

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

Maitri N. Patel^{1*}, Priyanka Aswani²

ABSTRACT

Personal mortality is a major concern of old age as death demands recognition and aging bodies are the constant signs of the reality of death (Wittkowski, J. 2005; Koestenbaum, 1999; Sheth. K, 1990; Feifel, 1974). In India, where spirituality and religiosity play a significant role, people are more inclined towards their religious beliefs, values, and norms that ensure the individual of being protected from death and gives a purpose in life. The study is aimed at exploring the influence of reading religious/spiritual scripture/s on the perception of death and meaning in life among older adults through a narrative lens. A sample of seven participants (2 women, 5 men), aged 55 and above, were recruited from semi-urban and urban areas through purposeful sampling. Data was collected using a semi-structured, open-ended, interview questionnaire focusing on their personal narratives on death and meaning in life. Thematic analysis of the narratives revealed four major themes: (a) Reference to Reading Religious Scriptures, (b) Perceived Meaning of Death, (c) Attitudes towards death after reading religious scripture/s, and (d) Perceived Meaning in Life, each comprising various subthemes. The findings from the study supplied a positive association on reading religious scriptures, a favourable outlook on death, and enhanced meaning in life among older adults. The implications of the study can inform multicultural competence in mental health professionals, impact end-of-life care practices, and contribute to the discourse on positive aging, particularly rooted in religious and spiritual traditions.

Keywords: Religious scriptures, Perception of Death, Meaning of Life, Older Adults

Death is as much a part of human existence, of human development, as being born (Kamal Sheth, 1990). Older adults are more likely to be surrounded by the thoughts of dying due to their closeness to their mortality than younger people who although possess the fear of dying are less prominent due to the sense of prolonged life (Tomar & Eliason, 2000; Stricherz, M., & Cunnigton, 1982). Although the prospect of death is not an aging problem, it is prominent that personal mortality is a major consideration of old age as death demands recognition and aging bodies are the constant signs of the reality of death. (Koestenbaum, 1999; Sheth. K, 1990; Feifel, 1974). The meaning of death varies from person to person depending on their personal life experiences (Bengtson, V.L., Cuellar, J.B.,

¹Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

²Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

*Corresponding Author

Received: December 23, 2023; Revision Received: March 28, 2024; Accepted: March 31, 2024

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

& Ragan, P.K., 1977). Attitudes towards death are also highly influenced by cultural, religious, and social perspectives. Death plays a key role in understanding the meaning of human existence and provides everyone a chance to discover life's true meaning by coming to terms with death as a part of human development (Koestenbaum, 1999). Individuals that assign greater meaning to their lives also display rates of lower death anxiety and higher rates of death acceptance (Surell & Steppacher, 2018). Death acts as a motivating element in finding purpose and meaning in life (Paul Wong, 2007). By confronting one's mortality with a positive attitude reorients one to review life, both past, and present, and realize that life has meaning. As Feifel (1977) comments, "*Life's ultimate meaning remains obscure unless it is reflected upon in the countenance of death*".

Religiosity provides one such explanation on death and perceived meaning in life and religious and spiritual scriptures serve as the foundation for all religious institutions. Understanding the meaning of death is the beginning of all philosophical and religious wisdom. Religious scriptures play a significant role in inculcating religious ideologies in an individual as somewhere between empirical details and metaphysical thematization lies the generic elaboration that can aid a reader to deal with menial problems of daily life to the existential questions on death and transcendence. Many religious scriptures view death as something to be temporary as opposed to eternity which helps inculcate the meaningfulness and purpose of life in an individual. As per the Terror Management Theory by Solomon S. Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1991), one's worthiness for immortality is highly based on believing in and living up to the standards prescribed by one's cultural worldview and another factor is self-esteem that enables individuals to manage potential death anxiety and thereby live with relative calmness. (Altemeyer, B. 2003).

Literature review suggests that Older Adults who are closer to death are more likely to face anxiety stemming from factors such as aging, fear of the unknown, lack of meaningfulness, etc (Petty et al., 2015; Tomar and Eliason, 2000; Fortner, B. V., & Neimeyer, R. A. 1999; Cicirelli V, 2002) and religiosity plays a major role in eradicating those fears through their literature (Surell & Steppacher, 2018). The narrative of people overcoming death anxieties and looking at it in a more accepting manner are scant as compared to other dominant studies on death perception. Therefore, by creating a dialogue space, highlighting stories of individuals from older adult age groups will help understand their perception of death and the purpose of life before and after reading the religious scriptures.

METHODOLOGY

Study design

This qualitative study was guided by narrative inquiry. The qualitative research process is highly inductive, and the outcome is vividly descriptive (Merriam, S.B., 2002). A Narrative inquiry is a study of "the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly, F.M. & Clandinin, D.J., 1990). We employed the narrative research design because it allowed us to explore the subjective experiences of participants who read religious scriptures and how it shapes their perception of death and the meaning of life. It comprises of many procedures which include gathering data through individual stories, experiences, and systematically ordering the meaning of those narrations (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

The goal of qualitative research is "not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013). In lieu of the aim of the study

**The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life
Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry**

to explore the perception of Death and the meaning of life among older adults who read religious scripture/s, purposive, homogenous sampling was most suitable to allow us to gain more information and insight about the topic at hand. We incorporated purposive sampling in selecting participants from a known sample that is rich with useful data essential for understanding the research problem and the main goal of the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, M.Q., 2002). For this study, the following criteria were included in selecting participants:

- The participants must include older adults (aged 55 and above) and belonged to semi-urban or urban areas in Indian Subcontinent.
- The participants had read one or more religious scripture/es (irrespective of any kind) and were willing to narrate their individual experiences and understanding of death and the meaning of life.
- The participants were comfortable conversing in Hindi or English languages.

