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Living Without a Verdict: Intolerance of Uncertainty and Anticipatory Anxiety in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*

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Abstract

The psychological effects of uncertainty are investigated in this study considering Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) and Michel J Dugas's Intolerance of Uncertainty (IU) theory. Although the novel has received much attention from existential, legal, and socio-political perspectives, few studies have analyzed Josef K.'s mental decline using a contemporary cognitive theory of anxiety. This research explores the impact of extended uncertainty on anticipatory anxiety and one's thoughts, feelings and actions. The study employs qualitative research design and close textual analysis to explore how the unexplained arrest of Josef K., the confused judiciary system and the seemingly unending delays create a constant sense of fear, worry, hypervigilance, emotional instability and helplessness. It also explores the erosion of his sense of identity, decision-making ability, and sense of reality as he slowly loses control and clarity. Analysis reveals the novel to be an effective illustration of the Dugas's IU theory. Kafka's novel demonstrates an unresolved ambiguity which results in a psychological burden. The interdisciplinary approach focuses on the novel's significance in the context of mental effects of uncertainty. The study suggests the application of IU theory to other literature for better understanding of the impact of being a person living with ambiguity in everyday life.

Keywords: Anticipatory anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty, psychological literary criticism

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Introduction

The novel, *The Trial*, by Franz Kafka (1925/2009), begins with one of the most famous sentences in modern literature: "Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested" (p. 3). K.'s well-structured, law-abiding life is

suddenly disrupted by a strange legal process, and a year unfolds in confusing elements, paperwork, and psychological breakdowns.

Though existentialist interpretations underscore the themes of absurdity and alienation (such as Camus, 1942/1955), and socio-political interpretations focus on critique of authoritarianism or bureaucracy (such as Arendt, 1951/1973), a cognitive-psychological perspective (specifically the intolerance of uncertainty (IU) theory by Michel J. Dugas) provides new insights into the escalation in Josef K.'s anticipatory anxiety. Intolerance of uncertainty is a dispositional characteristic encompassing negative thoughts about uncertainty and its implications that result in ongoing worry, cognitive avoidance, and emotional distress, especially in generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and related disorders (Dugas et al., 1998; Hebert & Dugas, 2019). People with high IU tend to see things as uncertain and perceive them as dangerous. Such people excessively worry because of their maladaptive coping mechanism and greater anticipatory anxiety when something is unresolved.

Through close textual analysis, this paper uses IU theory in the context of *The Trial*. It suggests that Kafka's works are great illustration of the ways uncertainty, that persists for so long and stays explained, undermines psychological functioning as it does in clinical presentations of IU. Because K. couldn’t get clear on his situation,he becomes over-vigilant, his identity splitted, and his resolution was resignation. This interdisciplinary research combines literary criticism and cognitive psychology to connects the novel to both the 20th-century modernists and contemporary mental health research, highlighting the novel's continued importance with the aspects of uncertainty in modern society, both political and health care (bureaucratic systems, for example, and vague threats).

Literature Review

The Trial is a text that covers many fields of scholarship. Existential readings view K.'s predicament as a metaphor for absurd human life (Camus, 1942/1955). Sociopolitical analyses interpret the court as a metaphor for oppressive state machinery or totalitarianism – an interpretation which prefigures 20th century authoritarianism (Arendt, 1951/1973; see also Thacker, 2020). Psychoanalytic theories delve into the unconscious guilt, such as interpretations

connecting this to punishment of the superego. The psychological literary interpretation of Kafka has been expanding in recent years, for instance with regards to cognitive dissonance and psychological turmoil (UWAKWE2026; see also analyses of Kafka's paranoia and his sense of helplessness). The use of certain cognitive models, such as IU, is still scarce however, previous research highlights K.'s hypervigilance and rumination, and generally does not connect these to empirical anxiety structures. In the 1990s, the IU theory was developed by Dugas and refined later, defines IU as a trans-diagnostic vulnerability factor. Core components are (1) negative beliefs of uncertainty (2) positive beliefs of worry (3) negative problem orientation and (4) cognitive avoidance. These thoughts trigger feelings of anxiety about fuel, which in turn causes emotional fatigue and paralysis in the form of behavior (Dugas et al., 1998; Hebert & Dugas, 2019; Robichaud et al., 2019).

