A cross-cultural perspective on autopsy

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Abstract: The dead body persists into the post modern era as a “troubling object for the subject”, one that Western culture has parried through autopsy - a practice that would seem to be most objectifying and empirical. Death and dying are profound individual events which are strongly influenced by culture and particularly by religion. The underestimation of the cultural factors may have a significant impact on forensic pathologists’ practice who might fail to achieve their professional goals. Therefore it is important for the forensic pathologists to understand and be aware of various intercultural issues which may arise in their current practice. The understanding and awareness of cultural differences have to be built and developed in order to avoid cultural conflicts and clashes. In this paper, the focus is on the intercultural issues linked to autopsy: religious and cultural factors, attitudes, values, tradition etc. Our study underscores the importance of the intercultural approach in forensic pathology and its impact on the families of the dead persons. We aim to highlight the relations, paradoxes, harmonies and antagonisms revealed by the intercultural phenomenon.

Key Words: autopsy, culture, religion, values, intercultural management.

INTRODUCTION

National culture defines the social forces within a community involving its conventions for behaviour. Religion defines how the community members interpret their role in the universe, this teaching being based on the local culture, so different religions rise out of different cultures [1, 2]. Once established, the cross-cultural differences linked with religion have become part of a national culture that is transmitted by the educational institutions and mass media of given societies to the people of that nation. A comparison of the relative contribution of national versus global religions on the cultural values of nations and in-country religious groups reveals that the national influence is much stronger than the influence of global religions. Evidence from the World Values Surveys demonstrates both massive cultural change and the persistence of distinctive traditional values [1,3].

The dead body persists well into the post modern era as a “troubling object for the subject”, one that Western culture has parried through autopsy- a practice that would seem to be most objectifying and empirical. The pathologists involved the performance of autopsies need to understand the different cultural and religious beliefs likely to be encountered surrounding death and how those views influence decisions about autopsy [4, 5].

In this article, we aim to underscore how cultural issues influence the forensic pathologists’ approach to the deceased and their families. We strive to provide a realistic understanding of the conditions of autopsy in an intercultural environment. Our thesis is that the decision-making process of the forensic pathologist is strongly influenced by intercultural issues. This idea is based on the extensive review of literature we conducted. The paper investigates and discusses major studies on intercultural management revealing a wide spectrum of concepts applicable to forensic pathology.

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We emphasise that studying cross-cultural matters concerning autopsy needs a cross disciplinary approach.

**National culture and identity**

Culture is very important in order to create synergies among people. Stereotypical information about how people in another culture behave might be wrong in a particular setting and with a particular individual from that culture [6, 7].

Geert Hofstede, a scholar who did the most fundamental research on cultural differences, identified six dimensions of national culture: Power Distance- the way people deal with hierarchy; Individualism/Collectivism- the way people deal with the relationship between the individual and the group; Masculinity/Femininity- the way people deal with motivation, i.e. a preference for competition or a preference for consensus; Uncertainty Avoidance- the way people deal with unfamiliar risks; Long Term Orientation- short term versus long term orientation; Indulgence versus Restraint- the way people deal with basic and natural desires [8].

Recognizing the role of religion in culture, Charles M. Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars reveal that the tension between Universalism and Particularism spills over into religion, politics, and society. Protestant cultures score higher on the Universalism scale than most Catholic cultures. Universalist cultures seek moral absolutes, typified by the Ten Commandments; for particularist cultures, “it depends”. Indulgence may sometimes be extended, and forgiveness follows confession and repentance. In Japanese culture, multiple points of view coexist. The ideal is to find a harmony among the varied particulars of nature [9]. In the same line of thinking, Shalom Schwartz defines ten value constructs related to religion and culture [10].

Samuel P. Huntington, cited by Huib Wursten, stated that people's religious identities would be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world because religion is the dominant cultural issue in his opinion [8].

Different religious groups can create different cultures and can account for different values, as showed by many prominent publications in the international management literature. Minkov and Hofstede consider that even a large and important cultural difference between two religious groups in a particular nation cannot automatically be viewed as a religious difference. Nations with similar religions tend to cluster together on measures of national culture. They also point out that religions have little effect on individual values and this seems to be true at the societal level as well. Religion can affect culture, but also culture can be moderating the penetration and local adaptation of a religious current [3].

**Culture and religion**

Minkov and Hofstede show that in terms of values, nations have on one hand a homogenizing effect, i.e. the values of nominally different religious groups that live within a single nation tend to be fairly similar and on the other hand a discriminant one, i.e the nominally different religious groups that live within a single nation tend to be distinguishable from the religious groups of other nations [3].

