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Deliver Us from Evil:

The Effects of Mortality Salience on Support for President George W. Bush

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Abstract

According to terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, 1997), one factor that increases the tendency to support leaders is the need to quell mortality concerns. The present research applied this analysis to investigate how thoughts about death and the 9/11 terrorist attacks (a death prime) influence attitudes toward the current president of the United States, George W. Bush. Results indicated that mortality-salient (MS) participants were more supportive of Bush and reported being more likely to vote for him in the upcoming election, although MS had the opposite effect on ratings of Presidential candidate John Kerry. Discussion focused on the role of terror management processes in allegiance to leaders and political decision-making.

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Death anxiety is a topic that no human can escape and it has a profound impact on the way we live our lives. One possible function of leaders is to protect us from the fear of our own inevitable deaths. Starting with Sigmund Freud's suggestion that leaders serve as substitute parent figures (Freud, 1921/1965), psychologists of diverse theoretical persuasions have argued that the popularity of leaders depends, at least in part, on the extent to which they meet the pressing psychological needs of their followers (e.g., Becker, 1973; Bord, 1975; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) posits that one of the most basic functions that leaders serve is that of helping people manage a deeply rooted fear of death that is inherent in the human condition.

Building on the writings of Ernest Becker (1973), TMT begins with the assumption that humans share with all animals a fundamental orientation towards continued survival but that humans are unique in their cognitive abilities such as a capacity for self-consciousness. Despite their adaptive value, these cognitive abilities render humans aware that their own death is inevitable and possible at any moment, a recognition that conflicts with the biological propensity for continued existence, and therefore gives rise to the potential for debilitating anxiety. To manage the potential for anxiety that this awareness produces, people deny that physical death implies absolute annihilation by maintaining faith in a personalized version of a *cultural worldview*: a set of humanly constructed, culturally derived, and socially validated beliefs about the nature of reality that provides meaning and the promise of literal or symbolic immortality to those who uphold culturally prescribed standards of value. Faith in cultural meaning and the

perception of oneself as an object of value within that scheme provide a protective shield against the potential for anxiety that results from one's awareness of the inevitability of death.

The most prominent line of empirical support for TMT comes from tests of the *mortality salience (MS) hypothesis*, which states that, if the cultural worldview functions to provide protection against death-related concerns, then reminders of death should intensify efforts to bolster and defend faith in the worldview. This broad hypothesis has been supported by a wide range of studies demonstrating the many ways in which MS increases defense of one's worldview (for reviews of empirical support for TMT, see Greenberg et al., 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, in press). This body of research has operationalized MS in a variety of ways and has included control inductions that prime aversive topics other than death (e.g., physical pain, social rejection, uncertainty) and that consistently fail to produce effects parallel to MS on the primary measures of worldview defense. Research has also shown that effects parallel to MS are not produced by heightened self-awareness, the salience of cultural values, meaninglessness, or high cognitive load (Greenberg et al., 1997). Additionally, internal analyses consistently reveal that terror management defenses are not mediated by the participant's current emotional state. This large body of evidence thus strongly suggests that MS effects result specifically from activating death-related cognitions.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001 seem highly likely to have dramatically increased the salience of such death-related concerns for most of the American people (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). If loyalty to leaders stems in part from terror management concerns, then reminders of mortality, including the events of 9/11, should increase Americans' support for President Bush. A number of previous findings are generally consistent with this hypothesis. First, the popularity of the then and current

American president, George W. Bush, increased dramatically in the days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and has remained relatively high to this date, in the Spring of 2004. Second, a substantial body of research indicates that MS engenders inflated regard for a wide array of people, concepts, and objects that represent the culture to which the participants subscribe (reviewed by Greenberg et al, 1997; Solomon et al., in press). For example, Greenberg et al. (1994) found that, compared to those primed with another aversive outcome, death-primed individuals expressed especially favorable evaluations of essays and their authors who praised the U.S., and especially negative evaluations of anti-U.S. essays and their authors. MS has also been shown to incite aggressive behavior against those who impinge on one's worldview: McGregor et al. (1998) found that death-primed participants administered excessive amounts of an aversively spicy hot sauce to a target who verbally attacked their political orientation. Taken together, these findings provide convergent support for the role of intimations of mortality in people's allegiance to and defense of the nationalistic aspects of their cultural worldviews.