Higher IU is associated with GAD in empirical studies, and experimental manipulations have demonstrated that worry is enhanced by the induction of IU (Ladouceur et al., 2000). IU is found in the disorders, such as OCD, social anxiety, and depression (Buhr & Dugas, 2002; Carleton, 2016). *The Trial* with its ongoing ambiguity is a prime example of literary applications of IU, while trauma or dystopian narratives are emerging. The novel fits with the mechanisms of IU, and this research demonstrates the absence of any prior systematic application of IU to K.'s arc.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this study is a qualitative research that is appropriate for psychological literary criticism based on a close textual analysis. The main passages from *The Trial* (Kafka, 1925/2009) are used as primary data. Analysis is deductive based on the intersection of textual evidence and IU theory which constructs inductive themes in addition such as erosion of identity.

According to the IU model put forward by Hebert and Dugas (2019), IU “a dispositional characteristic that arises from the presence of a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its consequences” (as cited in Koerner & Dugas, 2006). Some of the key processes are: appraisal of

uncertainty as threatening, anticipatory anxiety, avoidance or safety behaviors and emotional or cognitive consequences (Dugas et al., 2005; Robichaud et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

The primary research technique used in this section relies on textual analysis, which consists of reading and analyzing *The Trial* (Kafka, 1925/2009) closely and iteratively to discover linguistic patterns, narrative structures, development of character and symbolization that represents the mechanisms of intolerance of uncertainty (IU) theory. Here the textual analysis is deductive in a sense that it maps passages with the IU constructs of Dugas (e.g., negative appraisal of uncertainty, worry, anticipatory anxiety, cognitive avoidance, negative problem orientation), and inductive in the sense that it brings forth emerging themes, such as erosion of identity, distortion of time, and existential paralysis. Multiple readings show that Kafka's fractured prose, repeated deferrals and ambiguous dialogue play out the IU's cognitive loops, producing a visceral experience of the literary. This analysis is enhanced by scholarly voices. A reading of internalized guilt as a mechanism of safeguarding participation within corrupt systems, as done by Hannah Arendt, resonates with IU's negative beliefs of uncertainty. Margaret Church emphasizes the dreamlike nature of time's value and interiority, resulted in events that further built K.'s psyche. This also reflects IU's concept of distortion of reality. Keith Fort points to the "nightmarish quality of unreality" that is characteristic of the Kafkaesque which intensifies the sense of anticipation. Bureaucratic opacity can also be associated by psychoanalytical and existential critics with psychological fragmentation.

The novel begins with it an unsettling and sudden ambiguity: “Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning he arrested without doing anything really wrong” (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 3). This is the iconic sentence that instantly upsets K's neat and tidy world, triggering IU's main negative appraisal process, which is catastrophic because of ambiguous events of threats. The warders' entrance into his bedroom, “You can't leave, you're being held” (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 5), serves as an example of intrusion into personal space, and increased the perception of uncontrollability. K. asks for explanations but the guards say that they don't know anything: “We don't know anything about that” (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 6). This lack of information leads to catastrophic thinking, with K. denying and then frenetically asking questions on pages 3-15. In

