Terror management and political attitudes: the influence of mortality salience on Germans’ defence of the German reunification

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Abstract

From the perspective of terror management theory, reminders of mortality should intensify the desire to maintain faith in one’s own cultural worldview. We investigated this notion with regard to attitudes of Germans toward an important political event, the fall of the Berlin wall and German reunification. We found that when reminded of their own death, people with a supportive attitude toward the German reunification showed a more favourable evaluation of a positive essay about the fall of the Berlin wall and a more negative reaction to a critical essay than participants in the control condition. People with a more neutral attitude toward the reunification on the other hand did not show this effect. Practical and theoretical implications are discussed. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

During the last decade a large body of research in the context of terror management theory (TMT, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) has shown that reminders of death intensify the desire to maintain faith in one’s own cultural worldview and to defend it against threat. Within this literature, a variety of studies point to the relevance of terror management to national issues, for example, showing that following mortality salience people are more inclined to defend a global positive view of their own nation (e.g. Greenberg et al., 1990; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997) or to support national but not foreign charities (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). However, a wide variety of terror management studies have also shown that whether or not mortality salience affects cognitions and behaviours depends very much on individual and situational factors which make particular judgments and actions either relevant or irrelevant to the individual’s worldview or self-worth (e.g. Arndt, Greenberg, & Cook, 2002; Greenberg et al., 1990; Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). Therefore we suggest that when reminded of death, people will defend their own individual political attitudes. In this article we want to investigate this notion with regard to a very important recent political event in Germany: the fall of the Berlin Wall followed by the German reunification.

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TMT AND RESEARCH

TMT, which was inspired by the writings of the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1971, 1973), posits that the pairing of the instinctive desire for self-preservation and survival with the awareness of the inevitability of death creates the potential for paralyzing existential terror. According to TMT, this terror is managed by a dual component cultural anxiety buffer, consisting of the cultural worldview and self-esteem. The cultural worldview is defined as a set of beliefs about the nature of reality shared by groups of individuals that provides meaning, order, permanence, stability, and the promise of literal and/or symbolic immortality to those who live up to the standards of value set by the worldview. Self-esteem is defined as one’s belief regarding how well one is living up to the standards of value prescribed by the worldview. Because of the central importance these psychological structures have for managing existential terror people are highly motivated to sustain them and defend them against threats. This basic assumption of TMT has been supported by a substantial amount of empirical evidence (for review, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) illustrating for example that mortality salience increases positive reactions to those who uphold or validate the individual’s worldview and negative reactions to those who violate or challenge it (Greenberg et al., 1990, 1992), increases adherence to cultural norms (Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), and heightens estimates of social consensus for culturally relevant attitudes (Pyszczynski et al., 1996).

Mortality salience has been operationalized in many different ways, including more direct ways of asking participants to think about their own death or very subtle events such as proximity to a funeral home (e.g. Pyszczynski et al., 1996) and subliminal death primes (e.g. Arndt et al., 2002; Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997). The effects of thinking about one’s own death have been contrasted with those of thinking about a wide range of other aversive topics, including general pain and worries, dental pain, failure, paralysis, social exclusion, and giving a speech in public; none of these comparison conditions produce effects parallel to those of mortality salience (see Greenberg et al., 1997). Research has further clarified that whereas the initial response to mortality salience is to suppress death related thought, increases in worldview defence and self-esteem striving occur when thoughts of death are highly accessible but no longer in focal attention (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

The purpose of this study was to focus on the function of political attitudes in ameliorating concerns about mortality. Within the existing research, several studies found indications of strengthened national identification following mortality salience. For the US over a dozen studies have demonstrated that mortality salience increased the preference for those who praised one’s country over those who criticized it (e.g. Arndt et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 1990, 1992; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Nelson, Moore, Olivetti, and Scott (1997) found that mortality salience led people to become more biased toward organizations associated with their own nation: American participants who were given information about a car accident blamed the manufacturer less and the driver more if the auto company was American than if it was Japanese. One study has suggested an important role for national symbols, showing that reminding participants of their mortality made it more difficult for American college students to use the American flag in an inappropriate way during problem-solving tasks (Greenberg et al., 1995). For Italian participants, Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, and Sacchi (2002) found that following mortality salience, participants displayed stronger national ingroup identification and scored higher on national ingroup bias measures. Recently Jonas et al. (2002) discovered that after being reminded of their own death, American college students donated more money to American charities, but not to foreign ones.
Finally, Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, and Schimel (2000) found that mortality salience increased optimism among Dutch participants that their national soccer team would win the next game with a rival team.

