

EFFECTS OF MORTALITY SALIENCE ON STEREOTYPE USAGE IN JUDGMENTS

by

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(Under the Direction of Leonard L. Martin)

ABSTRACT

Previous research in Terror Management Theory has shown that when mortality is made salient, participants are more likely to favor stereotype consistent individuals relative to stereotype inconsistent individuals (Schimel, et al., 1999). This study sought to expand upon these prior findings by examining the extent to which a person fit a certain stereotype would relate to their subsequent liking scores of that individual. Participants first rated several occupations, then either had their mortality or experience watching television made salient, and finally they made judgments about stereotype fit and liking for another person. Results from the study were unclear, though a different research design might elucidate the effects further.

INDEX WORDS: Terror management theory, Stereotypes, Mortality salience, Stereotype judgments

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Terror Management Theory (Rosenblatt & Greenberg, 1989; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1990) is a pervasive theory through social psychology that provides a general theoretical framework for human motivation. The theory posits that the human mind possesses a strong faculty of awareness and reasoning which, when applied toward personal experience, reveals the vulnerable and ultimately mortal nature of human experience. This awareness of the finite nature of human life, then, provides the potential for anxiety and terror about life experiences. Unless somehow assuaged, this terror would be paralyzing to people, who would be devastated by the inevitability of death.

Cultural Worldviews in Death Anxiety Defense

In the context of this theory, then, cultural worldviews become an important part of an individual's experience of reality, as they can provide an anxiety-buffering effect. These worldviews contain different ways wherein an individual can obtain either literal (through rebirth, ascent to Heaven, etc.) or symbolic (being a celebrity, changing society, etc.) immortality. The anxiety-buffering effect of these forms of immortality is a way in which people can manage the terror posed by the awareness of their own mortality.

Diminishing the terror felt by the awareness of mortality and vulnerability of life is achieved by behaving in ways consistent with this cultural worldview grants an individual self-esteem. Within each of these worldviews, there are clear standards of how to live, what is important, and what goals one should work toward in order to attain value and therefore immortality within the culture. By working towards these goals, an individual's self-worth is

firmly established. This, along with validation from other individuals who share similar cultural values, helps bolster one's self-esteem and reduce the terror posed by the awareness of mortality.

Different Levels of Defense

There are two levels of defense against this existential terror that allow for the reduction of terror responses as well as the motivation for worldview defense (Pyszczynski, et al., 2006). The first are proximal defenses. Proximal defenses push death thoughts out of the mind of the experience or deny that person's vulnerability when death is made immediately salient to the individual. Afterwards, distal terror management responses arise. These distal responses motivate one to defend a cultural worldview after death thoughts are no longer immediately present, but are still influencing conscious action and thought. This was demonstrated experimentally (Greenberg, et al., 1994) in several studies that found thinking about death more extensively than in traditional mortality salience manipulations lead to weaker effects. However, if participants were distracted after completing the mortality salience manipulation, strong worldview defense returned once death thoughts were rendered unconscious.

Experimental Effects of Mortality Salience

Many effects have been found in psychological research on Terror Management Theory. For instance, activating thoughts of mortality has been found to increase ease of thoughts about one's parents and, conversely, thoughts of one's parents has been found to decrease death thoughts (Cox & Arndt, 2008). Other research has indicated that mortality salience can decrease a male's sexual attraction towards female confederates or pictures of attractive females, due to the distancing effect from sexual desire which inspires thought about corporeality and therefore mortality (Landau, et al., 2006).

The most demonstrated and consistent finding in Terror Management Theory research, however, has been derogation of out group members. Since cultural worldviews provide self-esteem and an anxiety-buffering function, out group members challenge these worldviews and thus are derogated and marginalized due to their undermining of an individual's terror management functions. Experimental evidence for Terror Management Theory found more harsh penalties were prescribed for individuals arrested for prostitution (Rosenblatt & Greenberg, 1989) and more harsh opinions were expressed from Christians of Jews after mortality was made salient for those participants (Greenberg, et al., 1990). Subliminal exposure to death-related stimuli has been found to lead to cultural worldview defense in the face of threatening stimuli (Arndt, et al., 1997). Out group derogation has been found in cultures around the world such as German citizens with respect to another person's views on the fall of the Berlin wall and German reunification (Jonas & Greenberg, 2004), and in Japanese citizens reading anti-Japanese essays (Heine, et al., 2002).

Terror Management Theory and Stereotypes

Some Terror Management Theory research has indicated that stereotypes can be an important part of an individual's cultural worldview and is therefore an important aspect of the terror management response (Schimel, et al., 1999). Terror Management Theory posited that stereotypical individuals, despite being out group members, would actually be liked more than out group members who did not fit stereotypes. Stereotype information can be an important part of an individual's cultural worldview. With respect to mortality salience, it is important that information be consistent with the worldview that is managing death anxiety. Inconsistent information brings doubt into the validity of a cultural worldview and is rejected since it allows for death anxiety to creep back into mind. Therefore, stereotyped individuals indirectly support

cultural worldviews and stereotype-inconsistent individuals can threaten worldviews by undermining important knowledge structures such worldviews provide.

