



## SYMPOSIUM/OTHER PROPOSAL

2014 APA Annual Convention

*Proposal ID: sym914063*

- 1. Type of program:** Symposium
- 2. Title of program:** Beyond Trauma: Ethnic Minority Groups on Death and Dying  
First index term: 29 Ethnic Minority Studies  
Second index term: 67 Religion
- 3. Brief Content Description:** An international panel of experts demonstrate the importance of learning from the culturally different Other, whose unique perspectives on death and dying add another dimension to interventions on suicide and trauma among ethnic minority groups.
- 4. Division to submit this proposal:** 24 - Theoretical and Philosophical  
**Second division:** 36 - Psychology of Religion and Spirituality  
**Other division appropriate for submission:**
- 5. Length of time requested on program:** 1 hr. 50 min.
- 6. Chair(s) of session:**

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**7. Participants:**

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Title of presentation: Disentangling Religion and Suicide: Relational Self, Human Connectedness, Social Capital  
Electronic Archiving: Yes

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Membership status: Non-Member  
Title of presentation: Be "Open-Hearted": Learning from the Tibetan survivors of earthquake  
Electronic Archiving: Yes  
Coauthor 1: Fan Long Meng, BA, Private Practice, Changping district, Beijing, China

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Title of presentation: Death ritual and Maori women in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand  
Electronic Archiving: Yes

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Membership status: APA Fellow  
Title of presentation: Spirit Voice Calls: Death and Dying Among Some American Indians  
Electronic Archiving: Yes  
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**8. Discussants:**

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**9. Accommodation request:** None

**10. Submit for CE:** Yes

Learning objective 1: The clinician will appreciate the importance of culture and spirituality in international interventions on trauma.

Learning objective 2: The researcher will acquire a more comprehensive picture of the human capacity for coping and resilience.

## **Beyond Trauma: Ethnic Minority Groups on Death and Dying**

Instead of the customary focus on catastrophes such as suicide and trauma, this proposed symposium casts these issues in the normalizing framework of death and dying, a fate shared by all, trauma or no trauma. Above and beyond the attempt to avoid pathologizing victims of trauma, this symposium offers the opportunity to address these issues through a philosophical lens--as problems of the Other. The approach to trauma canvassed here addresses the Other in psychology in a twofold sense—death and dying as the neglected Other in a society preoccupied with life and living; and world-views of ethnic minority groups as the Other to mainstream psychology. An international panel of experts will demonstrate the importance of learning from the culturally different other whose unique perspectives on death and dying can make significant contributions to psychology: Clinicians will be able to ponder the possibility that before rushing to offer clinical refuge to victims of trauma, they may well learn from the latter the function of culture and spirituality as refuge; researchers will be able to consider a more comprehensive picture of the human capacity for coping and resilience. The first paper presents data to show how culture and spirituality are protective factors against suicide among ethnic minority groups; the second presentation shows how for the Tibetan survivors of the earthquake in Qinghai, China, the focus was not on grief or trauma so much as the right (cheerful) attitude toward death and dying; the third presentation introduces the Maori ways of death, grief, and dying; and the fourth presentation adumbrates American Indian spirituality and philosophy in relation to living and dying. Bringing to bear his expertise in philosophical psychology as well as decades of clinical practice, the discussant will explore the clinical and spiritual implications of these presentations.

### ***(1) Disentangling Religion and Suicide: Relational Self, Human Connectedness, Social Capital***

There has been the program of research examining the relationship between religion and suicide using large international data sets such as Inglehart's World Values Survey. Essentially, these studies have found a negative relationship between religion and suicide suggesting that religion may serve as a protective factor. Yet, these findings do not explicate the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship. We propose the use of a disentangling approach to understanding the relationship between religion and suicide (e.g., see Leong, Park, Kalibatseva, 2013). According to this disentangling approach, demography is a poor proxy for psychology. While studies using demographic variables such as race, gender, and religion have found some interesting findings, these studies are limited by the fact that unspecified psychological variables may be the critical mechanisms responsible for the relationships. Therefore, the disentangling approach recommends adding psychological variables to provide incremental validity to demographic variables such as religion. Our review of the literature on religion and suicide suggests that psychological mechanisms such as the role of the relational self, human connectedness, and social capital may be the critical psychological elements accounting for the negative relationship between religion and suicide. Specifically, religion provides individuals with a relational self, opportunity structures to meet their social needs, experience human connectedness, and acquire social capital which in turns buffers against suicidal risk when stress and depression increases those risks. In contrast to Thomas Joiner's model of suicide which includes three risk factors (perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and acquired capacity), our current model identified protective factors. We propose that for individuals from collectivistic culture with a relational self, social capital and human connectedness buffers against the risks of suicide. The empirical relationships between these psychological mechanisms and the link between religion and

suicide using this disentangling approach will have to be tested in future studies.

