

Meaning Making in the face of a Negative Life Event: Responses in a Muslim Culture to the Eastern Anatolia Earthquake (2020)

Olumsuz Bir Yaşam Olayı Karşısında Anlam Oluşturma: Müslüman Bir Kültürde Doğu Anadolu Depremine (2020) Yönelik Yaklaşımlar

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Abstract

Aim: The problem of theodicy -a philosophical and theological issue concerning the coexistence of divine goodness and human suffering- also presents psychological significance. Such questions involve ambiguity and cognitive tension, prompting individuals to search for meaning. The present study aimed to investigate how individuals in a Muslim cultural context made sense of a major negative life event by examining their emotional responses toward God following the Eastern Anatolia earthquake in Turkey (January 2020).

Method: A total of 306 Muslim adults (women and men) participated in the study. Participants completed measures assessing two dimensions of religious emotional experience: feeling comforted by God (e.g., feeling protected, loved, supported, nurtured) and anger at God (e.g., feelings of abandonment, betrayal, or unkind treatment). Quantitative analyses compared levels of comfort and anger to explore patterns of religious meaning making.

Results: Findings revealed substantial differences between feelings of comfort and anger toward God. Consistent with previous international studies, negative perceptions of God were rare among participants. Most respondents reported high levels of perceived divine comfort and protection, indicating a generally positive relationship with God even in the aftermath of disaster.

Conclusion: The results align with psychological theories of meaning making and support cross-cultural findings that humans seek to maintain coherent global meaning systems in the face of suffering and ambiguity. The study contributes to understanding how individuals in Muslim contexts construct meaning, sustain faith, and reconcile adverse life events within a religious worldview.

Originality: What makes this study original is its examination of the problem of theodicy and meaning making processes within a Muslim cultural context. In the existing literature, these topics have predominantly been investigated among Western Christian samples, leaving emotional responses to God and their reflections in Islamic settings largely unexplored. This study addresses that gap by revealing how Muslim individuals who experienced a traumatic event such as the Eastern Anatolia earthquake constructed meaning in their relationship with God. The findings demonstrate how religious meaning making is shaped by culture and offer a cross-cultural perspective on the psychological dimension of the problem of theodicy.

Key Words: Attributions to God, earthquake reactions, meaning making, negative life event, theodicy.

Öz

Amaç: Tanrı'nın iyiliği ile dünyadaki acı ve kötülüğün bir arada var oluşuna dair felsefi ve teolojik bir tartışmayı içeren teodise problemi, psikoloji açısından da önemli bir konudur. Teodise kapsamında yer alan sorular, bireyin bilişsel sisteminde belirsizliklere ve gerilimlere neden olup anlam arayışını tetikler. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Müslüman bir kültürel bağlamda bireylerin olumsuz bir yaşam olayıyla (Doğu Anadolu depremi, Ocak 2020) karşılaştıktan sonra Tanrı'ya yönelik duygularını nasıl anlamlandırdıklarını incelemektir.

Yöntem: Araştırmaya toplam 306 Müslüman yetişkin (kadın ve erkek) katılmıştır. Katılımcılara, dini duygusal deneyimin iki boyutunu ölçen ölçekler uygulanmıştır: Tanrı tarafından teselli edilme (korunmuş, sevilmiş, desteklenmiş, şefkat görmüş hissetme) ve Tanrı'ya öfke duyma (terk edilmişlik, hayal kırıklığı, haksız muamele algısı). Nicel analizlerle bu iki duygu boyutu karşılaştırılarak dini anlam oluşturma örüntüleri incelenmiştir.

Bulgular: Katılımcıların Tanrı'ya yönelik teselli ve öfke duyguları arasında belirgin farklar bulunmuştur. Önceki uluslararası araştırmalarla tutarlı biçimde, Tanrı'ya yönelik olumsuz algılar oldukça nadir görülmüştür. Katılımcıların büyük çoğunluğu, felaket sonrası dönemde Tanrı'nın koruyucu ve destekleyici yönünü güçlü biçimde hissettiklerini bildirmiştir.