A sample size of seven (2 women, 5 men) were incorporated in the study based on the above-mentioned criteria through word-of-mouth.

Table 1. Participants details and Background summaries.

NAME	AGE	GENDER	EDUCATION	MARITAL-STATUS	LANGUAGES THEY SPEAK	BOOKS READ	NO OF HOURS FOR BOOKS READ.
MRS.SB	60	Female	B. E	Married	Sindhi, Hindi, Punjabi, English	Shri Guru Garanth Sahib, Bhagavad Gita, Puran	2
MR. R	75	Male	M.A, Banking	Married	Sindhi, Hindi, English, Marathi,	Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Pravachans, Lord Jhulelal Books	1-2
MR. JA	56	Male	B. Com	Married	Sindhi, Hindi, English, Marathi, Gujarati	Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita and Japji Sahib	1
MRS. S	59	Female	M.A (Sociology and Sanskrit)	Widow	Hindi, English	Ram Charit manas, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Himalay ka samarpan, Krishna Leela, Durga Saptashati and Pravacahns	2.5
MR. CK	61	Male	B. Com	Married	Sindhi, Hindi, English, Marathi, Gujarati	Gita and Sukhmani Sahib	0.5

**The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life
Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry**

NAME	AGE	GENDER	EDUCATION	MARITAL-STATUS	LANGUAGES THEY SPEAK	BOOKS READ	NO OF HOURS FOR BOOKS READ.
MR. DI	82	Male	Electrical Engineering and Astrology	Married	Tamil, English, Malayalam, Hindi	Ramayana, Purana and Mahabharata	Used to read for 8 hours and now for 4-5 hours
MR. K	64	Male	B. A.	Married	Hindi, Marathi	Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana	Twice a week

Data Collection

We collected the data through direct interview and audio recordings of the participant's narration, written notes, and face-to-face conversations. The interview method was the main method of data collection as it allowed the researchers to capture the essence of participants' emotions, intentions, perspectives, meanings, and experiences (Patton, M.Q., 2002). A semi-structured One-on-one interview protocol was developed for this study. The questionnaire was designed to elicit a narrative account. Depending on the availability and preferences of participants, the researchers set the date for a 40–60-minute interview either in-person or via video conference. The interviews were led by the participants' accounts and the interviewer's reflections on what they said. The first part of the questioning process was limited to short, close-ended questions to build a rapport with the participants and collect background information whereas the second part included elaborative, open-ended questions indicated to expect a narrative out of the participants regarding the significance of the study.

The questionnaires were independently translated to Hindi from English by us followed by back-translation. The back-translated versions were compared with the original versions and checked for any possible differences. Participants were given the liberty to answer the interview questions in either of the two languages they are comfortable in.

Ethics

We obtained informed consent from all participants included in the study. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the participants' personal identity (except for initials) were concealed in the study. After the data collection, the narrative data was re-confirmed for accuracy with the participants. This study received ethical approval from the host institution's ethics committee.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of the data, we used thematic analysis, as it is one of the common approaches in narrative research as per the guidelines of Barun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). We started the data analysis by transcribing the audio data in verbatim, the transcripts were arranged based on the question and response format followed by first coding using in vivo software and descriptive coding to identify possible patterns in all the responses of the participants. After the coding, the data were categorized into meaningful categories of participant's individual experiences to foster an in-depth understanding of Death Perception in Older adults. The main themes/patterns were re-analysed and cross-checked through

**The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life
Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry**

deletion and merging of certain themes into main themes. Later, the themes and the subthemes were refined and organized to ensure no innovative ideas were left unidentified by us in the data set. (Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Clark Plano, V. L., & Morales, A., 2007).

RESULTS

The study produced in-depth narrations on the influence of reading religious scriptures on perception of death and meaning in life among older adults. Thematic analysis revealed four primary themes, subdivided into several sub-themes. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Key primary themes and subthemes

Primary Themes	Sub-themes
Reference to reading religious scriptures	Parental Guidance. Personal Interest.
Perceived Meaning of Death.	Death is when the soul leaves the body. Death is the ultimate reality and inevitable. Death is uncertain.
Attitudes towards Death after reading scriptures.	Death is not the end of life but a transition of the soul. Death is a spiritual journey towards God. Acceptance of the inevitable nature of death. Near-death experience
Perceived Meaning in Life	Gained Mental peace and strength to deal with negative phases in life. Lessons on Karma Guidance towards the right path of life. Improved interpersonal relationships. Personal growth and improved way of living

1.1 Reference to Reading Religious Scripture/s.

Reading is a habit that is highly influenced by personal as well as environmental factors in one’s life. Numerous factors such as interest in reading religious scriptures, family background, educational background, and personal interest plays a prominent role. Four participants presented a narrative account on their reference to reading religious scriptures. However, the other three participants chose to not comment. The following sub-themes were identified.