***(2) Be “Open-Hearted”: Learning from the Tibetan survivors of earthquake***

During the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, harm to the local survivors was done by the so called “psychological experts,” due to the latter’s hasty focus on addressing the “trauma.” Since then there is a saying among the locals: “Beware of fire, burglary, and psychologists!” Is it possible for Chinese psychologists to “do good” to the ethnic minority in time of suffering? Two years later, a 6.9 magnitude earthquake hit Yushu, a Tibetan self-governing province in Qinghai, China. The loss was massive with over 2000 casualties, and complete damage of the area. The authors were involved in the long-term voluntary relief work, hence were able to gather anthropological data from personal diaries, interviews, participatory observations, personal dialogues, anecdotal stories, folk sayings, ancient literature, and more.

In this paper, we first describe the traditional culture and unique needs of the Yushu Tibetan surviving community, including medical resources, body-mind holism, concept of familism, and religious rituals. Secondly, we present the healing process of different survivors dealing with loss, bereavement, and poverty. Our focus will be on telling the narrative for these Tibetans—how they see life and death as part of the “pilgrimage” together, and how they consider having a cheerful attitude as a way to celebrate life and bring closure to the deceased. Their belief of an “unending life” is also actualized in their unique “sky burials” ritual. Local religious leaders, such as lama or living Buddha, are necessary participants in the funeral services to facilitate prayers, oil burning, and scripture recital. One may ask, “How is it possible to be cheerful in the grips of death and trauma?” We as modern psychologists have much to learn from this ethnic community in China, in order to deliver our services in a helpful and respectful manner.

***(3) Death ritual and Maori women in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand***

Death in the contemporary Maori world remains a gendered experience, despite two centuries of Christian and colonial influence. Maori are the indigenous population of Aotearoa New Zealand, a Pacific population numbering over 440,000, with a proud history of active resistance, political protest, and community resilience. This presentation considers how bereaved women – daughters, widows, sisters, mothers - go about the process of being in the wharemate, the ceremonial and sacred “house of death”, while meeting a range of other roles and responsibilities that enable and ensure the emotional healing of others. Such roles include being mourners from the moment of bereavement; the preparation of the deceased for viewing; and the arrangement of artefacts and ritual objects around the deceased lying in state. Women facilitate the enactment of feasting and remembrance, and ensure appropriate hospitality for visiting parties. Mourning and bereaved women are also ritualists and attendants during the days of death ceremony, until the interment of the deceased. Throughout this process, the sense of belonging to the community is reinforced, and the opportunity for catharsis and release is offered to other family members, and people close to the deceased person. The tangi, or traditional rites of mourning, occurs as a culturally prescribed sequence of events in which different women perform a series of reciprocal and profoundly related roles. In this paper, I will discuss elements of the tangi or mourning process, as practiced by women, with an emphasis on ritual.

***(4) Spirit Voice Calls: Death and Dying Among Some American Indians***

Beliefs about death and dying experiences and practices vary considerably among American Indians

tribes. Most believe that life and death are phases of one's spiritual existence; a few tribes believe that life ends with death and nothing is passed on to another world. Ceremonies vary considerably. In one belief solitude allows the dying person to intimately connect with the spirit world through prayer and song. In another belief four days are set aside to mourn the deceased person; a burial scaffold is constructed that will hold the deceased and their cherished belongings. Prayer and singing are intimate and sacred components of most Indian and Native death and dying ceremonies. Gifts are often exchanged.

Some of the tribes in the northern plains region of the U.S. believe there are four planes of existence. Each plane involves a holistic relation and connection with spirits and their world. The first plane is where the breath of life is given to the body. The second plane is one where the soul stays with the body while the spirit travels. The third plane is one where one's spirit leaves the body to travel to another dimension while one's soul remains. And the fourth plane is the place where souls live. In essence, life and death are not permanent as they involve changes from one world to another. For some death is a celebration of the transformation of the soul.

Organized according to the major death and dying beliefs and practices set within an American Indian perspective the following points will be emphasized: 1). basic beliefs and attitudes toward health, healing, and death within the context of Indian spirituality; 2). death and dying within a specific tribal milieu; and 3). basic understanding of American Indian spirituality and philosophy and their relationship to living and dying.