Sonuç: Bulgular, anlam oluşturma (meaning making) konusundaki psikolojik kuramlarla uyumludur ve insanların acı ve belirsizlik karşısında küresel anlam sistemlerini sürdürme eğiliminde olduklarını göstermektedir. Çalışma, Müslüman bir kültürel bağlamda bireylerin olumsuz yaşam olaylarını dini inançlarıyla nasıl uzlaştırdıklarını ve bu süreçte inançlarını nasıl koruduklarını ortaya koymaktadır.

Özgünlük: Bu çalışmayı özgün kılan nokta onun teodise problemi ve anlam oluşturma süreçlerini Müslüman kültürel bağlamda ele almasıdır. Alanyazında bu konular genellikle Batı'daki Hristiyan örneklerle üzerinde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Dolayısıyla Tanrı'ya yönelik duygusal tepkilerin ve bu konudaki yansımaların incelenmesi büyük ölçüde göz ardı edilmiştir. Bu çalışma, Doğu Anadolu depremi gibi travmatik bir olayı deneyimleyen Müslüman bireylerin Tanrı ile ilişkilerindeki anlam oluşturma süreçlerini ortaya koyarak bu boşluğu doldurmaktadır. Bulgular, dinî anlam üretiminin kültürel olarak nasıl şekillendiğini göstermekte ve teodise probleminin psikolojik boyutuna kültürlerarası bir bakış açısı kazandırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tanrı'ya atıflar, deprem tepkileri, anlam oluşturma, olumsuz yaşam olayı, teodise.

Introduction

People in a predominantly Islamic culture such as Turkey generally live in comfort believing that God's/Allah's goodness and control are protecting them when their lives go smoothly with no harm, disruption, or crisis. But they may feel stress and discomfort when a crisis occurs (e.g., cancer, injury, disability, death, being a victim of war, Covid-19, or a major earthquake), not only because it may be a harmful negative event but also because they trust God/Allah to protect them. Thus, people must interpret what such events mean. The present study reports research on how victims of the earthquake in Eastern Anatolia responded to questions that asked about their attitudes toward Allah following the earthquake - a negative life event that may have prompted them to make meaning out of it relative to their religious beliefs.

It is well known that people of various faiths can attribute opposite meanings to the same event. For example, a world-known news magazine recently reported that in response to the Covid-19 virus, some religious leaders might suggest that God intervenes to protect people from infection, while others may sound as if God is punishing unbelievers (Economist, 2020). But regardless of the ontological truth or falsity of such claims, in terms of psychological processes, they are attributions to the unseen because the human mind must make sense out of the ambiguity. This is the process of meaning making (Park, 2005, pp. 298-299; Paloutzian and Park, 2014, pp. 55-56). In particular, when life confronts one with a discrepancy such that a situation or circumstance seems inconsistent with the person's over-arching global meaning system, the person's cognitive process work to resolve the discrepancy and thereby reduce the tension and return the global meaning system to a state of harmony. Psychological science has learned a lot to help us understand the human mental and emotional meaning making processes at work in these situations (Park, 2013, pp. 61-62).