1.1.1 (a) Parental Guidance

One of the most common themes that appeared from this category was parental guidance. Parents play a significant role in one’s early developmental stages of life and most of our habits and interests are developed during our childhood days. Two participants’ narratives accounted for parental guidance as to their initial reference to reading religious scriptures.

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

The Participant Mrs. SB narrates, *“I had my mother’s guidance, she used to read books and make me chant few shlokas when I was a kid..., as I grew older, I developed an interest in religious scriptures and started reading about few Known saints, who I now also Follow, have always guided me to read the books.”*

On a similar note, another Participant Mr. R narrates, *“My Dad used to recite or umm read books out loud for me and I use to hear and I started reading from the age of 8 years. From then, I have discovered a lot of religious and spiritual books, which have enlightened me with many things around the world and inside the world and our purpose as human beings.”* These narrative accounts suggest a prominent impact of parental guidance on reading religious scriptures.

1.1.2 (b) Personal Interest.

Another prominent factor that comes into play in the reference to reading religious scriptures is one’s personal interest. All kinds of reading require one’s passion and interest in gaining the Knowledge provided by the books. One’s source of interest can appear from numerous factors.

According to Mr. J. Accounts, *“...I started reading on my own. I used to watch shows of Ramayana and Mahabharata as a Kid and then as I grew up umm...there was this thing which fascinated me. I wanted to read books just to Know the story in an elaborative and better way and ended up finding it more interesting. As I lost my parents at an early age, I had only seen people in Gurudwara reading Guru Granth Sahib and from there I developed an interest in reading the Punjabi religious scriptures as well.”*

Another Participant Mr. DI narrates, *“After I started learning Sanskrit. My interest in the spiritual field was raised. I started reading from Bhavan’s Journal and for 2 rupees we used to get so many books you know at that time (smiles nostalgically). That is how I developed my interest in reading, and I have read most of the religious books now.”*

From these narratives, the participants’ environment played a significant role in developing their interest in reading religious scripture/s.

1.2. Perceived Meaning of Death

The meaning of death varies from person to person depending on their personal life experiences (Bengtson, Cuellar, & Ragan, 1977). Attitudes towards death are also highly influenced by cultural, religious, and social perspectives. Understanding the meaning of death is the beginning of all philosophical and religious wisdom. The participants’ narratives on their perceived meaning of death were identified and divided in three sub-themes.

1.2.1 (a). Death is when the soul leaves the body.

As per the participants’ narrations, death occurs when one’s soul leaves the body. It is often understood as either the transfer of soul to another body or a means to reach transcendence.

According to Mrs. S, death is, *“When the soul leaves the body, it’s death”* whereas according to Mrs. SB, *“The soul never dies, only the body changes the way we change our clothes, till the soul receives salvation.”*

And Mr. DI says, *“Actually there's nothing like death, there are only changes of the body, see our soul is permanent, always there, it takes body, it goes from body to body only, it’s*

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

only like the work we do, we get the name on the body, no there is no death actually no death and all, the soul is always permanent. It's only the transfer of soul which is known as death".

1.2.2 (b). Death is the ultimate reality and fear of death is inevitable.

Adding more to the perceived understanding of death, a few narratives included that death is something that is inevitable and the ultimate truth of life. As per Mr. CK, *"It's a sure thing to any living being, irrespective of their status"* and

Mr. K states that, *"Every individual possesses the fear of death. The only difference lies between the individuals who are not spiritually inclined are caught up around worldly desires such as money, power, family, business, etc, and are scared to leave all of it behind but the individuals who are spiritually inclined are scared of death as it may hinder their devotional service to the almighty. In both the case, Death is inevitable and the ultimate reality of life."*

1.2.3 (c) Death is uncertain.

A few of the responses highlighted the uncertainty of death, one is not aware of what's going to happen next and until we are alive, we should make sure we do good deeds. As said by, Mr. JA, *"Death is like a sweet sleep. When what is going to happen, nobody knows, and when we'll wake, everything's just now. A new world with new people."*

Similarly, Mr. B accounts, *"Death is a word. It's the second part of our life. This body is made of five things and someday these five things are going to be mixed with nature and all of them will meet God and all will be one together, it's death. One shouldn't fear it. Like waters in the sea, we see waves, they come up and go down and get mixed with the water again. The same way our soul and our body is from God after we die It all goes to him."*

1.3. Attitudes towards death after reading religious scriptures.

The knowledge gained from reading religious/spiritual books can influence one's perception of life and death in a prominent way. Many religious scriptures view death as something to be temporary as opposed to eternity which helps inculcate the meaningfulness and purpose of life in an individual.

1.3.1 (a) Death is not the end of life but the transition of the soul.

The most common narrative accounts on the change in perception of death after reading religious/ spiritual books were focused on the belief that death is not the end of life but the transition of the soul from one body to another or towards an afterlife based on one's deeds in life. Mrs. SB accounts, *"The soul never specifically dies, only the body changes the way we change our clothes, till the soul receives salvation and one can only reach salvation when they let go of their desires, dreams, hopes, etc and surrender themselves into Bhakti and Devotion. After reading religious books, my beliefs about life and death, our purpose of being born, our final goal, etc have been cleared to me. I now see that my body is mortal, but my soul is immortal, and death is just the end of this mortal body but not the immortal soul that continues to live eternally"*.