**Individual Attitudes and Mortality Salience Effects**

Although people within a nation are generally likely to share a positive view of their own nation, attitudes toward particular political events of relevance to the nation are likely to vary. Previous terror management research supports the notion that mortality salience effects are moderated by specific situational and individual personality and attitudinal variables. For example it has been shown that personality characteristics like authoritarianism (Greenberg et al., 1990, Study 2), self-esteem (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997), need for closure (Dechesne, Janssen, & van Knippenberg, 2000), and attachment style (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000), moderate people’s worldview defence, suggesting that different personalities have unique styles of coping with the existential dilemma and responding to threats. Moreover, worldview defence also occurs according to individual’s values and specific beliefs. Greenberg et al. (1992, Study 1) suggested that while conservative participants reacted more favourably to a politically similar target and more unfavourably to a dissimilar target, for liberal people mortality salience even encouraged tolerance towards dissimilar others. More recently Arndt et al. (2002) even presented evidence that reminders of death increased spontaneous activation of those concepts relevant to the individual’s value system. Finally, following mortality salience only participants with negative attitudes towards prostitution recommended harsher bonds for a prostitute, whereas people with a more positive attitude did not (Rosenblatt et al., 1989).

This leads to the conclusion that it is the individual’s cultural worldview that determines terror management effects, which means that the TMT conceptualization of the cultural worldview is that it is both group-based and individual. Every child is socialized within a particular culture and, through the influence of their family, educational, mass media, and religious institutions, comes to internalize its own version of the larger culture’s ways of imbuing their view of reality with order, stability, meaning, and value. Many constructs like clocks and calendars, creation stories, morals, basic word meanings, and national histories are taught very similarly to the vast majority of children within a culture. So the cultural worldviews of traditionally taught Australian aboriginals will have much in common, as will those of French Canadians and their will be predictable large differences between members of the two groups in terms of perceptions of time, meanings of dreams, etc.

However within each culture, each child has natural capacities and propensities that may lead them toward somewhat different understandings of the meanings and importance of various elements of the overall cultural worldview. In addition, within cultures there is considerable variability in how these concepts are taught. Thus, every individual ends up internalizing his or her own version of the cultural worldview. According to TMT, the individual’s internalized worldview is the basis of that individual’s psychological security. Especially after mortality salience, other people and ideas should be embraced to the extent that they validate that individualized worldview and should be rejected to the extent that they challenge the validity of that worldview. The individual’s worldview should not change following mortality salience, rather, it should be held more firmly and defended more strongly.

The majority of the prior research on TMT has targeted broadly held beliefs within the culture, such as among Americans that America is a good country. In this study we examined a specific political issue, which like many such issues, is pertinent to larger cultural issues but is viewed variably by people within the culture. Therefore we predicted that mortality salience would intensify bolstering and defence of the individual’s position regarding this issue. We hypothesized that the effects of mortality salience on defence of the German reunification would depend on individual attitudes.
towards this important political event. After the nationalistic outbursts of the Nazi era and the lingering feeling of Holocaust guilt, which have led the majority of Germans to be generally uncomfortable with overt signs of patriotism (Noelle-Neumann & Koecher, 1987), the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the peaceful revolution leading to the end of the socialist political system in East Germany were recent positive events in German history. However, the reunification process was and still is accompanied by several concerns discussed within the German population. Although the majority of Germans clearly supported the reunification, the reunification process turned out to be very problematic and individual attitudes towards the reunification vary highly within the German population (e.g. Flippo, 1999; Schmitt & Montada, 1999). We therefore predicted that defence of the reunification would be moderated by the direction of people’s individualized cultural worldview.

In the tradition of former terror management research (e.g. Greenberg et al., 1992) and in line with the suggestion of Greenberg et al. (1997) that mortality salience increases motivation to defend one’s attitudes rather than making general attitudes more extreme, we decided to test this hypothesis by creating two essays on the German reunification ostensibly written by foreign persons. In one essay the reunification was praised, in the other essay it was devalued. Then we asked participants to evaluate the essays and predicted that following mortality salience pro-reunification participants would have an especially strong preference for the pro-reunification essay, whereas those less favourable toward the reunification would not. We would also expect a reversed preference in individuals strongly opposed to the reunification, although we did not expect many individuals in our sample to express such a view.

METHOD

Participants

Sixty participants from the University of Munich in Germany volunteered to participate in the study. The sample consisted of 39 women and 21 men, ranging in age from 19 to 43 years.¹

Design

The experiment was based on a 2 (mortality salience: yes vs no) × 2 (essay about the German reunification: positive vs negative) design with repeated measures on the second factor.