What cognitive, social, or emotional processes mediate responses to such confrontations between real life events and beliefs? Psychological research provides large volumes of data that document the various ways that people respond to such puzzles and make meaning relevant to Allah in context of positive and negative life events. For example, Sagir (2014, p.36; 2016, pp. 25-26, 2018, p. 114) found that when Syrian refugees in Turkey from the war in Syria (2011-2020), who were strong Muslim believers (assessed by a mean score of 6 on a 7-point scale in response to the question, "How important is your religion in your life?") answered questions that assessed their Islamic religious coping (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney and Stein, 2008, pp. 291-315), they overwhelmingly strongly agreed (average approximately 75%) with positive religious coping statements such as, "When I face a problem in life, I consider that a test from Allah to deepen my belief." They also overwhelmingly disagreed (average approximately 88%) with statements suggesting that they are struggling with their faith such as, "I find some aspects of Islam unfair." Paloutzian and Sagir (2019, pp. 193) asked 100 Syrian refugees to rate on a 1-6 Likert scale the degree to which the war was due to "Man" (1) or "Allah" (6). A total of 78 said Man was responsible for the war, whereas only 22 said Allah had some degree of responsibility. It seems clear that deeply held beliefs about the nature and motives of Allah, which contain specific content and positive affect (Seitz, Paloutzian and Angel, 2017, pp. 3-10, 2018, pp. 2-4), guide the attribution

made about an unseen agent (God acting) in ambiguous situations in ways consistent with learned teachings. This may be so especially if a claim to the contrary is based on information that is likewise unseen and ambiguous.

Intellectuals in all fields of study would agree that the theodicy problem is fundamental, as it goes to the very core of what humans face in the process of living - suffering and tragedy and asking the question, "Why?". This being so, one might have thought psychologists of religion would always have studied it. But a generation ago, theodicy was called "a neglected aspect of the psychology of religion" (Furnham and Brown, 1992, pp. 37-38). Fortunately, things changed. Hale-Smith, Park, and Edmondson (2012) developed the Views of Suffering Scale to measure what people believe about suffering. Wilt, Exline, Grubbs, Park, and Pargament (2016, pp. 358-360) examined views of God's role in suffering and divine struggle as related to mental health variables - a valuable line of research that extends from Pargament et al.'s (2000; 2005; 2013, pp. 482-486) research on positive and negative religious coping. These scholars have been concerned with how individuals appropriate God in times of need, as positive or negative, as helpful or vengeful, as loving or punishing in the circumstance that happens to be. The findings show that people cope by various, sometimes opposite, means, although positive religious coping is more psychologically beneficial.

Research on cognitive processes has also been conducted on psychological puzzles related to theodicy issues. Most such processing is learned in connection with how believing teachings is acquired through developmental stages within one's culture (Angel, Oviedo, Paloutzian, Runehov and Seitz, 2017, pp. 8-10; Levenson, Aldwin and Igarashi, 2013; Richert and Granqvist, 2013). They are neurologically fluid but can feel relatively fixed at a phenomenological level (Angel, 2017; Seitz, Paloutzian and Angel, 2017, Seitz, Paloutzian and Angel 2018). In a close-to-life study, strength, comfort, and purpose in spirituality were examined in various homicide survivors (Johnson and Armour, 2016, pp. 277). In some cases, the survivor found comfort and strength after someone tried to kill them; but this depended upon continuing the believing process even though, technically, God allowed it to happen. Those who began to doubt or had a mixed relation with God experienced the most struggles, especially if they were also trying to keep their faith. Another group, who tended to go their own way, seemed to struggle less; they were generally not as interested in and did not care to depend on their religion or God. However, those who continued believing under these circumstances felt strength and comfort from God.

Various ways of "dealing" with the theodicy issue have been given different names, and these names may seem suggestive of the default processes that guide how we interpret information related to our beliefs, self-definition, and global meaning system. One approach has been termed "Benevolent Theodicies" that protect against Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following a natural disaster (McElroy-Heltzel, Davis, Davis, Aten, Van Tongeren, Hook and Hwang, 2018, p. 6). Similarly, the term "Therapeutic Theodicy" has been used to describe suffering and struggle when one shifts from a God's-eye view (Griffioen, 2018, pp. 1-7). Notice that these two "names" for theodicy are positive, suggesting that people's default need is for a god that helps. A somewhat overlapping notion is that of "crisis" religion during which one may feel a heightened need of God (Hvidt, Hvidtjorn, Christensen, Nielsen and Sondergaard, 2017, pp. 294-296), in contrast to people's ordinary religiousness in everyday life, suggesting that one's source or anchor in a religion (i.e., God/Allah) is what to turn to when one is pressed beyond the ability to cope.