literary style, Kafka uses short, abrupt sentences and repetitive questions to reflect on the mental ruminations. K's inner voice demonstrates a lack of problem orientation because he sees the situation as an incomprehensible and threatening, and attempts to control it, in this instance by affirming his role as chief clerk (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 8). This reflects Dugas et al. (1998) with IU being the explanation of intolerance for lack of salient information. This uncertainty becomes internal, that is, Arendt speaks of “vague guilt”, as the external bureaucracy becomes a self-perpetuating anxiety. In his rush to retrieve his identification papers. Early safety behaviour (9–10) is an attempt for ‘illusory clarity' but causes further helplessness when it fails. K. is eventually got out of the room and could continue his life normally, but with a sense of unease. “Was it not very probable that there were dangers which he had failed to notice?” at the end of the chapter. Like Kafka noted in reflections from Chapter 1, which established the precedent for IU's escalation - when ambiguity is not resolved, it eats into one's cognitive resources. This is interpreted as confronting the unconscious by scholars who focus on the psychoanalytical themes; IU theory gives a precise cognitive mapping of the confronting unconscious. The arrest isn't just crazy but a symptom of worrying which is inappropriate in this respect. The fact that K. admits guilt, “Our officials never go hunting for guilt but are attracted by guilt” (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 9, warder dialogue), is detriment and undermines his pre-arrest confidence, setting the stage for identity fragmentation.

The initial hearing in the overly crowded attic makes IU even more mysterious. K. comes with expectations of clarity, but faces chaos: “The trial was getting under way and he had to put up a fight” (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 36). The ambiguous conduct of the magistrate, and the inaccessibility of the court are examples of unresolved ambiguity. K. carefully observes the details, the actions of the officials and the reactions of the audience, paying special attention to the threat cues, a characteristic drawn from IU theory which explains that uncertainty can lead to hypervigilance (Kafka, 1925/2009, pp. 30–50). Positive beliefs about worry are the concepts that K. thinks, will always be possible to solve the unknown through constant strategizing, which results in fatigue. These thoughts (repetitive rumination passages) wore him down. The analysis of the text reveals Kafka's way of using spatial metaphors as the metaphor of cognitive entrapment, the attic and the labyrinth-like corridors. The speech in Kafka's courtroom is initially confident, but then becomes confused and interrupted (Kafka, 1925/2009, Chapter 2). This reflects a negative

problem orientation, whereby problems seem to be insurmountable. Cognitive avoidance occurs when the process is perceived as too absurd to bother with, thus minimizing or preventing deeper feelings of anxiety, and when these feelings re-emerge, stronger than ever before (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 45). The critics of literature refer to this as the dreamlike quality of time values (Church), in which deferrals warp the sense of time and create a sense of anxiety towards an indeterminate future.

In chapter 3, a relationship with the law student and others complicates the labyrinth. Kafka observes the endless paperwork and lack of care in the court offices during his visit and, as he continues to think about it, the suggestions that the defendants are starting to formulate that will improve the court will negatively affect them. When he visits the court offices, K. sees the endless paperwork and lack of care, then, as he continues to think, he begins to think of suggestions for improving the court, which had a negative effect on him. Delays and confusion with lawyer Huld, are just examples of the IU cycle of confusion, worry, poor problem solving and increased anxiety. K. mentions the opacity of the system and behavioral paralysis. Fort's nightmarish unreality illustrates how Kafka's prose, circular dialogues, and unsolvable contradictions, perform IU's cognitive avoidance: Mental images of catastrophe are suppressed but recur. When read comparatively with other scholars, existential interpretations of absurdity are seen to complement IU by defining the court as a meaningless universe while cognitive theory sets out mechanisms in which worrying as a preparatory tool can have the reverse effect. As K. becomes increasingly obsessed with "unimportant court etiquette" (Kafka, 1925/2009, pp. 55–60), safety behaviors that compromise agency can be seen, which reflects IU theory's maintenance as found by Robichaud et al. (2019). This section's bureaucratic satire is not only of totalitarianism, but of the psychological effects of the ambiguity, anticipating contemporary study of GAD.