Procedure

The participants were recruited in university buildings by asking if they were willing to take part in a psychological study in which they had to fill out some personality questionnaires. If they agreed, they were led to a lecturing room and given a short packet of questionnaires. Participants were asked to answer the questions in the order they were presented, to turn each page once they had answered all the questions, and not to go back to previous pages. The packet started with a German translation of a mortality salience or control treatment that was entitled: ‘The Projective Life Attitudes Assessment’ and that has been used in many studies on terror management (cf. Greenberg et al., 1997). The mortality salience treatment consisted of having participants respond to two open-ended questions:

¹One participant was excluded from the analysis because he did not fill out large parts of the questionnaires.
‘Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you,’ and ‘Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.’ In the control condition, we asked the same questions with regard to dental pain. Participants were randomly assigned to these conditions. They then responded to two filler questionnaires consisting of one mood assessment and one about participants’ sleeping and waking patterns to constitute a delay between the mortality salience manipulation and the dependent measure (cf. Greenberg et al., 1994).

The dependent variable was measured by giving participants two essays, ostensibly written by French journalists who were in Germany during the fall of the Berlin Wall. One essay was a positive report focusing on the great historical event of the fall of the Wall and the happiness and positive emotions of East and West Germans. The author stated that although the reunification process was not as easy as expected at the beginning, one clearly has to point out the value of bringing together one nation which was separated and the historical value and uniqueness of the event. In the negative essay, the historical importance of the fall of the Wall and the positive emotions of the Germans were devalued, the historical achievement was attributed to other countries like Hungary, Czech and Poland; the West Germans were accused of not appreciating the reunification and the East Germans of whining and missing the former DDR. Both sides were assumed to be happier without the reunification. Order of presentation of the essays was counterbalanced. After having read each essay, participants were asked to evaluate it with regard to five questions: how much the participants liked the author, how intelligent they thought he was, how knowledgeable they thought he was, how much they agreed with his opinion and how true what he said was (these questions were taken from former terror management studies, see e.g. Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Each question had to be answered on a scale from 1 (= not at all) to 10 (= very much). The questionnaire for the second essay contained at the end an additional question: ‘What is your personal attitude towards the German reunification?’ (scale from 1 = negative to 10 = positive). This measure was placed at the end so that participants would not be alerted to the focus on the reunification at the outset of the study and wouldn’t feel compelled to appear consistent when reacting to the essays. After completion of the questionnaires, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

For our dependent measure of worldview defence we calculated composite scores across the evaluation items for both the reunification favourable and reunification unfavourable essays. Then we subtracted the evaluation score for the unfavourable essay from the score for the favourable essay as our measure of relative preference for the favourable essay over the unfavourable essay (e.g. Greenberg et al., 1994). Cronbach’s alpha was 0.78 for the five items rating the favourable essay, and 0.85 for the ratings of the unfavourable essay. We pre-tested the essays on the German reunification in order to make sure that they were indeed pro and anti reunification. In the current sample we found the positive essay to be judged significantly more positive (M = 6.41, SD = 1.26) than the scale midpoint of 5.5, t(58) = 5.52, p < 0.001, and the negative essay to be judged marginally more negative (M = 5.13, SD = 1.58), t(58) = 1.79, p < 0.08. Other recent research with a larger German sample has found the latter essay to be rated significantly more negative than this scale midpoint, (M = 5.04, SD = 1.54), t(72) = 2.56, p < 0.02.

We checked whether mortality salience affected the personal attitude toward the German reunification and found—in line with our prediction—no effect (control M = 7.66, SD = 1.99; mortality salience M = 7.50, SD = 2.29), t(58) < 1, p > 0.75). We also checked whether there was any effect of gender or order of presentation on the dependent variable, but however, found no effect.

as independent variables. Following Aiken and West's (1991) recommendation in this analysis we had converted the continuous predictor variable (attitude towards reunification) to $z$-scores before we computed the interaction. The results revealed that overall, the independent variables accounted for a significant portion of the variance in the dependent variable, $F(3, 55) = 9.84, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.35$. Moreover, we found the predicted interaction between mortality salience and general attitude towards German reunification, $B = 1.17, \beta = 0.42, t(55) = 2.52, p < 0.02$. To illustrate the nature of the significant interaction, we inserted standardized attitude scores at values one standard deviation above (+1) and below (−1) the mean and the two experimental levels for the mortality salience manipulation into the regression equation (see Figure 1). This analysis revealed that following mortality salience, participants with a supportive attitude toward the German reunification liked the positive compared to the negative essay more than participants in the control condition. People with a relatively neutral attitude toward the German reunification on the other hand showed no reliable effect of mortality salience.4

**DISCUSSION**

Mortality salience affected reactions of Germans to essays about a recent political issue: the fall of the Berlin Wall followed by the reunification. Participants with a supportive attitude toward the German reunification were more inclined to defend the reunification against criticism after the mortality salience prime compared to a control prime. People with a neutral attitude toward the German reunification, on the other hand, did not show this reaction.