Given the above research findings and the principles of meaning making summarized above, especially the tendency of our cognitive system to appraise incoming information against one's global meaning system and adjust either or both of them to achieve balance (Park, 2005, pp. 296-298), we hypothesize that our data from earthquake victims will (1) not be normally distributed but instead show a pattern consistent with the religious global meaning system of the research participants and (2) may show unexpected patterns of responses to any specific items with cross-cultural differences in meaning.

Although the present study is grounded in meaning-making theory, it is essential to consider the Islamic understanding of theodicy within a predominantly Muslim cultural context. In Islam, adverse life events are frequently interpreted as a form of *imtihan* (divine testing), allowing individuals to construe suffering as a trial that deepens faith (Qur'an 2, pp. 155-157; 29, pp. 2-3). The belief in *qadar* (divine decree) frames events as occurring within God's will, which may reduce cognitive dissonance and reorganize perceptions of control. *Sabr* (patience) denotes steadfast endurance in the face of hardship, whereas *tawakkul* (trust in God) refers to exerting effort while ultimately entrusting the outcome to Allah; both can function as regulatory mechanisms within religious coping processes (Macic and Özgüvenç, 2025, pp. 21). Within this conceptual framework, a traumatic event such as an earthquake may be perceived not merely as a crisis but as an experience that can be integrated into one's religious meaning system. By situating meaning-making processes within these Islamic theodical concepts, the present study highlights its cultural specificity and underscores its distinctive contribution to the literature.

Methods

Participants

There were two categories of participants: 306 (207 female, 99 male) who completed a questionnaire, and 4 (2 female, 2 male) who gave in-depth interviews. Their age range was 18-42 years ($M = 22.3$, $SD = 3.5$). All were students at Firat University, Elazig, Turkey, and were earthquake victims. None had lost a loved one in the earthquake, but they felt the possibility of death closely and were fearful of it. Their participation in the study was voluntary.

Instruments and Procedures

The Attitudes toward God Scale-9 (Wood, Worthington, Exline, Yali, Aten and McMinn, 2010) was translated from English to Turkish by the senior author. This measure has two subscales, one to assess feelings of anger toward God and one to assess feelings of being comforted by God. Either one or both subscales can be used. Wood et al. (2010) reported in the validation study that its coefficient alpha for either the comfort or anger subscales was not available for the Muslim sample. However, for 4 other religious samples (Catholic and Protestant denominations) the coefficient alpha was above .9 in all cases for the comfort subscale, and was above .8 in all cases for the anger subscale. For the present Muslim sample, it was .72 for the comfort subscale, and .43 for the anger subscale.

The questionnaire contains 9 items, 5 on the comfort subscale and 4 on the anger subscale. Each item was answered on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("Not at all") to 10 ("Extremely"). No word-cues were placed on top of the other numerals. The instructions stated, "To what extent do you currently _____ in relation to Allah in context of the earthquake?" The participants were asked to mark the numeral that most closely reflected their attitude about Allah, as reflected in each question, by selecting the numeral that corresponded to each of the following phrases that could fill in the blank in the instructions. They were presented in the following order: (1) trust God to protect and care for you, (2) feel angry at God, (3), feel that God has let you down, (4) view God as unkind, (5) view God as all-powerful and all-knowing, (6) feel loved by God, (7) feel supported by God, (8) feel nurtured or cared for by God, (9) feel abandoned by God. The "comforted by God" items were numbers 1, 5, 6, 7, and 8; the "anger toward God" items were numbers 2, 3, 4 and 9. Each subscale was scored by averaging across items. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Firat University Rectorate, with decision dated 10 August 2020 and numbered 405205.