IU's relational effect is uncovered through contact with women and artists. Fräulein Bürstner provides temporary certainty but none at all as K. strives to relate to others to allevate uncertainty and discovers emotional insensitivity (Kafka, 1925/2009, pp. 70–80). Physical intimacy becomes another unhealthy coping strategy with Leni, a false sense of control through control, an increase in isolation: "He could not find his way in this darkness" (Kafka, 1925/2009). While ostensibly acquitting, Titorelli the painter advises the contrary, as all avenues of appraisals lead to uncertainty (Kafka, 1925/2009, pp. 140–160). Relating to his work, K.'s bank life goes into

a downward spiral as the anxiety of anticipation takes resources: “His mind was constantly filled with fear of trial” (Kafka, 1925/2009). Confidence of clerk diminishes to disorganized identity, questioning reality in deferrals. Cognitive loops are enacted by textual markers, repetition of 'perhaps', conditionals and fragmented perspectives. This is understood as a psychoanalytical rupture or as an existential alienation, but IU perceives this as doubt that is continuous, which undermines the sense of agency and reality testing (Dugas et al., 2005). A failure to resist is the lesson of K.'s resistance.

Cognitive avoidance and helplessness are evident in the lawyer's long-winded explanations in chapter 7, where “The trial has to be kept going round and round” (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 180). With the dismissal of the lawyer, K. is moving in a new direction, but also to the limit of IU's endpoint: when control is found to be illusory, despair will be in the wake. The internalization of guilt is the reason why K. is involved in his own destruction and the interior time of Church is a reflection of anxious mind in the relational dream. The fragmentation is a criticism of ambiguous threats of modernity and a connection to other alienation themes in literature.

K. resigned after passive acceptance which led to a queryy, he dies “like a dog” (Kafka, 1925/2009, p. 231). The parable “Before the Law,” told by the priest, is an example of the constant uncertainty of the man waiting a lifetime, and dying just as the door shuts (Kafka, 1925/2009, pp. 215–220). This is similar to what happens at IU's endpoint: when the ambiguity becomes intolerable and unavoidable, surrender occurs. The last thing K. says is “like a dog”, which is an extreme expression of helplessness and identity collapse. Each of Kafka's narrative methods, each of his "deferred resolutions," each of his shifting perspectives and his symbolic darkness reflects IU theory's repetitive negative thinking. The silence of the executioners and the non-resistance of K. are examples of behavioral paralysis. It is thought to be related to absurd defeat or self-judgment, and IU theory is understood to provide the cognitive bridge, since resources are depleted by unchecked worry and caused existential defeat. The uncertainty is corrosive and the novel's open-ended terror reminds us of that.

Throughout, Kafka’s fragmented perspectives, repetitive deferrals, and ambiguous symbolism enact IU theory’s loops. A progression from shock to paralysis is shown across a textual density of over 15 direct citations. The applications of such scholars as Arendt (guilt), Church

(temporality), Fort (unreality), and psychoanalytical self-confrontation are made to coalesce with IU theory, thus making *The Trial* psychologically astute in its depiction of the existential and bringing modernism and clinical theory together. This analysis demonstrates the ability of the literature to materialize abstract anxiety mechanisms, and provides insight for the uncertainties of today.

Findings and Conclusions

The Trial is a lucid depiction of Dugas' IU Theory. Negative appraisal, anticipatory anxiety, maladaptive coping, and progressive decline (identity loss, helplessness) are what K. has experienced. Kafka foretells an authority gleaned from the doctor, and a picture of IU theory as all-consuming loss of self. Recognizing IU theory is informing interventions such as behavioral experiments to build tolerance (Hebert & Dugas, 2019), in contemporary contexts (legal limbo, information overload). In literary studies, it promotes cognitive-psychological approaches to literature such as Orwell or Camus. Subjectivity in interpretation, quantitative and/or comparative research would be appropriate for future study. Living without a verdict is a human toll, as stated in the Trial, so there must be more tolerance towards uncertainty.

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