Three of the dimensions identified by Hofstede can provide insights into the significance of religious norms in the context of culture.

Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV-COLL) is a dimension of national culture that is strongly correlated with national wealth and, therefore, highlights cultural differences between economically advanced nations and those with less advanced economies but it does not take into account intra-societal differences. Some of the core differences along the IDV-COLL continuum are freedom-vs.-restriction differences. The strength of religious norms in a society is an especially important indicator as organized religion has always restricted people’s choices not only in matters related to the creation and termination of life but also with respect to social issues, such as what is appropriate to eat and wear, or what jobs pertain to men or women. Individualism, as a societal characteristic, reflects the degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups [11,12].

Individualism and communitarianism follow the Protestant-Catholic religious divide. Protestants had covenants with God and with one another for which they were personally responsible. Roman Catholics have always approached God as a community of the faithful. Therefore, Catholics score higher on group choices and Protestants lower [13].

Uncertainty Avoidance is relevant given that religion is one of the ways in which people avoid anxiety. Religious beliefs and rituals help us to accept the uncertainties and some religions offer the ultimate certainty of a life after death. Most Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christian countries score high on uncertainty avoidance; Muslim countries tend to score in the middle; Protestant countries below average; and Buddhist and Hindu countries medium to very low (except for Japan).

In establishing a relationship between uncertainty avoidance and religious belief, it is important to analyse the Western and Eastern religions which have a different approach of Truth. In the Western religions there is an absolute Truth that excludes all other truths and that human beings can possess. The difference between strong and weak uncertainty avoidance societies adhering to these religions lies in the amount of certainty one needs about having this Truth [14].

Masculinity-femininity dimension has also a strong relationship with religion. In masculine cultures God justifies the tough behaviour toward other people.
Religions, Values and Identity

Individuals who share a national habitat are involved in complex interactions that result in the emergence of a particular national culture. A global religion will not be able to produce a specific global culture of its own as it cannot generate sufficiently complex and frequent interactions among its members across the globe [3].

Cultural comparisons of religious groups on values may be misleading. Religious tags, such as “Catholic,” “Orthodox” or “Muslim” etc., are often used in self-identification. But the boundaries defined by these labels do not coincide with any meaningful and important cultural boundaries [3]. More, the major religions of the world are all internally heterogeneous [14, 15].

As a society shifts from an agrarian to an industrial economy traditional religious beliefs tend to decline. However, the converse is also true. Communist-style industrialization was especially favourable to secularization, but the collapse of Communism has given rise to pervasive insecurity and a return to religious beliefs. Furthermore, the post-industrial phase is not necessarily characterized by a decline in the prevalence of traditional religious. People have always sought answers to such questions as: Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? The need for answers may be especially acute in the face of disaster [1].

Values and cultural change seem to be path dependent: Protestant or Orthodox or Islamic or Confucian traditions gives rise to cultural zones with distinctive value systems that persist after controlling for the effects of economic development. Economic development tends to push societies in a common direction, but rather than converging, they seem to move on parallel trajectories shaped by their cultural heritages. Religious beliefs persist, and spiritual concerns are becoming more widespread in advanced industrial societies. Economic development tends to bring pervasive cultural changes, but the fact that a society was historically shaped by a particular religion leaves a cultural heritage with enduring effects that influence subsequent development [1].

Religions and autopsy

Autopsy has been an essential tool for the evolution of medical sciences, allowing for the description, characterization and understanding of the functioning of the human body and of the effects of the diseases on various organs. Examination of human corpses has been considered a prerequisite for medical education and professional development. More, studies show that autopsy is also an indispensable mean to assessing the quality of care, highlighting those diseases that pose diagnostic challenges [16, 17].

The purpose and practice of autopsy has changed little from early Greek and Roman civilization. However, the social history created a complex terrain of social relations in modern Western culture in which the body is passive to enculturation, the autopsy being a relevant example. The fact that the body dies and eventually disappears is the best example of insubordination to culture.

Many people, from all over the world, consider that the physical integrity and timely burial of deceased persons is both a significant facet of their cultural identity and something that should be legally enforceable.

The role of religion is important for most victims/survivors because their answers to religious questions form their view of life, death and meaning. Many people do not know their position on religion until they suffer from a loss [5, 18].

Cultural or religious beliefs are often cited as a reason for opposition to autopsy. However, most religions and cultures find autopsy acceptable either based on the individual’s beliefs or special circumstances. Some religions give individuals more power over life than others while some religions give certain people power over life whereas some give spirits more power over death than the living. Some religions give free will or fatalism and all have defined ways of dealing with death. Certain religions (eg, Islam and Judaism) consider that bodily intrusion violates beliefs about the sanctity of keeping the human body complete, although religious doctrine does not in of itself strictly forbid autopsies. Instead, it is a matter of interpretation of the doctrines which have changed over time [5, 18].