The data were collected following the earthquake in Eastern Anatolia, Turkey, that occurred at 20.55 local time, 24 January 2020. The magnitude of the earthquake was 6.7 MW. The earthquake's epicenter was close to the town of Sivrice in Elazig Province and felt in the neighboring provinces of Malatya, Diyarbakir, and Adiyaman. A total of 41 people were killed and more than 1,600 were injured.

All data were collected on 3 March 2020 at Firat University. For the questionnaire study, the participants were recruited by invitation in a psychology class, and told that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. They were told that the research would ask for their reaction to the earthquake and would take about 10-15 minutes. All participants completed the questionnaire at the same time, and were in individual seats in one large classroom. The in-depth interviews were conducted individually in the office of the first author, and lasted approximately one-half hour. They centered around the questions, "Why do you think you experienced this earthquake?," "What did you think about Allah?," and "What did you do during the earthquake?." All interviews were recorded by permission and assurance of confidentiality. They were then transcribed and analyzed. The in-depth interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to understand participants' experiences of the earthquake. Codes were generated inductively from the data and grouped into main and sub-themes based on similarities. Transcripts were repeatedly reviewed, and themes refined through team discussions. Coding and theme development were independently checked by multiple researchers, with discrepancies resolved through consensus. Detailed records of coding decisions were maintained, and findings were supported with direct participant quotes, enhancing the credibility and transparency of the qualitative analysis.

Results and Discussion

Overall Findings

The pattern of results was consistent with those of previous literature and the hypothesis of the present study of Muslim earthquake victims in rural Eastern Turkey. On the 0-11 rating scales, the mean for the comfort items was 8.87 ($SD = 1.25$), indicating high agreement with items asking about Allah's protection and care, power and knowledge, love, support, and nurture. In contrast, the mean for the ratings on the anger items was 2.66 ($SD = 1.71$) indicating strong disagreement with the items asking about abandonment, anger, being let down by Allah, or viewing Allah as unkind. Thus, few participants said they felt angry with Allah because of the earthquake. These trends were not affected by age

or gender, as all such tests were non-significant. Individual scores ranged from 0-10 on all items. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the aggregate comfort and aggregate anger scores was highly negatively significant ($r = -.45$, $p < .001$), which confirms the significance of the above differences between the two means ($p < .001$) and clearly shows that, although the earthquake was highly negative, the participants overwhelmingly reported feeling comforted by Allah, instead of angry. These findings add to the pool of international research that documents similar responses of individuals to crises that embody issues of theodicy.

The qualitative results parallel the above summary of quantitative data. They show dominant themes indicating that the earthquake was an unforgettable time, feeling forgiven by Allah for sins, interpreting the earthquake as a warning and, therefore, that all should take refuge in Allah. These are elaborated below.

Frequency Analysis: Comforted by or Angry at Allah?

Table 1: Frequency distribution, mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and statistical analysis of ratings* in response to the question, “To what extent do you currently _____ in relation to Allah in context of the earthquake?”

Rating													
Attitude toward Allah:	Not at all 0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Extremely 10	M**	SD
Item # -- Comforted													
1. Protected, cared for by	5	0	1	1	2	15	9	17	31	28	197	8.92 _b	1.94
5. All powerful, knowing	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	298	9.81 _b	1.30
6. Loved by	4	1	1	7	7	27	14	34	54	37	120	8.08 _b	2.19
7. Supported by	1	0	1	4	1	17	14	25	41	51	151	8.68 _b	1.77
8. Nurtured by	2	3	0	1	3	8	13	20	41	49	166	8.83 _b	1.80
Item # -- Anger													
9. Abandoned by	161	31	26	19	4	25	3	8	11	5	13	2.01 _c	2.95
2. Angry at	209	34	19	18	4	6	2	5	6	0	3	.97 _c	1.98
3. Let down by	70	14	18	13	18	58	14	26	24	12	39	4.59 _d	3.46
4. View as unkind	199	25	10	14	8	25	4	6	4	1	10	1.47 _c	.59

* The frequencies in each row in the table were subject to an 11-cell 1-way chi-square test of equivalence. Significant non-equivalence ($p < .001$) was found in all cases.

