

Fear of death among voluntary migrants – qualitative pilot study

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Abstract

The studies presented here were aimed at answering the following questions: do voluntary migrants, when deciding to cross borders illegally, take into account the risk of losing their life, how much they fear it, and whether personality traits, such as sensation seeking or self-esteem and culture worldview, are associated with the fear of death. The research covered 16 voluntary migrants. A psychological interview and observation were used. Attempts were made to explain the fear of death and the related behaviours of migrants on the basis of two theories: sensation seeking theory by M. Zuckerman and terror management theory by Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon. It turned out that the subjects rarely considered the risk of losing health or life on their way to the EU, and the level of fear of death was low, especially in men. The existence of relationships between the level of anxiety and sensation seeking, self-esteem and worldview has been noticed. The level of fear in women can be explained by their age, life experience, way of making decisions and awareness of dangers along the route to the UE. Women thought about passing away more often because they encountered the death of their relatives more often. Men often made decisions on an impulse. The contemplating death, second aspect of the thanatological attitude was absent in them. They had higher self-esteem than women, a more stable culture worldview, and a higher sensation seeking and propensity for risky behavior. These personality traits may have diminished the fear of death.

voluntary and forced migrants; fear, death; attitudes

INTRODUCTION

People expose themselves to numerous dangers by deciding to leave their own country, whether for economic reasons or in search of a safe refuge. Some of them are reported by the world's media, others escape the attention of a wider audience. An example of the latter are the events of 8 October 2021, which took place in the Maba-ni detention centre in Tripoli. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reported the death of six migrants who were shot dead by guards as a result of riots and attempted escape

[1]. Until now, few people in Poland were interested in similar problems, as our country was far from the main migration routes. However, currently there is a migration crisis on the eastern border of the EU, which can be compared to the events in the Mediterranean Sea or the attempts to cross the Spanish-Moroccan border in Ceuta in 2018. Alexander Lukashenka decided to open a new route for the illegal transfer of migrants to rich Western countries, which forced Poland to introduce a state of emergency in 183 localities neighbouring with Belarus. However, this did not discourage migrants who still fall into deception by criminals. Kurds, Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans and even citizens of African countries

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are lured by the vision of easy access to the EU through this route. On the way to their dream destination, migrants expose themselves to numerous dangers, such as contact with ruthless smugglers or the brutal uniformed services of Minsk, diseases such as COVID-19, the risk of drowning in the Bug River or in the marshes of the Polesie region. For having no idea about the political, economic and geographical realities of this part of the world, they are defenceless both against the games of politicians and the interests of people smuggling gangs.

The aforementioned International Organisation for Migration, which analyses data on disappearances and deaths of people leaving their countries on an ongoing basis, reports that every year more than 4,000 people die on migration routes all over the world [2]. These numbers – although underestimated, make it possible to understand the serious risk of losing life associated with migration. Statistics compiled by international organisations and migrants' destination countries also show that young, single men predominate among forced migrants [3, 4, 5]. Such a structure of this population is understandable because they are the ones who are best able to cope with the hardships of a dangerous path to a better world.

When looking for the grounds of this phenomenon based on science, one can use selected concepts. From a psychological point of view, making the decision to leave and not taking into account the risk of losing life on the migration route can be explained by the theory of sensation seeking. Zuckerman [6] showed that men score higher than women in terms of disinhibition, susceptibility to boredom, experience-seeking or thrill and adventure seeking. Other authors [7] draw attention to the significant role of the socio-cultural environment in sensation seeking, who showed that the predictors of sensation seeking were place of residence and gender – boys from the South Bronx obtained higher scores than boys from Puerto Rico.