Mr. R narrates on similar grounds, *"Death is not the end. But it is the second part of life. It is a transition that everyone in this world must go through no matter who that individual may be. As it is said in The Bhagavad Gita that the ones who take birth must die one day. It*

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

is nature's cycle, and nothing can interfere with it, not even the devas or the gods. The fear of death is present in everyone as no one wants to leave behind their worldly possessions and death is that moment that rips us away from everything that we have come to acquire in life but as one understands that true surrender requires detachment from the material world, Fear of Death subsides in them. All our religious scriptures and spiritual books guide us towards this Knowledge of letting go to connect with our eternal self."

Another participant Mr. DI also believes the same as he narrates, *"Actually there's nothing like death, there are only changes of the body, see our soul is permanent, always there, it takes body, it goes from body to body only, It's only like the work we do, we get the name on the body, no there is no death actually no death and all, the soul is always permanent. It's only the transfer of soul which is known as death."*

These accounts are influenced by reading the holy scripture of The Bhagawad Gita and The Puranas.

1.3.2 (b) Death is a Spiritual journey towards God.

Another theme that appeared from the narrative accounts revolved around Death as a Spiritual Journey towards God. For many people, Death is not just limited to a physiological process but is viewed as a spiritual transition. Many religious scriptures and spiritual books view Death as a communion with the almighty or a journey towards a transcendental plane.

As Mr. R accounts, *"This body is made of five things and someday these five things are going to be mixed with nature and all of them will meet God and all will be one together, it's death. One shouldn't fear it. Like waters in the sea, we see waves, they come up and go down and get mixed with the water again. The same way our soul and our body are from God after we die. It all goes to him"*.

A similar account by Mr. K, *"Death in its true meaning can be understood by reading the Bhagavad Gita as it accounts that when remembered the God during the moments before dying, they will reach a peaceful experience of death. During the time of death, a person experiences a sense of enlightenment and fulfilment that they keep looking for their entire lives. It is like a transcendental experience where a soul is experiencing liberation from the mortal plane. When one understands the true meaning of death, its fear decreases but since most of us are still swayed by the pleasures of the mortal world that we do not use the right Knowledge when necessary. However, reading can help decrease the fear of death. The Bhagavad Gita accounts for the true meaning of death and reading such religious and spiritual books, especially during these tough times of pandemic where there is death and dying as it can help reduce the stress and anxiety surrounding it. People will not only experience a decrease in death anxiety but also understand their true purpose of life and experience gratitude."*

1.3.3 (c) Acceptance of inevitable nature of death

Some people greet death as their old friend and are not scared of it, they accept it in whatever way it comes, similarly, our two participants also accept death happily and without fear.

Mrs. SB says, *"It feels like today someone is gone, someday we'll also be gone Whatever chance we get to do good we should grab it."*

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

As per Mr. RB, *“Death is like changing clothes and it should be accepted happily. It’s all on our karma and It’s all-natural”*.

1.3.4 (d) Near-Death Experience

A near-death experience has a profound influence on one’s perception of death and how one views the world around them. Many times, the individuals experience an intense feeling of unconditional acceptance and gratitude or a connection with their cultural or religious beliefs. Through the story that one of the participants shared, explained how his belief in God had saved his life that day and the strength received from the religious/spiritual books he read, helped him to be strong and help the ones in need after the incident had occurred.

Mr DI’s account, *“ In 1990 when once I was traveling towards my office in the local train, the train’s wheel came out and it was running without balance when the control was full lost the train had fallen sideways on the railing and it all came inside the train, people who were standing, railing went across them, more than 20 people died on that day, some who survived with the railings across them had their intestines hanging out, luckily I was at a distance from it and was saved. We somehow helped all of them and tried to reach the platform. Although I was helping, I was very scared and was shaking. I believe I was saved only because of my prayers.”* Through this narrative, it can be inferred that the participant experienced an intense feeling of unconditional acceptance and gratitude and a connection with the almighty”.

1.4. Perceived Meaning in Life

Perceived meaning in life is subjective and is rooted in numerous factors such as personal relationships, achievements, or happiness. It is often associated with spirituality, religious beliefs, or contributing to a greater cause. As per participants’ narratives, five sub-themes were found.

1.4.1. (a) Gained Mental peace and strength to deal with negative phases in life.

One of the most common subthemes identified in this category on how reading religious/spiritual books affect other aspects of life is gaining mental peace and strength to deal with any negative phases in life. Religious scriptures provide answers to all our problems and dilemmas that one goes through in life. Most of the participants experienced the peace of mind and strength by reading religious and spiritual books which helped them connect to their inner self and experience personal growth.

Mrs. SB narrates that reading has, *“.... helped me experience mental relaxation and peace. I am a very short-tempered person and easily get triggered when facing a negative situation. However, after reading Gita and other religious scriptures, I have a better grasp of the power of myself and my inner being as reading helps in self-reflection to an individual. I. Think I experienced a reduction in panic and irritation which is a meaningful change in my life. I have changed the way I see the world as earlier I use to give up when meeting a bad phase in life but now that I own the ability to rationalize and tell myself that it is just a phase, and it will pass away. I just must keep calm and patient throughout and come up with solutions to deal with the situation effectively. Another notable change in my life is the recovery of my Asthma problem. Reciting shlokas and prayers from religious books has helped me control my disease and the power to fight it. Therefore, the most important thing that I have learned is that Life is a TEST with both good and bad aspects. Our resilience and*

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

patience will help us immensely in succeeding this Life Exam and religious scriptures, as well as spiritual books, are the only source of guidance we have.”

