DEATH CAN MAKE US PROSOCIAL, BUT WHY?

EXPLORING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSES TO MORTALITY REMINDERS

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Take a few moments to think about how you would answer these questions....

“Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you”

“Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead”

Mortality Salience Manipulation (MS; Greenberg et al., 1990)
Now, take a few moments to think about how you would respond to this scenario:

“Imagine that you are visiting a friend who lives on the 20th floor of an old, downtown apartment building. It’s the middle of the night when you are suddenly awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of screams and the choking smell of smoke... The room is filled top to bottom with thick fumes and nearly entirely in flames. With your heart pounding, it suddenly hits you, as time seems to stand still, that you are literally moments away from dying...”
1. Please describe the thoughts and emotions you felt while imagining the scenario.
2. If you did experience this event, how do you think you would handle the final moments?
3. Again imagining it did happen to you, describe the life you led up to that point.
4. How do you feel your family would react if it did happen to you?

Death Reflection Manipulation (DR; Cozzolino et al., 2004)
CONFLICT BETWEEN DRIVE FOR SELF-PRESERVATION AND OUR AWARENESS OF THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

- Potential for paralyzing terror.

TO ALLEVIATE THE TERROR:

- Endorse cultural worldviews and a symbolic sense of self.
- Self-esteem is derived from living up to cultural standards of value.
+ Jonas et al. (2002) “...reminders of mortality should intensify the desire to engage in culturally prescribed prosocial behaviors”
  - MS increased favorable attitudes to charitable organizations
  - MS increased the amount of money donated to American charitable causes compared to international causes.
  - No significant difference in donation amount in the CN condition.
TMT & PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

+ Norm Salience + MS
  – Jonas et al. (2008) help prime followed by MS increased participants’ willingness to help in three imagined scenarios.
  – Gailliot et al. (2008) MS and help prime increased helping behavior (e.g., picking up a book). No effect in CN condition.

+ Materialism + MS
  – Kasser & Sheldon (2000) MS increased perceptions of personal wealth and greedy behavior in a limited resource game.
Differential Responses to Reminders of Death

There are qualitative differences in our reactions to mortality...

“A change came over me which I believe is irreversible. Questions of prestige, of political success, of financial status, became all at once unimportant. In those first hours when I realized I had cancer, I never thought of my seat in the Senate, of my bank account, or of the destiny of the free world... For the first time I think I actually am savoring life. I realize, finally, that I am not immortal. I shudder when I remember all the occasions that I spoiled for myself – even when I was in the best of health – by false pride, synthetic values, and fancied sights”

Yalom (1980) p. 35
LIMITED TIME PERSPECTIVE

Open-ended MS = standard MS manipulation

LTP MS = feelings about death at age 75

Content coding:
LTP MS > open-ended MS on themes of generativity, personal growth, and positive affect.

Cozzolino et al. (2009)
Cozzolino et al. (2004)

CN condition = positive slope between EVO value orientation and greed, but it was not significant ($p = .14$)
## Death Reflection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Death Reflection</th>
<th>Mortality Salience</th>
<th>Example Item</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
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<td>Negative affect</td>
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<td>.14</td>
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<td>.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical sensations</td>
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<td>Life regrets***</td>
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<td>Thoughts of others****</td>
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<td>Selfish other thoughts**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Universal mortality***</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Death reflection, n = 31; mortality salience, n = 28.

**p = .07. ***p < .05. ****p < .01.

Cozzolino et al. (2004)
High Need Condition =
no difference between MS & DR
(p = .58)

MS greater intention to donate
than CN (p < .05)

Low Need Condition =
DR greater intention to donate
than MS (p < .01)
BUT... WHY?

+ The results do not appear to be due to the DR scenario...

No Death Condition = spending the day sightseeing with a family member followed by same 4 questions

![Graph showing Mean number of tickets taken as a function of death reflection and value orientation (high EVO = +1 SD, low EVO = -1 SD).](image)

- p < .01
- p = .90
The four questions appear to be integral to DR effects...

Figure 3 Mean number of tickets taken as a result of question type and value orientation (high EVO = +1 SD, low EVO = −1 SD).
POSSIBLE MECHANISMS?

+ Last two questions distinguish DR from MS
  – Based on the life review and perspective taking processes from NDEs
  – Does DR induce a broader perspective?
+ Acting like a self-affirmation prime?
  – Expansion of the self-concept reduces the threat
  – Legacy prime buffers the threat
+ Motivation for self-consistency