** Means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .01$ by analysis of variance and Scheffe tests.

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution, means, and standard deviations of responses to all questionnaire items. The 5 comfort items (1, 5, 6, 7, 8) and the 4 anger items (9, 2, 3, 4) are grouped into two separate categories for ease of visual inspection and interpretation. Looking across the rows for comfort items reveals a strikingly parallel set of ratings. For all five items, out of a total $N = 306$, only from 1-5 people answered “not at all” (i.e., 0) to one or more of the items indicating that Allah provided comfort in response to the earthquake. In contrast, between 120 and 298 people gave the highest rating of 10 (“extremely”) to between 1 and 5 of the comfort items. Thus, the high mean reported above for the comfort items was not due to an outlier - an unusually high score on one item that skewed the distribution as an artifact, but due to the uniformity of the distributions for all five items. The dominant trend of the ratings indicates that the participants generally responded to the questions in accord with their global meaning systems as learned and

formed through their developmental years, and there was little in the strength or character of the earthquake itself sufficient to override them.

An examination of the bottom part of Table 1 shows strikingly uniformity of responses to the anger items, but in the opposite direction. Only a small number of participants rated themselves as “extremely” (10) angry at, abandoned by, or let down by Allah, or viewed Allah as unkind due to the earthquake. In contrast, the very dominant majority of the ratings said “not at all” to these items. The generality in the pattern of responses reflects the norm for what would be expected for Muslims in a predominantly Islamic culture.

The one exception to this last point is Item #3, to which only 70 people said “not at all” (0), and 39 said “extremely” (10) to being let down by Allah. The rest of the responses were roughly balanced out across the rating options, with approximately 20% (58) giving a rating of 5 (the exact neutral point). This pattern of ratings for Item 3 suggests that an issue of cultural uniqueness may have been operating to guide the responses to that item, the effect of which would be to lower the alpha reliability coefficient for the anger subscale, compared to that for the comfort subscale, for Muslims. The Attitudes Towards God Scale was developed in English and used in a predominantly Christianized religious culture. It was then translated into Turkish and used in a predominantly Islamic religious culture. This raises the possibility that the meaning of the phrase “let down by” God/Allah may not connote the same thing in the two cultures. The phrase “let down by” God in the English scale could certainly be part of what is connoted by the more general phrase “anger at God.” But the Turkish Islamic connotation of that phrase is far less a connotation of anger and more a reflection of sadness or disappointment not necessarily tinged with angry feelings. Thus, a large proportion of the participants could validly rate themselves as not angry at Allah while at the same time feeling like Allah let them down. Further research on these and other cross-cultural differences is needed, both within the same religion and among diverse religions and spiritualities, so that we can gain a more precise understanding and comparison of them (Cohen, 2002, pp. 200; Saroglou and Cohen, 2013, pp. 330-354).

Group Comparisons

Examining the column of means in Table 1 is confirmatory of what has been reported above, but also reveals more of the fine-tuned point in the anger items. First, all 5 comfort means are non-significantly different from each other, but all are significantly different ($p < .001$) from the means of all 4 anger items.

Of more intriguing psychological interest, however, and confirming the point made above about a cross-cultural difference in the meaning of feeling “let down” by Allah, is the discrepancy between the means of Item 3 versus the means of Items 9, 2, and 4 in the anger group. The mean of item #3 is significantly higher than the mean of items 9, 2, and 4 ($p < .05$), suggesting that the theorized cultural difference in the meaning of item #3 is real, and the difference in the ratings is therefore non-chance. Thus the Turkish Muslims are more likely to feel let down by, without necessarily feeling angry at, Allah for the earthquake.