Another Participant’s Mrs. S narrative account is on the similar grounds of gaining strength in life during a bad phase. She accounts, *“When my husband died 3 years back..., I ...I felt as if my world had fallen apart. I lost my support system and felt very lonely in this world. Everything suddenly became depressing for me as I lost my faith in everything that I once believed in and loved to do in life. The only thing that helped me get through this difficult phase was my habit of reading. I felt that the answer to my grief and sadness lies somewhere in the religious and spiritual books and that motivated me into reading increasingly and gain strength to live my life.”* Both narrative accounts suggest that reading can help increase the peace of mind and gain strength to deal with negative situations in life.

1.4.2. (b) Lessons of Karma

One narrative account by a participant focused on the philosophy of Karma that he explained through an anecdotal example from the great epic of Mahabharata.

Mr. JA narrates, *“Yes, yes obviously. so, the philosophy of Karma Theory, Aatma Paramatma, and Punar Janam. I’ve learned and gained myself and also tried to spread it in many ways to people I meet. the example can be. You get what you do and ask for. If you’ve seen or read Mahabharata, I don't know if you have or not but there’s a story from it which I would like you to hear. So after Arjun wins and married Draupadi when they reached home, Arjun said to his mother ki see we’ve got bhiksha for you, his mother reacted in the way usually she used to, she said, divide it among yourselves, here Arjun was talking of Draupadi and when the mother got to know that Arjun was talking of Draupadi, she said now nothing can be done, I can’t take my word back, at the same moment Lord Krishna arrives and says, it’s not your fault at all, Draupadi wanted this to happens, lord turns towards Draupadi and says, Didn’t you asked for a husband who was an epitome of truth, had the strength of Hanuman, who was an ace archer, extremely beautiful and very patient and didn’t Lord Shiva say one person cannot have all these qualities and did you hear him? You asked for a boon and the lord did grant that in this way, as you see, in this world no one but Yudhistir is the epitome of truth, no one but the only Bheema is as strong as hanuman, no one but Arjun is today’s best archer, no one is more beautiful than Nakul and lastly no one is as patient as Sahadev. So, in the end you get what you do and what you ask for. Keep your choices precise enough, because as said karma plays back well.”*

1.4.3. (c) Guidance towards the right path in life.

Another sub-theme that appeared from this category was that reading helped most of the participants as guidance towards the right path in life. Religious Scriptures function as a guide towards the right path in life and helps us infer the code of conduct and morality to live a peaceful and efficient life. Stories from Mahabharata and Ramayana help us understand the importance of truth and goodness that helps us live our lives for the betterment of ourselves and others around us. Few of the participants’ narrations suggested that reading religious and spiritual books have helped them towards the right path in life.

One of them being Mr. R narrates, *“Yes it has helped me at my workplace and as a social worker also. Especially Krishna’s and Rama’s life have helped me a lot. Gave me basic principles of life. Everything that I have learned on how to live a simple and decent life with high morals and principles has helped me achieve a lot of things in my life that I am very*

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

grateful for. The part/role I play in society is because of reading spiritual books. I suggest that everyone must read their religious scriptures and spiritual books not only for the welfare of their own self but also for helping others guide on the right path in life.”

While Mr. K narrates, *“there had been times in my life where it had been difficult to understand the difference between what is right and what is wrong in life. Sometimes, in life, there are instances where one is confused and does not take the right decision due to poor Knowledge and lack of proper guidance. But whenever I met such situations in my life, the spiritual Knowledge gained from reading religious scriptures and spiritual books has always helped me show the right direction in life and has never failed to disappoint me....”*

1.4.4. (d) Improved interpersonal relationships.

Few narrative accounts by participants suggested improved interpersonal relationships in their personal as well as professional life. The Knowledge gained from reading various religious scriptures such as The Bhagavad Gita, The Holy Bible, The Quran, Guru Granth Sahib, etc supplies strong grounds on how one can improve their interpersonal ties. It is often seen that we reserve our unkindest and thoughtless deeds to those who mean the most to us and because they are close to us, our words hurt them more consciously as well as unconsciously. Therefore, the teaching from these books teaches us to express love and gratitude to the people around us and help each other grow collectively as a whole.

Mrs. SB narrates, *“my ties with my family and workspace have improved immensely as I started practically applying the teachings of the various religious and spiritual books wherever possible in life. Not only did it make me wise but also empathic to other people’s feelings and their struggles. I keep trying to give positive and approachable vibes to people around me as everyone needs someone who understands them and cares about them and by becoming that person for them, it makes me happy and satisfied with my life.”.*

At the same time, another participant Mr. CK accounts, *“...it definitely for the most part generally was useful for my family, everything is very positive now around me and I can feel that my house has more positive vibes than ever despite the chaotic situation all around the world, I and my family try our best to always remain positive and collected in any situation of life. This strength in me comes from reading books every day....”*

1.4.5. (e) Personal growth and improved way of living

The most important aspect of reading religious and spiritual books is one’s personal growth and improved way of living one’s life. A few narratives from the participants shed light on this aspect of reading.