On the other hand, a concept that may be helpful in explaining how migrants deal with the fear of death or keep it at a low level is the terror management theory by Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon [8]. According to it, the self-preservation instinct of a person confronted with the prospect of inevitable and sometimes sud-

den and violent death triggers existential fear. World-view and self-esteem, rooted in the culture of an individual, help in coping with anxiety. The role of culture seems to be crucial, because it is the basis of the human world-view and self-esteem derives from it indirectly. Therefore, raising self-esteem and persistent belief in the correctness of one's own concept of reality constitute a buffer against the fear of danger. Regardless of where you are born, everyone has a need to see himself / herself as a person who makes morally right choices and his / her actions as logically justified. Self-esteem is a universal need, known in all cultures, although assessed differently by a group or an individual. This is confirmed by research – for example, the level of self-esteem of Chinese people is similar to that of Americans, although the former are less likely to evaluate themselves in an excessively positive way [9]. Other analyses also show that students from the USA, China and Japan have a similar, very positive hidden self-esteem, but the Japanese achieved the highest results. This contradicts the common view that Eastern people are more modest than Westerners. The authors therefore concluded that high implicit self-esteem may be culturally universal [10]. The cited works lead to the conclusion that the theories of fear management and sensation seeking are applicable in intercultural research and comparisons.

Fear of death

The fear of death is a basic element of the self-preservation instinct. This fear and thinking about death constitute two different but related dimensions of the thanatological attitude [19]. This issue is little studied in the migrant population. The studies usually refer to mental health problems resulting from traumatic experiences, such as loss of loved ones and chronic mourning, to religious aspects and burial rituals, and to suicidal behaviour [11, 12, 13, 14]. Others relate to dying and palliative care provided to refugees in the destination countries [15], and dealing with these experiences [16].

While searching the resources of scientific journals dealing with migration issues (Journal of Refugee Studies; Journal of Refugee & Glob-

al Health; Journal of Traumatic Stress; Journal of Trauma Management and Outcomes; European Journal of Psychotraumatology), no article was found describing the issue of fear of death or attitudes towards death in the asylum seeker population. The analyses conducted among refugees from Chechnya [17] may provide some indication. They show that the characteristic attitudes towards death were contempt, indifference, expectation and fear. Most of the subjects indicated contempt and indifference, and the fewest people feared death. Attitudes towards death were different in both sexes. Women most often talked about indifference, men about contempt.

Research objective

Voluntary migrants do not have to leave their country due to the threat of losing their lives, their decision is most often dictated by economic considerations. Forced migrants, on the other hand, have no option – escape is a necessity, and death is equally involved in the risk of staying and leaving the homeland. In this situation, the following questions arise: are voluntary migrants accompanied by a reflection on the possibility of losing their life, is this aspect taken into account by them on their way to a “better world”, or are they accompanied by a fear of death? The research objective was to determine the level of awareness of the risk of losing life during illegal crossing of foreign borders, the fear of death and the relationship of these variables with sensation seeking, self-esteem and the worldview of migrants.

METHOD

The research, conducted in 2018-2019 in Poland, was an element of voluntary psychological help for foreigners. None of the subjects received international protection, which means that they can be considered a voluntary migrant. All of them confirmed that the main reasons for leaving their homeland were economic reasons. The research was conducted in Polish, Russian or English, without the presence of an interpreter. All persons agreed to use the collected material on condition that they were fully anonymous.

The presented study is exploratory in nature – therefore no hypotheses were put forward, and of pilot nature, as they covered only 16 migrants from Tajikistan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Russia, Iraq, Iran, Syria. All the women were in relationships and 7 of the 11 men were single. The mean age of women was 44 and that of men was 31. A qualitative method was used, using structured self-constructed interview, psychological interview and observation. The fear of death, awareness of the risk of loss of health / life on a dangerous road to the EU, the level of general self-esteem, a world-view based on the appreciation of the value of one’s own culture, as well as adventure seeking, boredom tolerance and a tendency to risk, were rated on a 10-point scale. Choices 1 or 2 were very low, 3 and 4 were low, 5 and 6 – average, 7 and 8 – high, and 9 or 10 – very high.