Correlation Analysis

The analysis of the inter-item correlation coefficients corroborates the interpretation of the results presented above. All correlations among the five Comforted-by-Allah items were significant and positive (r range = .14 -- .55, $p < .001$). Three of the four Anger-at-Allah items (abandoned by, angry at, and view as unkind) were negatively associated with the Comfort items (r range = -.13 -- -.43, $p < .001$), except for one nonsignificant association between feeling abandoned by Allah and believing in Allah’s power (ns). Also, the three Anger items noted above were all positively associated with each other (r range = .14 -- .35 $p < .001$). The one nonsignificant association noted above makes psychological sense because a person ought to feel abandoned by someone only if they think the person was capable of behaving otherwise – in context of the earthquake, to lend help in time of danger or to avoid doing a dangerous thing. Thus, those who felt abandoned by Allah did so precisely because they did believe that Allah could have helped during the earthquake or could have prevented it from happening, but decided to let it happen. The in-depth qualitative interviews, summarized below, give us a clue about why they thought Allah let it happen.

The one item whose correlations and significance were inconsistent with the above pattern was Item #3 (“let down” by Allah). Its associations with all other items, on both the Comfort and Anger subscales, were nonsignificant except for one: Feeling “let down” by Allah had a significant and negative association with feeling “supported by” Allah ($r = -.16$, $p < .005$). This correlation also makes psychological sense because feeling let down by someone means that the person expected supportive assistance from someone but it was not forthcoming. Overall, therefore, the psychological processes at the root of the above dataset seem clear and consistent with known principles and the related research.

Qualitative Interviews

Context and overview. People were affected by the earthquake in many social, psychological, and economic ways. It caused major changes in their lives, including in daily routines, where and how they might live (e.g., loss of house), what they wear (loss of clothes), what implements they have (loss of books or special items that were kept for sake of memories). In short, everything that was part of life until that day of the earthquake ceased to exist. Psychologically, the earthquake constitutes a striking traumatic moment when meanings that had been built were either severely damaged or destroyed. All must be rebuilt. These and other themes were apparent, as stated by the below participants. Of particularly prominent importance, however, were the statements they made in relationship to Allah. The common threads in all of their supernatural attributions following the earthquake were both important, and revealing. (Note: For sake of confidentiality, the names of the following interviewees are fictitious.)

Hatice. Testimony (shadah) sounds were heard from downstairs. I started praying, "God save us." I was waiting for it to stop, but it didn't stop. I gave my testimony and closed my eyes, and waited for things to fall over me. Then it stopped and I started running away.

I thought only of my sins ... then about what to do if I go to the other world. I couldn't sleep all night because I thought it too much. There was a constant confrontation when I prayed and worshiped. I wasn't too scared, but there was a constant expectation of death ... can I really be forgiven? I realized that I had to take refuge completely. The earthquake caused a spiritual closeness ... a turning point for me. There was more commitment in my prayers.

Allah can ... do anything he wants, but He is not merciless ... Allah can make a few warnings ... People can go to extremes, and Allah makes those warnings after that. ... It was actually a warning. I think so, so I said compassionate. I think so, so I said He is merciful.

Kübra. My mother's feet were stiff. ... I grabbed her by the arm and took her out. My father gave testimony (shadah). ... It was such a moment. I don't think I'll ever forget.

My heartbeat accelerates the moment I feel ... even a tiny earthquake. This is the fear of death. How am I going to die? I will go to the other side, and what account I can give. How much good and bad did I do? Will I be able to account? I have fear ...

About Allah: I can't describe with words. It is my glory, that is, everything I have ... I have everything ... how can I say it? If he can give me mercy, if I can feel my good and evil in this world. So my profit is to be in him. I want to be his servant. Nothing else. There is nothing I cannot give up in this world. Even if it caused pain, I would not rebel if I had lost my family during the earthquake. This world is a lie, temporary world for me. I think about the other world.