One of the participants’ Mr. DI narrates, *“...After reading spiritual books, mainly the way of living has only changed nothing else. I regularly do this thing, I get up early, do yoga, then read holy books and practice asanas, this all that I have learned. This routine helps me look forward to each day. There were times when I use to read books for 8 hours but now, I have reduced it to 4-5 hours a day due to my ill-health and growing age... But I am grateful to be able to keep my routine despite so many changes happening around me. Only the ones who follow a strict routine as recommended by our shastras and scriptures can achieve success in life. Discipline in life is important.”*

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

While Mr. K accounts, “.... after reading so many books such as the Upanishads, The Bhagavad Gita and our great epics of The Mahabharata and The Ramayana, I have gained so much knowledge which has helped me get through so many obstacles in life. My thoughts have improved, and my view of life has changed as I feel grateful for what I am today and what I have. My devotion to God and the real meaning behind becoming a devotee has been cleared to me and every day I take a step towards connecting to my inner self and understanding the purpose of my life and reading religious and spiritual books has provided me with the right direction towards my personal growth.”

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study highlighted the core aspects as to how reading religious scriptures/s and spiritual books can influence one's perception towards death in a positive manner. Four themes followed by subthemes emerged from the findings of the study on the influence of reading religious and spiritual books on the perception of Death and the purpose of life of seven older adults (above 55 years). The evidence to support these themes came directly from the narrative accounts by the seven participants. The four themes and their subthemes are linked with the conceptual framework, theories, and research that informed this study.

Reading not only supplies access to immense source of knowledge but also serves to develop one's cognitive and personality traits. An individual's interest in practicing reading as a source of knowledge and information can be due to numerous factors such as one's educational accessibility, environmental influences, availability of reading sources, etc. Among them, one's Familial Background plays a significant role in the development of particular interest in an individual and during early developmental ages, Parents are said to be our first teachers and a prominent source of learning for every individual. Two out of Seven Participants' narrative accounts indicated parental guidance as an initial source of reference in reading religious scriptures. This finding resonated with a study conducted on religious beliefs and parenting practices by Jon Howarth. Et.al., (2008), that recognized a significant role of parents in shaping one's religious beliefs and faith. Most of them saw it as a way of life and a responsibility to pass on their faith to their children. Another prominent factor that came into play was one's personal interest as an initial start of one's journey to reading religious scriptures. Watching tv shows of Ramayana and Mahabharata, learning Sanskrit, and accessibility of sources were some factors that played a role in developing interest.

Perceived Meaning of Death is highly based on the provided understanding of the journey of the soul during lifetime and afterlife, the concept of rebirth, resurrection, and one's perception of good and bad deaths. Religious beliefs and one's faith play a key role in uprooting a positive or a negative perception of death in people, especially in older adults. It has been reported that elderly tend to be more religious and have stronger belief in an afterlife than either middle-aged or young adults (Bengtson, V. L., Cuellar, J. B., & Ragan, P. K., 1977). In Anthropological literature, the relationship between death and religion has been stressed for a long time. According to Kellehear, A., (2007), “*To dismiss the creative and literal power of religious interpretations of death is to miss the one most obvious and powerful resource we have to explain how we got what we've got today in society and culture.*”

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

When asked about their perceived understanding of Death, the most common theme that emerged was that Death occurs when the soul leaves the body. The soul never dies and after one's death, it passes on towards the cycle of rebirth or achieve transcendence and get merged with the divine consciousness as highlighted by various religious traditions.

Another prominent themes that emerged from the participants' narratives talked about Death as inevitable and uncertain. The uncertainty surrounding death may lead to either death anxiety or acceptance of one's present moment. The inevitable nature of death, however, induces death anxiety in most people. As evidence from Milkulincer & Florian, (2006) research findings suggest that an individual's understanding of death is linked to numerous anxieties that shape their attitudes towards death that is bound with other personal factors such as the death of a loved one or bodily decomposition. Older Adults are more likely to be beset by personal losses and physical illness. Their inability to carry on with many of the activities and role that used to give meaning and fulfilment, coupled with social isolation and loneliness, may further increase their longing to be delivered from a painful existence. However, as per Paul Wong's Meaning-Management Theory (MMT), by accepting the inevitable nature of death, one can focus on finding one's purpose in life as death is a phenomenon that cannot be controlled, however, one can control other aspects of life by giving meaning to death and living lives to one's fullest potential.

Reading Religious scriptures helps strengthen an individual's religious beliefs that serves as an effective tool in addressing the concept of Death. As per the Terror Management Perspective, religious beliefs try to quell the potentially overwhelming anxiety of Death that is present in every individual by providing solutions such as literal immortality in the form of afterlife or reincarnation beliefs (Atran, 2002). There has been evidence suggesting fear of death is lowest in people who have either strong faith or no faith (McMordie, 1981). It appears that people who are firm believers in either afterlife or nonexistence beyond death have less fear than those who are uncertain. This raises the possibility that firm believers, in contrast to those who are uncertain, may have acquired a sense of symbolic immortality (ability to symbolize death and life continuity) that helps them cope with the fear of death (Neimeyer, R.A., & Moore, M.K. 1994). A near-death experience also holds a significant prominence in influencing perception of death. A positive near-death experience may include detachment and a sense of levitating from one's body, total serenity, a tunnel experience to the presence of light, etc as seen in one of the participant's narratives while a negative experience may include feelings of anguish and despair in an individual. Death is an integral part of life. To be alive is to live with death and dying (Haraldsdottir, E. 2011; Kubler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. 2005; Armstrong, N. 1987). An individual may neither fear death nor welcomes it; one simply accepts it as one of the unchangeable facts and tries to make the best of a finite life.