Of most direct relevance for present purposes, Cohen et al. (in press) recently demonstrated that MS enhances the appeal of a charismatic leader who promotes a grand vision and promises citizens a significant role in a noble mission in a hypothetical election scenario. More specifically, MS increased preference for a hypothetical political candidate portrayed as having charismatic qualities, but not for ones portrayed as task-oriented or relationship-oriented. The studies reported here seek to extend these findings by providing an "experimental case study" of the role of death-related concerns in general, and 9/11-related concerns in particular, in promoting support for President George W. Bush.

In the present paper we use the popularity of President Bush as a context for an "experimental case study" of the role of existential fear in promoting support for government

leaders. Specifically, we sought to examine the effect of reminders of mortality on support for President Bush. We have proposed that through his charismatic leadership style, President Bush represents a protective authority capable of assuaging existential concerns. Thus, participants in the following study were asked to state who they would vote for, either President Bush or the current Democratic Presidential nominee John Kerry. We predicted that participants in the MS condition would be more likely to vote for Bush over Kerry and that participants in the control condition would be more likely to vote for Kerry over Bush.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred and fifty seven students at Brooklyn College (95 females and 62 males) were randomly assigned conditions in a 2 (mortality salient vs. intense pain salient control) X 2 (evaluate George W. Bush vs. evaluate John Kerry) design. Participants completed the experimental materials individually on May 13, 2004.

Materials and Procedure

The experimenter approached individuals in the college cafeteria and asked them to participate in a short study of personality attributes and social judgments. After giving verbal consent, each participant was given a questionnaire packet and asked to complete each question in the booklet in the order in which it appeared. The packet began with two filler questionnaires to sustain the cover story and obscure the true purpose of the study, followed by the manipulation of mortality salience. In the MS condition, participants responded to two open-ended questions (used in previous TMT studies, e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990): “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.” Control participants (i.e., the intense pain condition) responded to two parallel questions: “Please describe the emotions that the thought of being in intense pain arouses in you” and “Write down as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you physically as you are in intense pain.” All participants then read a short literary passage to serve as a delay and distraction.

The next page of the questionnaire booklet was entitled “Opinion Survey.” In the evaluate George W. Bush condition, participants were instructed to “Think for a moment about President George W. Bush and then answer the following questions by circling the number that best approximates your feelings.” Four questions followed: “How favorably do you view George W. Bush?”, “To what extent do you admire George W. Bush?”, “To what extent do you have confidence in George W. Bush as a leader?”, and “If you vote in the upcoming Presidential election, how likely is it you will vote for George W. Bush?” In the evaluate John Kerry condition, participants read identical instructions and responded to identical questions about Presidential candidate (rather than President) John Kerry. The questions were followed by nine-point Likert scales with end points marked “not at all favorably” and “extremely favorably” for the first question and “not at all” and “very much” for the remaining three questions. Participants were then thanked and debriefed.

Results

After forming a composite index indicative of support for either Bush or Kerry, we then subjected the composite index scores to a 2 (MS vs. Intense pain) X 2 (evaluate Bush vs. evaluate Kerry) X 2 (gender) ANOVA, which revealed main effects for mortality salience vs. intense pain ($F_{(1,149)} = 8.52, p = .004$) and evaluating Bush vs. Kerry ($F_{(1,149)} = 8.48, p = .004$), qualified by an interaction between these factors ($F_{(1,149)} = 64.00, p < .001$; see Figure 1). The

main effects were due to participants in the MS condition giving higher ratings ($M = 4.68$) to either candidate than those in the intense pain control condition ($M = 3.83$) and higher ratings of John Kerry ($M = 4.67$) than George Bush ($M = 3.83$). More importantly however, an examination of the interaction revealed that while John Kerry was significantly more highly regarded than George Bush in the intense pain control condition ($p < .001$), George Bush's evaluations increased in response to MS (across the midline of the scale; $p < .001$) while John Kerry's evaluations declined ($p = .001$) such that Bush was evaluated significantly more positively than Kerry when mortality was salient ($p < .001$). Analyses conducted on the individual items making up our composite measure revealed significant effects on all items – including the voting decision item, all p 's $< .001$, with identical patterns of statistically significant differences among means.

