p < 0,01$

Since music is considered a vital activity for adolescents, we correlated our three dependent variables with the musical preferences. Hence, results support that those who reveal more preference for feminine pop (artists such as Alanis Morissette or Amy Winehouse) tend to show less self-harm behaviours; and the more the participants prefer to listen to classic pop (such as U2 or even Beethoven), less they tend to incur in risk-taking behaviours (cf. Table 2)¹.

In what concerns to SR of life, we observe that the less the adolescents felt personally fulfilled, greater is the risk for them to incur in some kind of risk behaviour. So, the self-harm conduct is associated with a pessimistic perspective of life, as shown by the negative correlations with the dimensions well-being, love for life and personal fulfilment. For those who ever found themselves on any imminent death situation, life tends to be represented with more sadness.

In order to understand if there were relevant differences between boys and girls as well as according to age (15-16 versus 17-19 years old), our sample was also sorted and filtered according to gender and age.

Table 2
Correlations between the representations of life, death and the music preferences
and the threatening behaviours

		Risk-taking behaviours				Self-harm behaviours				Imminence of death			
		All sample	♂	♀	15-16	All sample	♂	♀	15-16	All sample	♂	♀	15-16
Music Preferences	Feminine Pop					-.160*							
	Classic Pop	-.126*											
	Well-being				-.250**	-.137*			-.210**				-.218**
	Love for life				-.232*	-.197**			-.343**				-.190*
SR Life	Personal fulfilment	-.154*			-.357**	-.226**			-.143*				-.305**
	Sadness								-.181*				-.181*
	Attachment to others				-.201*								
	Malaise												-.157*
SR Death	Ritualism												-.190*
	Malaise												-.289**

* $p < 0,05$ ** $p < 0,01$

¹ The results for 17-19 years old adolescents were not included since there were no significant associations.

That allowed us to determine that, for girls, the less life is represented as love for living, personal fulfilment or attachment to others, the greater is their careless or risk behaviour attitudes.

Among girls, we notice that the more they feel bad and the less they feel personally fulfilled and with love for life, the more is possible for them to have self-aggressive acts, and give relevance to situations of imminent death. For male adolescents, sadness seems to be the strongest impulse for self-harm episodes, and for them to recognize imminent death situations.

Concerning age, for the younger adolescents, the more they feel bad and with a weak perception of personal fulfilment, more probable are the risk behaviours and the self-harm conduct; self-harm behaviour is also strong connected with a low love for life.

Standing on the verge of dying, appears to find stronger eco in a poor well-being - or, in other words, a clear bad-being - a weak affective attachment with the others and a general sense of malaise.

Finally, regarding the social representations of death, we found that, for boys, risk behaviours are significantly and positively linked to the ritualism of death (e.g. coffin, burial, skull and cross). For girls, the imminence of death is negatively associated to death as a ritual, and those who have been closer to a death situation are clearly those that feel less malaise in face of dying – facing death with a more positive attitude.

5. Discussion

The more the adolescents reveal sadness, low self-esteem and express that they do not feel personally realized (with themselves, the family or at a social level), highest is the possibility that they can harm themselves, incurring in parasuicide (Saraiva, 1999) - risk behaviours and self-harm behaviours -, and living situations that can put them near to die or, as we may say, on the verge of dying - which can derived from a distraction, a suicide attempt, an accident or a disease episode (e.g. Oliveira, 2008).

It is also note worthy that, although, overall, boys seem to be more likely to engage in any of the threatening behaviours, girls are the ones who, more vehemently, associate them with the most relevant social representations of life and death. But this association is significant in an inverse way. The more the girls feel confident, well with themselves, with the others and with the life they have, the less they choose to behave in a way that can put them in any kind of danger.

Likewise, it is for younger adolescents that threatening behaviours seem to find correspondent perceptions on their feelings and thoughts about life and death. The more the youngsters feel sad, the more they recognize they have lived situations of proximity with death.

Finally, one interesting finding was that contrary to most of the literature, no significant correlations between rock/heavy metal and any of the threatening behaviours were found. But we can say that the greater preference for pop or danceable music (that girls prefer more than boys) and classical music, is linked to a lesser tendency of the youngsters to incur in behaviours that endanger their life.

6. Conclusions

Understanding how teenagers think and feel about life and death is presented as an asset to the mental health professionals and is a precious contribution for any youth suicide prevention programs (Brown & Hendee, 1989) given that 'understanding suicide is a key to prevent it' (Blackburn, 1982, p. 11).

The adolescents' perceptions about life and death are real windows that allow us to discover their perspectives, goals and aspirations, but also their fears, anxieties, hesitations and difficulties for living in the present time, and to face the future. By connecting risk behaviours, self-harm conducts, and the perception of an imminent death, with the referred perceptions, we face a unique opportunity to unravel some of the cognitive and emotional issues that might help us to explain the recourse to these escape patterns.

In fact, an adolescent in the verge of dying, is an adolescent that feels desperate in the verge of living, trying to escape from what disturbs and hoping to survive, somehow, through a possible death.

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