Another sub-theme highlighting lessons on karma and guidance to be on the right path from religious scripture was expansion of a study conducted by Willard, A. K. et al.,(2020), in their research on the role of karma and the afterlife beliefs, found that karmic believers perceived stronger consequences of both good and bad actions in this life and the next. They also saw a greater emphasis on doing virtuous deeds among karma believers compared to karma non-believers in this analysis than in the analysis of all religious groups. This idea supports the prediction that karma increases the value people see in doing virtuous deeds as a way of improving their afterlife/next life.

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

Presence of meaning in life allows people to experience their lives as comprehensible and significant and feel a sense of purpose or mission in their lives that transcends the mundane concerns of daily life (Steger, M. F. 2012). Earlier research conducted on the relationship between meaning in life and acceptance of death indicated a relationship between the variables is due to religious faith and religious beliefs as an influential factor at play (Duke, E.H. 1977). Religion can be defined as “a search for meaning in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, K. I. 1997). Even though the relationship between religion and meaning is intimate and complex, many people find in religious beliefs a sense of purpose, understanding, and psychological support (Park, CL. 2013). Various religious scriptures talk about practicing mindfulness and praying to transcend all distractions and finding one’s inner peace. A peace born of constant awareness of the Almighty’s presence. The participants’ narratives accounted for how they achieved mental peace and strength in dealing with negative situations in life. As one of the participants gained strength in controlling her asthma problem by reading shlokas and prayers from religious books while the other participant gained strength in dealing with the loss of her spouse by reading religious books as it gave her answers about grief and sadness that she was experiencing during those difficult times in her life. This suggests that reading religious scriptures helps in self-reflection which gives patience and an increase in one’s mental peace and strength to deal with negative situations in life.

The participants’ narrative accounts on improved interpersonal relationships after reading religious scriptures is evident with the previous researches by Coleman, (1990); Pearce and Axinn, (1998), suggesting religion may directly or indirectly foster relationship quality or in this case improving interpersonal relationship as they help promote behaviours such as expression of forgiveness and schemas that include willingness to put aside resentments that have a direct influence on the quality of relationships. There is substantial evidence demonstrating that meaning in life is associated with well-being and positive functioning. People reporting high levels of meaning tend to experience stronger positive affect (King et al., 2006) and less negative affect (Chamberlain and Zika, 1988), depression and anxiety (Debats et al., 1993). This may help with an individual’s personal growth and improved way of life. The findings from the participants’ narrative accounts also provide evidence that meaning in life is a crucial element of religious coping and Personal Growth. People use religious beliefs, feelings, and practices as a part of their meaning system to cope with life’s difficulties and challenges (Pargament et al. 2005; Park, CL. 2005).

Limitations of the study

The study included purposeful sampling for the collection of data and the sample population was restricted to the Older Adults population (above 55 years) from a restricted geographic location (semi-urban and urban areas). Therefore, such Demographic features and the geographic location of the study limit the generalizability of the findings to other groups. English and Hindi were used while collecting the data. This may have affected the ability of the participants, who would have been eloquent and expressive if they had used their respective mother tongues. The study also failed to be inclusive towards including sample from diverse religious traditions. Further on, the study relied on interviews to collect the narrative accounts of the participants, which could be negatively affected by response bias. Despite these limitations, the study supplies valuable information about the perception of death and meaning in life influenced by reading religious scriptures.

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

Implications of the study

The study has significant implications of research and practice. The findings from the study can be used in expanding research into the connections between spirituality, religion, and mental health across diverse age groups and cultural contexts. Further, it can contribute to the discourse on positive aging, emphasizing the importance of recognizing diverse sources of meaning, particularly rooted in religious and spiritual traditions, in the context of aging and end-of-life experiences. At the same time, the study can be used as a framework to facilitate the engagement of mental health practitioners and educators to inculcate the potential therapeutic benefits of reading religious scripture/s as a form of narrative therapy to foster intercultural dialogue and promote a more culturally informed, indigenous approach in therapeutic settings.

REFERENCES

- Altemeyer, B. (2003). Why do religious fundamentalists tend to be prejudiced?. *The international Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(1), 17-28.
- Armstrong, N. (1987). *Desire and domestic fiction: A political history of the novel*. Oxford University Press.
- Atran, S. (2002). The neuropsychology of religion.
- Barun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Bengtson, V. L., Cuellar, J. B., & Ragan, P. K. (1977). Stratum contrasts and similarities in attitudes toward death. *Journal of Gerontology*, 32(1), 76-88.
- Chamberlain K, Zika S. (1988). Religiosity, life meaning, and wellbeing: Some relationships in a sample of women. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 1988;27:411–420. doi: 10.2307/1387379.
- Coleman, K. M. (1990). Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological enactments. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 80, 44-73.
- Connelly, F.M. & Clandinin, D.J. (1990) Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Research*, 19 (5), pp.2-14
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research*. pearson.
- Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Clark Plano, V. L., & Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative research designs: Selection and implementation. *The counseling psychologist*, 35(2), 236-264.
- Debats, D. L., Van der Lubbe, P. M., & Wezeman, F. R. (1993). On the psychometric properties of the Life Regard Index (LRI): A measure of meaningful life: An evaluation in three independent samples based on the Dutch version. *Personality and individual differences*, 14(2), 337-345.
- Duke, E. H. (1977). *Meaning in Life and acceptance of death in terminally ill patients*. Northwestern University.
- Feifel, H. (1974). Religious conviction and fear of death among the healthy and the terminally ill. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 353-360.
- Feifel, H. E. (1977). *New meanings of death*. McGraw-Hill.
- Fortner, B. V., & Neimeyer, R. A. (1999). Death anxiety in older adults: A quantitative review. *Death Studies*, 23(5), 387–411.
- Haraldsdottir, E. (2011). The constraints of the ordinary: 'being with' in the context of end-of-life nursing care. *International journal of palliative nursing*, 17(5), 245-250.
- Howarth, J., Anna, A. B., & Kesler K. D. (2008). Religious beliefs and Parenting styles: A correlational research. *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. New York: Guilford Press.