Discussion

The results of our experiment demonstrate that, compared to an intense pain prime, MS increased support for President Bush. In contrast, MS significantly reduced support for Presidential candidate John Kerry. These results suggest that MS does not heighten affection for anyone associated with U.S. leadership, but Bush in particular. These results are consistent with Cohen et al.'s (in press) finding that MS heightens the appeal of a leader with a charismatic style, and go further in demonstrating that MS can significantly reduce the appeal of some (potential) leaders. The Cohen et al. (in press) study found that MS reduced attraction to a hypothetical candidate with an egalitarian, relationship oriented style; perhaps the reduced appeal of Kerry in this study reflects a perception of him as having such a style. Of importance, these results go beyond mere approval and reveal that, in a complete reversal from the control condition, mortality salient participants actually favored Bush in the upcoming Presidential election.

The present findings support the views of many theorists and researchers (e.g., Bord, 1975; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996) who have noted that political allegiances are not always based on the balanced, rational forces of self-interest suggested by the Jeffersonian notion of democracy, but also on the operation of non-rational forces of which we're not always aware. From the perspective of TMT, it is the need to manage concerns about personal mortality that lead people to cling to the protection provided by their leaders. By showing that reminders of death (such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks) increase support for President Bush, the present research provides clear support for this TMT analysis.

One flaw in our research is that, although the present findings are consistent with a TMT analysis, they could also be interpreted as stemming from the more general phenomenon of increased in-group cohesion and favoritism in the face of a shared external threat. More specifically, research both in (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) and outside the laboratory (Piliavin, Rodin, & Piliavin, 1969) has shown that facing or even anticipating a common enemy or threat can activate superordinate identities and increase in-group solidarity. Based on this research, perhaps reminders of 9-11 and the threat of terrorism united people in a common cause and a singularly integrated identity, leading them to "rally around the flag" and support their current leader.

The present findings raise a variety of intriguing questions for future research. The fact that MS decreased the appeal of Kerry suggests that there is something specific about President George W. Bush that makes him especially useful for terror management purposes. President Bush has certain elements of a charismatic style: he appears highly self-confident and certain of his views (Feldmann, 2004), appeals to patriotism and emphasizes the positive qualities of America and being American, and the central role of the U.S. in triumphing over evil and

defending freedom. Cohen et al. (in press) found that MS increases preference for a hypothetical candidate who embodies precisely this style. Another possible factor is Bush's advocacy of strong security and aggressive military measures. Although it would be useful to determine the relative contributions of these different facets of Bush, this would be a difficult task because Bush and his positions are unique. Although in our study we compared Bush to John Kerry, Kerry's qualities are less clear, and he seems to lack those two elements. In contrast, a past leader like Reagan had both qualities but differs in no longer being influential. Indeed, we would suggest that these two attributes tend to co-vary in political leaders, and act in concert to contribute to who President Bush is as a public figure.

The present results clearly show that President Bush's popularity is increased when thoughts of death or terrorism are especially salient, and this is particularly relevant to ongoing campaign strategies as the 2004 presidential election approaches, and for future political campaign strategies as well. Indeed, the results of our study clearly show that mortality salient participants were more inclined to re-elect President Bush over Presidential candidate Kerry. The fact that reminders of death (which could be accomplished in the real-world easily by raising terrorism alert levels) enhanced support for President Bush in the present studies may not bode well for the philosophical democratic ideal that political preferences be the result of rational choice based on an informed understanding of the relevant issues. If the effect of MS on attraction to leaders is indeed rooted in the largely irrational symbolic protection that they provide, the best antidote to this problem may be to take great pains to encourage people to vote with their "heads" rather than their "hearts" – as past research (Simon et al., 1997) has demonstrated that MS effects are attenuated by instructions to think rationally. Of course, in these frightening times, when the media is rife with images of death and the threat of terrorist

acts is increasingly imminent, rationally driven decisions may be unlikely. But perhaps the knowledge of how concerns about death influence human behavior can promote campaign strategies and electoral choices based on the political issues and qualifications of the candidates rather than based on rhetoric primarily serving defensive needs to preserve psychological equanimity in the face of death.

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Figure 1

Support for President George W. Bush and Presidential Candidate John Kerry as a Function of Priming Condition.