RESULTS

The awareness of the risk of loss of health or life on the road and during illegal border crossing was higher in women than in men. The women achieved high results, but due to the economic situation of their families, they consciously exposed themselves to such danger. On the other hand, men obtained low (2 subjects) or very low (9 subjects) results in this respect. Big differences also appeared in the case of the fear of death. In this case, two women scored average and three scored high. The opposite was true for men – low scores were recorded in six, and very low in five. The younger the man was, the lower his anxiety level was.

The tendency to risky behaviours such as substance abuse, gambling, fast driving, and hasty acquaintances was higher in men – high scores were characteristic of eight, and very high scores of three of the subjects. All women scored low. The same results were obtained in the case of seeking adventure and resistance to boredom – women did not need additional sensations or complained about the monotony of life, they claimed that they did not have the time or strength for it. They spent their free days doing household chores, taking care of the family and shopping. Single men, on the other hand, often filled their free time with, for example, drinking

alcohol, gambling, making casual acquaintances. They emphasised that because they work hard physically, they deserve some entertainment and relaxation in their free time.

Overall self-esteem was average for three women, and high for two, while men had high (5) or very high (6) self-esteem. The world-view strongly embedded in one's own culture and commitment to its values was average in all the surveyed women, while three men obtained a high result, and eight a very high result.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to women, the surveyed men did not take into account the danger of losing their life on the way to Europe before leaving their homeland, they had little awareness of such a risk or rejected it, they were not afraid of death or thought about it (the lack of the second aspect of the thanatological attitude). On the other hand, they showed a greater tendency to sensation seeking, hasty decisions and risky behaviours than women. Men made decisions spontaneously, on an impulse. One of the respondents put it this way: "My relative paid and entered the EU without any problem. Everything worked out, so I decided to try it, too. What is there to be afraid of?" These features were associated with propensity for risky behaviour, high self-esteem and a culturally shaped, stable worldview reflected in their values.

The higher level of fear of death among women can be explained by their age – they were older than the surveyed men. Therefore, women had greater life experience, they were more often affected by the death of relatives or friends, and thus were more aware of the risk of losing their lives. Lower self-esteem and sensation-seeking have led them to make more informed decisions, minimize risk, for example by using tried and trusted smugglers, and traveling to the EU with family or friends.

DISCUSSION

Due to the small study group and different countries of the voluntary migrants' origin, the results obtained should be treated with caution. It

would be important to conduct much broader research using standardised and culturally adapted questionnaires on larger, ethnically homogeneous groups. However, it can be assumed that in voluntary migrants with specific personality traits (high self-esteem, a stable world-view and a strong need to seek sensations), determination in pursuing a goal suppresses the fear of death. Especially when it is skillfully fueled by politicians and / or criminals. When looking for solutions to these problems in further research among migrants, one should enrich the theoretical basis and refer to the logotherapy by V. Frankl [20], the psychoformative theory by R. Lifton [21] and the meaning management theory and death acceptance by P. Wong [22]. These concepts capture an important aspect of human functioning, which is the meaning of life, and shed new light on the research on the fear of death. The sense of meaning is a protective factor against excessive fear of death and, like death, it is a universal experience present in every culture. Finding meaning allows people to organise their value system, make the right decisions and avoid many life mistakes, sometimes impossible to correct.

Summing up, reaching voluntary migrants with reliable information and making them aware of the dangers of losing their health and life is a difficult task. Many of them, will still leave their families, weaken the economies of their countries and die on the way to their dream "paradise", regardless of danger. This is especially true for young men with a low fear of death and high levels of self-esteem, sensation-seeking, a stable worldview rooted in the culture of the individual and prone to risky behaviour. These personality traits may have diminished their fear of death. Young men do not realise how easy it is to lose one's life by treating illegal migration as an adventure, a test of one's strength, intelligence and courage.

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