Some scholars argue that Christians strongly respect the dead body and undergo several rituals surrounding death. Although there are not specific limitations during autopsies of Christians, the body should always be handled with respect. Catholics accept the value of an autopsy and often see it as an act of charity in order to help others. Although there are several rituals surrounding death, an autopsy would not interfere as long as the body was treated with respect. Today, Catholics accept the value of autopsy and generally agree with its use for medical education, organ transplantation, and determination of diagnoses [5, 19].

The main issues in Islam concerning autopsy are related to various aspects, such as: autopsy delay burials, cause harm to the body, and remove body parts.
On the other hand it is considered that autopsies can lead to scientific advances, important medical diagnoses and enhance education. The Koran does not directly approach the autopsies but many Islamic doctrines do so. Muslims have rigid rituals after death and do not encourage autopsies as the procedure could harm the body and delay burial, which should happen as soon as possible. To carry out the autopsy, the body must be transported away from the site of death and this is not favoured by the Muslim traditions. Autopsies are allowed in certain Muslim countries for specific reasons such as medical education and diagnosis of various pathological conditions. Family members may have to consent to the deceases wishes and autopsies may be limited to only the relevant body cavities [5, 19].

In Judaism customs are designed to treat the body with respect, therefore, autopsies and embalming are generally prohibited. Viewing the corpse is also considered disrespectful. One of the most important commandments in the Judaic law is Pikuach nefesh (“saving of human life”) and, therefore, Jews, are obligated to do anything necessary to save another life, even if it means disregarding other Jewish laws, with some exceptions (e.g., murder, suicide). The emotional needs of the survivors are very important but there are differences among Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jewish practices. Since Jews believe that the body belongs to God there is varied interpretation to whether a person has the right to decide what is done to their body following death. Permitting autopsies is not a clear-cut issue. However, autopsy may be permitted if the donation can save another’s life and if the body is treated with respect. Autopsy should be performed as soon as possible to allow for a rapid burial and the family may request that a rabbi witness it [5, 18, 19].

For Hindus, the purpose of life is to exit the cycle and enter a state of extinction of passion. Hindus believe in a cycle of re-birth and re-death where death is not viewed as the end of life. Family members must provide a smooth journey to death, because death is not viewed as a finite event. The soul leaves the body during death but is still aware. Therefore, Hindus believe that an autopsy may be disturbing to the soul [5, 19].

Buddhists believe that the body is a shell for the spirit. A main Buddhist teaching point is that one should not be overly attached to his/her body; inevitably, it will deteriorate with age and then cease to function. The spirit remains following death and is reborn. Where it is reborn is dependent on the person’s karma, which is a result of his/her past actions. There is great cultural diversity in Buddhism but in general they see autopsies as a form of compassion that helps preserve life. The body should not be disturbed for three days or until a religious leader has determined that the soul has left the body. At this time, most Buddhists will be cremated. Buddhists believe that the body should be treated with great respect and it is not proper to desecrate the body. However, autopsy is accepted for honourable intents such as bringing justice to a criminal and for medical education [5, 19].

Burton remarks that, in modern times, followers of Confucianism do not prohibit autopsy. In spite of this, the Chinese suffer from a serious shortage of bodies to dissect for medical education. In response, several agencies have enacted public outreach initiatives in order to teach the benefits of body donation. As a result, a large study performed in this country showed that approximately one third of the population is willing to donate their bodies to medicine [5].

Further, Burton observes that although certain cultures and religions do not advocate for autopsies, most do not have outright objections to autopsy. In general, most views about autopsy parallel attitudes about organ and tissue donation, which can vary not only by religions, but within religious sects and beliefs within different countries. Religious objections to autopsy pose a particular dilemma for the forensic pathologists and coroners in that such objection can be in conflict with laws to investigate circumstances for certain causes of death. In most instances, strong consideration is given when there are objections to an autopsy and in only those cases with a clear and convincing reason are autopsies done. As a result of such conflict, some states have enacted legislation that restricts the power of the state to demand an autopsy, often requiring the courts to intervene in the decision to proceed [5].

Some studies assert that often religious and cultural beliefs are a major reason why a family may not consent to an autopsy or why a physician may not ask based on the assumption of the family’s beliefs. There are many different beliefs and traditions that surround death but most religions and cultures find autopsies acceptable based on the individual’s belief or special circumstances. It is important to always ask a family what their beliefs are about an autopsy and inquire as to whether it is something they would want to consider. Educating the families about such options allow the family to make the best decision possible for themselves [19].

