



## Diverging effects of mortality salience on variety seeking: The different roles of death anxiety and semantic concept activation<sup>☆</sup>



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Mortality salience has anxiety-inducing as well as concept-activation effects
- Death anxiety leads people to choose less variety in order to avoid novelty
- Activation of death-related concepts increases the variety of choices
- The concept-activation effect is mediated by a global processing style
- Whether death is thought in relation to oneself determines which effect occurs

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 2 July 2014

Revised 29 December 2014

Available online 30 January 2015

#### Keywords:

Mortality salience

Death anxiety

Semantic priming

Processing style

Variety seeking

### ABSTRACT

Thoughts about one's death can not only induce death anxiety but also activate death-related semantic concepts. These effects of mortality salience have different implications for judgments and behavior. We demonstrate these differences in an investigation of variety-seeking behavior. Four experiments showed that the anxiety elicited by thinking about one's own death decreased the variety of participants' choices in an unrelated multiple-choice decision situation, whereas activating semantic concepts of death without inducing anxiety increased it. Moreover, inducing cognitive load decreased the anxiety-inducing effect of mortality salience, leading its concept-activation effect to predominate. The accessibility of death-related semantic concepts spontaneously induces a global processing style that increases the range of acceptable choice alternatives in a variety-seeking task, and this occurs regardless of how mortality salience is induced. However, the effect of inducing death anxiety, which is driven by a desire for stability, may override the effect of semantic concept activation when participants think about their own death.

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People encounter death-related information nearly every day and thoughts about their own or others' mortality are hard to avoid. The effects of these thoughts on attitudes and behavior are manifold (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Maxfield, 2006; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). For example, thinking about one's mortality can lead to more indulgent choices in domains that have implications for self-esteem (Ferraro, Shiv, & Bettman, 2005). Thus, it can increase preferences for products such as suntan lotion that enhance perceptions of one's physical attractiveness (Routledge, Arndt, & Goldenberg, 2004). At the same time, the anxiety that results from awareness of one's mortality can increase the desire for stability. This, in turn, can increase people's commitment to cultural norms and values

and motivate them to preserve their worldview (Greenberg et al., 1990).

However, the anxiety-inducing influences of mortality salience have rarely if ever been separated from the effects of death-related semantic concepts that are activated in the course of contemplating one's mortality. In the research we report, we show that the two effects of mortality salience can have diametrically opposite consequences for judgments and behavior. On one hand, the anxiety induced by contemplating one's death leads to cautiousness and a need for stability. On the other hand, activating concepts of death, which is an abstract and temporally distal event, can induce a global processing strategy (Trope & Liberman, 2003; Trope & Liberman, 2010; see also Dhar & Kim, 2007; Hansen, Kutzner, & Wänke, 2013) that influences responses to stimuli that are unrelated to death per se.

To examine this possibility, we considered a domain in which these opposing effects are particularly likely to be evident. People often have occasion to choose a number of different options (e.g., things to do on vacation, television programs to watch, or the types of tea to drink

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported in part by grants GRF 640011, GRF 452813 and GRF 493113 from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong.

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over a period of several days). In these conditions, people could either choose the same option repeatedly (e.g., to play golf every day while on vacation) or choose a variety of options (e.g., to play golf, to surf at the beach, and to visit a museum). Variety seeking could increase with the breadth of the concepts that individuals use in construing the choice alternatives (Kahn & Isen, 1993; Laran, 2010; Pham & Chang, 2010; Viswanathan & Childers, 1999). However, it could decrease with the motivation to avoid novel and unfamiliar options (Lieberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999). To the extent that everyday life experiences spontaneously activate concepts of mortality, they could influence the extent to which these opposite tendencies are manifested, depending on whether the concepts activated are accompanied by death anxiety.

These considerations suggest that differences in variety seeking not only provide a diagnostic tool in separating the concept-activation and anxiety-arousing effects of mortality salience but also have implications for an understanding of its effects on decision making outside the laboratory. The two effects of mortality salience are hard to separate using traditional manipulations of this factor (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). That is, the anxiety that is induced by thinking about one's own death is necessarily elicited by semantic concepts that compose these thoughts. However, death-related concepts may be activated without inducing anxiety. By employing this strategy, we found that activating death-related concepts without inducing death anxiety increased the variety of options that individuals chose in a multiple-option decision situation whereas inducing death anxiety decreased the variety of their choices. The effects of death anxiety are particularly evident when the choice alternatives are unfamiliar. At the same time, putting individuals under cognitive load interfered with their attempt to defend against death anxiety, leading the consequences of activating death-related semantic concepts to become more dominant. We also showed that the crucial distinction between these effects is the extent to which people experience anxiety about their *own* mortality rather than about others' mortality or mortality in general. Thus, if individuals think about another's death without considering their own, the anxiety-mediated effect of mortality salience is not apparent.