Muhammed. Of course, I immediately gave a word of testimony (shadah). I said salavat. We already know the cause of the earthquake, but I think not only that, but Allah reminds people of it. I think he warns. I see people are arrogant.

Yasemin. ... Allah is a place where we can take refuge ... Everyone sinned ... man is sinning. ... we can all go and take refuge in Allah. ...no matter how much we sin ... whenever we open our hands, he forgives us. He looks at a tiny repentance. ... But not everyone takes refuge.

Interpretation. A set of common themes is apparent in the interviews. Foremost among them is that they seem to highlight Allah's power and absoluteness, combined with a notion that because of their sins, Allah is giving people a warning in the form of the earthquake. Attributions to Allah during and after the earthquake reflect the people's belief that he can save them, that they should trust only him, that he is merciful, that this trial is his will, and similar thoughts and feelings. Humans feel the need to take shelter in the most difficult time; that shelter should be Allah. The prayers and recitations they made to Allah during and after the earthquake make clear and highlighted reference to the idea that the earthquake was a warning, that people should not sin, and that they should trust and ask forgiveness from Allah. These attributions, although made in context of a deadly negative life event, are uniformly and strongly positive.

General Conclusion

This study is the first to test the psychological principles theorized to undergird the religious responses of people in a predominantly rural Muslim culture as found in Eastern Anatolia, especially their attitudes about Allah, in context of a major life threatening emergency such as the earthquake in Elazig province. The data show that the principles do apply in this population in a manner similar to how they apply in others. Thus, knowledge gained by this and similar research in Turkey adds to the international pool of information that fosters the understanding of how all humans function psychologically. There appear to be psychological processes that are sufficiently powerful to be evident across cultural differences. This study illustrates part of that.

Psychological research into human religiousness focuses on humans in their hear-and-now dealings with Allah in the midst of not only the positive and joyful life events, but also in their tragedies and suffering. People have to process and make sense out of the negative events -- losses or deaths, pain and injury, loss of livelihood -- just as they do for positive life events. Either way, the fundamental issues inherent in the nature of theodicy are present, waiting for human

minds to understand – to make sense out of why a positive or a negative event happened. In this way, the human mind can gain some sense of clarity, as it is difficult for a person to live with no answers and see only shades of grey.

The fundamental psychological process is that the human mind must make meaning. When confronted with ambiguous information, it has to make sense of it. This tendency is so strong that the vast majority of responses to the questionnaire following the earthquake fell strongly on the positive side of the response options, indicating that the participants interpreted the earthquake in a way consistent with their pre-held beliefs as represented in their global meaning system. This is the way that such responses would normally default, unless unusually strong evidence suggests the contrary. In this psychological way, people tend to keep trust in their object of faith in the midst of tragedy, although some do not.

The responses in the present study are an instance of a dilemma that illustrates the “theodicy problem” is “solved” cognitively by people making attributions about something they cannot see with their eyes. This illustrates one way that religious faiths can work, given the issues of theodicy that they entail. Overall, the results of this study illustrate fundamental psychological processes about how people respond to situations in which information can appear inconsistent with beliefs normally held, but can respond via normal psychological processes to sustain continuity with one’s perception of oneself and one’s commitments.

Despite its contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the relatively low reliability coefficient observed for the anger subscale of the Attitudes Toward God Scale warrants caution in interpreting findings related to this dimension. This issue may reflect cultural and linguistic nuances in the expression of anger toward Allah within a predominantly Muslim context, where such expressions may be socially or theologically constrained. Future research may benefit from further scale adaptation studies or the development of culturally sensitive measurement tools. Second, the sample consisted of university students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population affected by the earthquake. Although university students represent an important segment of society, future studies should include more diverse age groups, educational levels, and rural community members to enhance external validity and provide a more comprehensive understanding of religious meaning-making processes in similar contexts.

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