Cultural values and autopsy

Death and dying are profound individual events which are strongly influenced by culture and particularly by religion. The individual experience of death and dying is influenced by the customs, rituals, and beliefs of the group to which the person belongs and these particularities have become more relevant in the contemporary multicultural environment. Therefore, healthcare professionals have to be sensitive to the cultural peculiarities of their beneficiaries, in order to avoid inter-cultural conflicts and infringement of human dignity [20-22].

Regional, ethnic, and religious cultures account for differences within countries; ethnic and religious groups often transcend political country borders. Such
groups form minorities at the crossroads between the dominant culture of the nation and their own traditional group culture. Some assimilate into the mainstream, although this process may take a generation or more; others continue to stick to their own ways [14].

Certain rituals and practices surrounding death are common to all cultures and religions and influence whether or not an autopsy is done. The site of autopsy becomes a place where the reciprocity of the live and the dead is the most acute, where the subject and object both occupy the thin line between pathologic and cadaveric time [4, 5].

In a recent study, Arnold and Bonython observe that many people consider that the physical integrity and timely burial of deceased adults and minors is both a significant to their cultural identity and something that should be legally enforceable. For example, freedom from arbitrary and disproportionate interference is a value underlying Australian law [23].

The same authors remark that there is a public interest in knowing why and how people died. That knowledge in some instances can only be gained through the autopsy, although it might involve delays in burial and the removal of organs. The Australian statute law provides that the coroner can order an autopsy, irrespective of the religious or other beliefs of the dead person or of the dead person's survivors. Some statutes provide for interested parties to object to autopsy. That objection, when successful, usually embodies cultural exceptionalism, with recognition that in some circumstances the values of particular communities should override a practice norm. Acceptance of the need for sensitivity in dealing with families does not mean distress and provides sufficient grounds for overriding a coronial decision to conduct an autopsy. In considering objections from family members and community representatives about autopsy and delays in burial, practitioners and policymakers should focus on outcomes and proportionality [23].

Different traditions, beliefs, and practices surrounding death are common to all cultures and religions and have resulted in conflicts regarding anatomic dissections and autopsies. More, such views have been said to have hampered scientific and medical advance in past years. People from more westernized or diverse cultural environments tend to have less cohesive connections with traditions, religion, and beliefs, and show a greater acceptance of autopsies. On the other hand, non-westernized, less diverse cultural groups have more unified traditions, beliefs, and practices surrounding death, and they more frequently have religious objections related to autopsies [5].

Consequently, invasive examination of a body is acceptable in instances where there is reasonable belief that the death is attributable to a criminal act or that the autopsy will provide society with valuable data regarding illness, irrespective of the ethnic and religious affinity and the distress experienced by families through the death of a loved one [23].

**CONCLUSION**

A certain culture will emerge among people who share a particular geographic, and socio-economic habitat and must find particular responses to its specific challenges.

National culture operates as a gravitational force that most frequently keeps a nation's territories together in terms of cultural values.

There is a wide range of attitudes towards autopsy between various religions and cultures. Although some religions may not advocate for autopsies, exceptions may be made in certain circumstances. Thereby, it is important to talk with the families of the dead persons about their views, values, and beliefs and allow them to make the decision on whether or not to consent to autopsy.

When discussing the cultural beliefs and practices of a distinct ethnic minority group, regarding anatomic dissections and post-mortem examinations, it is always useful to avoid generalizations. Assuming that all individual members of a certain culture think, believe and behave alike can result in stereotyping and leading to a careless approach.

On the whole, most views about autopsy parallel attitudes about organ donation, which can vary not only by religions, but within religious sects and beliefs/values within different countries. To summarize, for pathologists involved the performance of autopsies, it is useful to have a clear understanding of the different cultural and religious beliefs likely to be encountered surrounding death and how those views influence decisions about autopsy.

Going forward, we call for more inquiry into the regional, ethnic, and religious cultures in forensic research and practice, and its impact on the families of the dead persons. What are the harmonies and antagonisms revealed by the intercultural phenomenon? Beyond affecting the patients and their families, what further implications does this complex context offer to forensic pathology? If the law is prevalent in today's contemporary world, have traditions and values become obsolete? If this is the case, is it time to redraw the boundaries in the academic study of autopsy and organ donation? Is there space for the underestimation of the cultural factors in the global contemporary society, and if yes, what form does it take?

Despite maintaining momentum, we acknowledge that our findings remain explorative and tentative. Further work is required to expand on the present findings across other contexts. We look forward to an inspired and active research agenda going forward.

**Conflict of interest.** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.
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