## Theoretical background

### *General effects of mortality salience*

Research on the effects of mortality salience has been largely stimulated by terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 1991). According to this theory, people have an inherent fear of death and are motivated to defend against the existential anxiety that results from thinking about it. This anxiety results in part from the fact that death and dying are fraught with uncertainties. Consequently, individuals who become conscious of their mortality attempt to reduce their death anxiety by reassuring themselves that the world is predictable, meaningful and orderly. For example, they often show escalated commitment to their cultural values and increase their liking for others who embrace these values while derogating persons who oppose them (Greenberg et al., 1990; McGregor et al., 1998; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). These defensive reactions serve to maintain a stable and meaningful perception of the world.

In addition, reminding people of their mortality increases their motivation to engage in behavior that enhances their self-esteem (Dechesne et al., 2003; Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). This behavior can help individuals to convince themselves that they are living up to the standards of their society and can also increase feelings of stability.

Attachment to significant others can also provide a buffer against death anxiety. Thus, people whose mortality is salient show an increased desire for stable and close relationships (Florian, Mikulincer, &

Hirschberger, 2002) and consequently an increased tendency to think about parents and significant others (Cox et al., 2008).

However, not all effects of mortality salience can be easily interpreted as defensive reactions to death anxiety. For example, unobtrusively priming death-related concepts leads people to judge their life to be more valuable (King, Hicks, & Abdelkhalik, 2009). Because attaching greater value to one's own life would be expected to increase one's fear of losing one's life rather than decreasing it, this finding is hard for terror management theory to explain. Liu and Aaker (2007) also demonstrated that thinking about another person's death by cancer leads people to plan their future activities within a broader temporal framework. This effect also cannot be readily accounted for by terror management theory, which predicts that death-related thoughts lead to a desire for immediate materialistic indulgence rather than long-term goal attainment (see Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004; Kasser & Sheldon, 2000).

### *A Two-stage process conceptualization of mortality salience*

In conceptualizing the non-anxiety-related effects of mortality salience, we recognized that death is an inherently abstract concept whose referent cannot be personally experienced. Moreover, death is perceived by most people to be a temporally distal event and might be construed in abstract terms for this reason (Trope & Liberman, 2003; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Thinking abstractly in a particular domain can spontaneously activate a more general disposition to process information globally (e.g., Hansen et al., 2013; Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003) that, once activated, generalizes over stimulus domains. Consequently, the disposition can affect behavior and decisions in subsequent unrelated task situations (Schooler, 2002; Schooler, Fiore, & Brandimonte, 1997), the nature of which we elaborate presently.

We assumed that when individuals contemplate death, their thoughts spontaneously activate semantic concepts associated with it. However, these concepts do not always elicit anxiety. When people think about death in a way that is void of emotion, however, their motivation to defend their worldview is decreased (Simon et al., 1997) and defensive reactions may not be evident. For instance, people who watched a car accident on video showed less nationalistic bias if the video stimulated them to think about death in general than if it led them to think about dying personally (Nelson, Moore, Olivetti, & Scott, 1997). Moreover, people who are exposed to cancer-related information exhibit defensive reactions to the death-related thoughts it elicits only when they feel personally vulnerable to the specific cancer described (Arndt, Cook, Goldenberg, & Cox, 2007).

Thus, the anxiety-inducing effects of mortality salience are likely to depend on whether thoughts about one's own death are evoked and death anxiety is elicited by these thoughts. When this anxiety is *not* experienced, the effects of activating death-related semantic concepts should predominate. Our research focused on implications of this difference for multiple-choice decision making.

### *Effects of mortality salience on variety seeking*

To isolate the concept-activation and anxiety-eliciting consequences of mortality salience, we chose a task in which both factors were likely to play a role. Variety seeking, which is characterized by a tendency to distribute choices over a series of decision episodes (Ratner, Kahn, & Kahneman, 1999; Read & Loewenstein, 1995; Van Trijp, Hoyer, & Inman, 1996), was particularly useful in accomplishing this. Variety-seeking behavior can be affected by various factors, and thus it may capture the divergent effects of different components of mortality salience. For example, variety seeking can be motivated by impression management (Ratner & Kahn, 2002), a need for stimulation (Kahn & Isen, 1993), a desire to relieve boredom (Fishbach, Ratner, & Zhang, 2011), and a preference for stability (Lieberman et al., 1999).

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