Several studies found greater liking for stereotypical out group members and less liking for stereotype-inconsistent out group members when examining national identity stereotypes, African-American stereotypes, gender roles, and homosexual stereotypes. In one study, for example, participants rated their liking of an African-American target person who was stereotype consistent, stereotype neutral, or stereotype inconsistent. The stereotype consistent person wore high-top sneakers, a backward baseball cap, and an Atlanta Braves jersey. He wrote an essay written with slang, writing about “serious hoop, slammin’ nightlife, cruisin’ for honeys...” The stereotype neutral person dressed in a t-shirt, wore shorts, and carried a backpack. He wrote about visiting San Francisco, visiting family, and hanging out with friends. The stereotype inconsistent person wore a button-down blue shirt, khaki dress pants, and penny loafers. He wrote about taking engineering classes, working for a software company, and reading Herman Wouk’s *War and Remembrance*. After mortality salience, participants reported more liking for the stereotype consistent African American target relative to the stereotype neutral or inconsistent targets.

A concern arising from these studies, however is that stereotype usage is not directly measured. An assumption made on the part of the researchers is that whether or not participants profess liking for an individual indicates whether or not they are using a stereotype. Participants are expected to have negative stereotypic beliefs about men or women that violate cultural norms (e.g. men writing about fashion or women writing about sports), or an African-American student who uses slang (e.g. writing about “serious hoop, slammin’ nightlife, cruisin’ for honeys...” etc.). Conversely, positive stereotypic beliefs are expected for men and women who fit with

cultural norms, and an African-American student who dresses neatly and works at a software company. What is not clear, though, is whether or not these are truly negative or positive stereotypes before or after mortality salience. Participants might accept these individuals or find them funny – the ratings of these stereotypes could be the same or the opposite of what is assumed.

Hypothesis

The current research aimed to examine directly whether or not participants were using these stereotypes in their judgments of another person and how that affected their liking scores of that individual. Within participants testing was done to examine whether or not stereotypes about certain occupations were positive or negative. Participants then either had their mortality or experience watching television made salient to them prior to making judgments about a picture of a man described as being either a writer or a telemarketer (two of the occupations rated prior). Data were also collected with respect to how related participants felt to personal attributes in order to examine the possibility of distancing from the self after having mortality made salient.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

91 male and female University of Georgia undergraduate students aged 18 to 24 enrolled in an introductory psychology course participated in this experiment. Partial course credit was awarded for participation.

Procedure

All experimental sessions included only one participant. Participants were seated at a desk in the room. They then read over and signed a consent form indicating the types of tasks they would be completing for the study. After consenting to participate, a questionnaire was administered asking participants to indicate the extent to which they liked different types of people. The people were described in terms of their occupation with ratings ranging from 1 – not at all – to 7 – very much. Examples of included occupations were salespersons, police officers, writers, and telemarketers.

For their second task, participants filled out a questionnaire indicating the extent to which a series of trait adjectives described them. Examples of such adjectives were logical, proud, friendly, etc. Ratings ranged from 1 – not at all – to 7 – very much.

Participants then either completed a mortality salience or television salience (control) induction. Participants answered two questions, the first of which asked, “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death (or watching television) arouses in you.” The second section prompted, “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think happens as you die and once you are physically dead (or as you watch television).” The questions were open-

ended and participants were allowed to take as much time and space as they wanted to respond to them.

Following the mortality salience or television induction, participants rated the extent to which they were currently experiencing a series of emotional and physical states. Listed states included: happiness, sadness, relaxation, anxiety, tiredness, and so forth on a scale from 1 – not very much – to 7 – very much.

For the next 60 seconds, participants were given a blank piece of paper and asked to draw a map of the University of Georgia campus. This was to serve as a distraction task following the mortality salience or television induction. The distraction would allow for the shift from proximal defenses, which try to repress thoughts of death, to distal defenses, which focus on worldview defense once death thoughts are not consciously available (Greenberg, et al., 1994). Most participants drew a few buildings and roads on campus during the time allotted.

Participants next completed the Job Task. They were presented with information detailing the types of people who would work at a series of five jobs, labeled Jobs H, K, P, N, and L. The people who worked there were described with four trait adjectives. For example, people working at Job H were described as unconventional, friendly, intelligent, and spontaneous. Participants were asked to describe how much they would like to work at each job and to rate that liking on a scale of 1 – not at all – to 7 – very much. According to previous research, participants should have higher ratings for jobs if they identify with the traits that describe those jobs. This indicates greater accessibility and identification with these self traits.