**The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life
Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry**

- Kastenbaum, R. (1999). Dying and bereavement. In J. C. Cavanaugh & S. K. Whitbourne (Eds.), *Gerontology: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 155-185). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kellehear, A. (2007). A social history of dying. *Death and dying, a reader*, 61-84.
- King, L. A., Hicks, J. A., Krull, J. L., & Del Gaiso, A. K. (2006). Positive affect and the experience of meaning in life. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 90(1), 179.
- Kubler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005). *On grief and grieving: Finding meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. New York: Scribner.
- McMordie, W. R. (1981). Religiosity and fear of death: Strength of belief system. *Psychological reports*, 49(3), 921-922.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*, 1(1), 1-17.
- Mikulincer, M., & Florian, V. (2006). The complex and multifaceted nature of the fear of personal death: The multidimensional model of Victor Florian. In Tomer, A., Wong, P. T. P., & Grafton, E. (Eds.), *Death attitudes: Existential & spiritual issues*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Neimeyer, R. A., & Moore, M. K. (1994). Validity and reliability of the Multidimensional Fear of Death Scale. In R. A. Neimeyer (Ed.), *Death anxiety handbook: Research, instrumentation, and application* (pp. 103-119). Philadelphia, PA: Taylor & Francis.
- Pargament KI, Ano GG, Wachholtz AB, (2005). The religious dimensions of coping: Advances in theory, research, and practice. In: Paloutzian RF, Park CL, editors. *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. New York: Guilford Press. pp. 479–495.
- Pargament, K. I. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Park CL, (2005). Religion as a meaning-making framework in coping with life stress. *Journal of Social Issues*. 61(4):707–729. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00428.x.
- Park, C. L. (2013). The meaning making model: A framework for understanding meaning, spirituality, and stress-related growth in health psychology. *European Health Psychologist*, 15(2), 40-47.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). Two decades of developments in qualitative inquiry: A personal, experiential perspective. *Qualitative social work*, 1(3), 261-283.
- Pearce, L. D., & Axinn, W. G. (1998). The impact of family religious life on the quality of mother-child relations. *American Sociological Review*, 810-828.
- Petty, E., Hayslip, B., Caballero, D. M., & Jenkins, S. R. (2015). Development of a scale to measure death perspectives: Overcoming and participating. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, 71(2), 146–168
- Sheth, Kamal, "Relationship between perceived meaning in life and death anxiety in the elderly" (1990). *Master's Theses*. 23.DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.c63t-euz3>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/23
- Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (1991). A terror management theory of social behavior: The psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural worldviews. In M. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 24, pp. 93- 159). San Diego, CA: Academic Press. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60328-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60328-7)
- Steger, M. F. (2012). Making meaning in life. *Psychological Inquiry*, 23(4), 381-385.
- Stricherz, M., & Cunnington, L. (1981-1982). Death concerns of students, employed persons and retired persons. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 12(4), 373–379. <https://doi.org/10.2190/T7AJ-W6FP-MBA2-C8DX>

The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry

- Surall, V., & Steppacher, I. (2018). How to deal with death: An empirical path analysis of a simplified model of death anxiety. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*.
- Tomer, A., & Eliason, G. (2000). Attitudes about life and death: Toward a comprehensive model of death anxiety. In A. Tomer (Ed.). *Death attitudes and the older adult: Theories, concepts, and applications* (pp. 3-22). Philadelphia, PA: Brunner-Routledge.
- Victor G. Cicirelli, (2002, July 1). Fear of Death in Older Adults: Predictions from Terror Management Theory. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B, Volume 57, Issue 4*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/57.4.P358>
- Willard, A. K., Baimel, A., Turpin, H., Jong, J., & Whitehouse, H. (2020). Rewarding the good and punishing the bad: The role of karma and afterlife beliefs in shaping moral norms. *Evolution and Human Behavior, 41*(5), 385-396.
- Wittkowski, J. (2005). Attitudes toward dying and death in the elderly: Issues of basic research. *Zeitschrift für Gerontopsychologie & -psychiatrie, 18*, 67–79.
- Wong, P. T. (2007). Meaning management theory and death acceptance. In *Existential and spiritual issues in death attitudes* (pp. 91-114). Psychology Press.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Patel, M.N. & Aswani, P. (2024). The Influence of Reading Religious Scripture/s on the Perception of Death and Meaning in Life Among Older Adults: A Narrative Inquiry. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 12*(1), 2532-2548. DIP:18.01.232.20241201, DOI:10.25215/1201.232