4The non-transformed data for the attitude measure illustrate that with a mean of $M = 7.58$ and a standard deviation of $SD = 2.13$ one standard deviation above the mean clearly indicated a positive attitude towards the German reunification (9.71), whereas one standard deviation below the mean (5.45) was almost on the scale midpoint of 5.5 and thus indicated a neutral attitude.

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Whereas a large body of past terror management research has found that mortality salience led people to react more favourable towards one’s own nation, our study illustrates that this relationship is strongly moderated by people’s individual attitudes towards the specific national topic. However, past research has tended to focus on national constructs and entities that virtually all citizens within a culture would view positively, such as global evaluation of one’s own nation, donations towards national charities or optimism that the national soccer team will be successful. In contrast, this study focused on a national political topic, which is controversially discussed within the German population.

In showing that the mortality salience effects on defence of the reunification depended on the direction of people’s individual cultural worldview, our study connected the line of terror management research on nationalism (e.g. Nelson et al., 1997) with another line of terror management research pointing at the relevance of individual differences moderating terror management effects (e.g. Greenberg et al., 1992). Mortality salience does not seem to have a general effect increasing nationalistic tendencies overall, but rather an effect moderated by the individual’s own ideological preferences with regard to the specific issue being challenged. Theories such as self-categorization theory (SCT, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987, see also e.g. Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991) may be helpful to better understand the determinants of these ideological differences. In fact there are many parallels between theories of group processes and TMT. As one’s own nation is only one group among others people identify with, terror management effects have also been observed with regard to other groups, like religious groups (Greenberg et al., 1990), sport teams (Dechesne, Greenberg et al., 2000), universities (Dechesne, Janssen et al., 2000) and even for minimal groups (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1996). Moreover, it has also been shown that mortality salience leads to distancing from unsuccessful groups (e.g. Dechesne, Greenberg et al., 2000) if the group boundaries are perceived as permeable (Dechesne, Janssen et al., 2000).

Indeed, Castano et al. (2002) have recently pointed out some basic similarities between social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and TMT. Both theories emphasize the psychological importance of social identities, including national identity, for providing people with self-worth. One could even argue that the two theories are entirely compatible, with TMT simply offering a more distal explanation for why people need self-esteem and suggesting that identification with social groups serves the function for individuals to ‘project themselves in space and time, beyond their personal death’ (Castano et al., 2002, p. 137). Whereas TMT helps to understand the fundamental fears and needs of people, research of group processes facilitates our understanding of the specific mechanisms people use to deal with their existential fears (e.g. categorization of other persons as ingroup or outgroup members, conformity to ingroup norms, or perception of ingroup similarity). SCT sheds particular light on explaining under what conditions people perceive themselves as members of certain categories and what are the consequences of this categorization process. In this context, the concept of category salience is of special importance (Oakes et al., 1991), which depends on the relative accessibility of the category within the persons mind and the ‘fit’ between stimulus input in a specific situation and stored knowledge about the category (see also Bruner, 1957). Connecting these ideas again to TMT we can predict that the influence of mortality salience on people who challenge vs support the cultural worldview might also be affected by such accessibility-fit considerations depending on a person’s specific knowledge stored in her mind. For example, in the present study, perhaps the reunification supportive participants were identified with Germany as a whole whereas for the less supportive, West German identification was still more salient. Future research connecting TMT and SCT more specifically is warranted.

Finally, in focusing on a current political issue rather than global national elements as looked at in other studies (e.g. the Italian or American nation in general, the American flag), our study is the first pointing to the relevance of terror management concerns for explaining citizens’ reactions towards current issues discussed in society. With regard to practical implications we think that TMT enhances
our understanding of people’s reactions towards political issues. We believe the current findings suggest that there may be a variety of such specific political and economic future issues affected by mortality salience. Mortality is often highly salient in crisis situations, and the present research suggests that this is likely to lead people to more vigorously defend their own attitudes and reject alternative views. Therefore future research should investigate whether these effects have any influence, for example, on how politicians communicate in such situations, or on whether the use of death reminders can push people toward extremist views.

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