Finally, participants were shown a picture of a man described as either a writer or telemarketer (see Appendix A for the materials used). They were asked the following three questions: How much does this person fit your stereotype of a writer (or telemarketer)? How

much do you think you would like this person? How much would you enjoy spending time with this person? All questions were on a 1 – not at all – to 7 – very much – scale.

Subjects were then debriefed on the nature of the tasks of the experiment and allowed to leave. Subsequently, credit was given to the participants for their time.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

A regression was performed examining the effects of the television or mortality salience condition, the writer or telemarketer stereotype condition, the initial profession ratings, and subsequent stereotype fit ratings. Effects were examined relative to self-reported scores of how much each participant liked the stereotype-described picture in the final task. All higher order interactions were examined in the regression model.

Upon examination of the results of the regression model, two main effects were found in the data. A main effect of the television or mortality salience condition was found, $\beta = .237$, $t(90) = 2.54$, $p = .01$. This indicates that, after mortality salience, participants tended to like the person in the picture more than after watching television was made salient to them.

A second main effect was found for the effect of stereotype fit, $\beta = .337$, $t(90) = 3.620$, $p = .0001$. This main effect demonstrates that participants liked the picture presented to them more so when the stated stereotype fit him more.

No other significant main effects or interaction effects were found in the regression data.

For the Job Task, correlations were calculated between a participants' original rating of a particular trait and their rating of the corresponding job described with that trait. For the television salience condition, $r = -.43$. For the mortality salience condition, $r = -.37$. A t-test was performed on these data in order to test for a significant difference between the two conditions. The test resulted with the following t value, $t(89) = .709$, $p = .40$, ns.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

This study was unable to replicate any Terror Management Theory effects or to expand upon prior research. The results indicate that clearly mortality salience had an effect, but it is not clear what the effect meant or how it can be applied. After mortality salience, participants showed greater liking for the person in the picture on the final task, however only a main effect was found. Since this was not dependent on the stereotype mentioned or the extent to which participants felt the person pictured fit the stereotype, the results seem unclear. Does mortality salience simply lead people to like others more? Are the participants not using stereotypes?

The second main effect proves even more difficult in light of the first. Participants in the study liked the person in the picture more when they felt he fit the listed stereotype more. This effect was not dependent on him being either a writer or a telemarketer or whether the participants had undergone either the television or mortality salience. This finding is difficult to reconcile with the mortality salience main effect. The effect could represent worldview defense if the fitness is important to how participants conceptualize people in those occupations. Perhaps it could be a matter of settling the ambiguity of the situation to understand how to rate this unknown person they had been presented with. In either case, the result is unclear.

The data from the Job Task could indicate that there was not a significant effect of mortality salience with respect to how strongly participants identified with their own personality traits. Prior studies with Terror Management Theory in our lab have found significantly stronger relationships between how participants rated traits and how they rated the jobs after mortality salience. Not replicating this effect could indicate that the mortality salience manipulation did not have a true effect in this study or that other situational factors mitigated this effect.

One possibility for why the study did not obtain significant findings is that perhaps the picture used and described as either the writer or telemarketer was not one that was particularly meaningful to participants. The person in the picture may not have fit with their thinking of either writers or telemarketers or the picture itself inspired such demand to lean one way or another in the self-reported liking scales that no effect could be found.

The stereotypes used in the current study may have also led to the lack of significant findings. Previous studies in Terror Management Theory research with stereotypes have looked at national identity, gender roles, racial identity, and sexual orientation (Schimel, et al., 1999). These stereotypes can be regarded as knowledge structures that are an important part of an individual's cultural worldview. Being male or female, homo or heterosexual, and so forth could be a more important aspect of a person's view of the world than, for instance, a person's occupation. In more modern times where people shift careers regularly and people do not identify as strongly with their jobs, using stereotypes about different jobs might be something that is simply not relevant enough to people once their mortality is made salient.

Finally, the control condition may have been a cause for the lack of data differentiation between groups. Other mortality salience studies have used different control conditions such as writing about the effect of dental pain or social exclusion as control conditions. It is possible that the use of the television salience control condition masked any effects that might have been found with a different control condition.

In conclusion, it may be difficult to replicate certain Terror Management Theory effects. Ultimately, sticking closer to the original studies may have proved more fruitful than attempting to replicate the effects in a different domain. However, with certain methodological changes, more useful results might be found.

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APPENDIX

EVALUATION MATERIALS

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW ABOUT THE FOLLOWING TELEMARKETER



1. How much does this person fit your stereotype of a telemarketer?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not						Very
At All						Much

2. How much do you think you would like this person?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not						Very
At All						Much

3. How much would enjoy spending time with this person?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not						Very
At All						Much