



Reports

Tit for tat in the face of death: The effect of mortality salience on reciprocal behavior

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HIGHLIGHTS

- People under mortality salience strive to live up to cultural norms.
- It is indicated that mortality salience increases following the norm of reciprocity.
- In Study 1, a favor of a server led to higher tip after making mortality salient.
- In Study 2, valuing retaliation led to harsher punishment under mortality salience.
- Results show that the norm of reciprocity is an important element of people's worldview.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 October 2011

Revised 10 June 2012

Available online 16 July 2012

Keywords:

Terror management theory

Mortality salience

Norms

Reciprocal behavior

Personal norm of reciprocity

ABSTRACT

Research on terror management theory has found evidence that people under mortality salience strive to live up to salient cultural norms and values, such as egalitarianism, pacifism, or helpfulness. A basic and strong internalized norm in most human societies is the norm of reciprocity: People should support those who have supported them, and people should injure those who have injured them, respectively. In two experiments, the authors demonstrate that mortality salience increases adherence to the norm of reciprocity. In Study 1, a favor of a server led to higher tipping after making mortality salient. Study 2 indicated that mortality salience motivated participants to act according to their high dispositional relevance of the norm of negative reciprocity following an unfavorable treatment: Those participants gave less money to a person who had previously refused to help them.

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Introduction

Research on terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) has found evidence that people under mortality salience (MS) strive to live up to salient cultural norms and values, such as egalitarianism, pacifism, or helpfulness (Gailliot, Stillman, Schmeichel, Maner, & Plant, 2008; Jonas et al., 2008). Assuming that the norm of reciprocity is strongly internalized in most human societies, in the current paper we investigate the idea that MS increases the motivation to follow the norm of reciprocity.

Research on TMT and adherence to salient social norms

A large number of studies concerning the effect of people's reaction to thinking about their own death have indicated that the human animal is a cultural animal. According to TMT (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1986), culture functions as an anxiety buffer against the ever-present potential terror of death by providing a meaningful, orderly conception of reality that contains a set of standards and values. By living up to those standards, people believe that they are valuable beings

in a meaningful reality. Based on this idea, the MS hypothesis states that reminding people of their mortality should lead them to increase their defenses and bolster their cultural worldview, resulting in derogating those who violate important cultural standards and supporting those who uphold them. In their meta-analysis, Burke, Martens, and Faucher (2010) showed that 80% of a total 277 experiments significantly supported the MS hypothesis.

Research has further indicated that living up to social standards under MS means promotion of materialism and accumulation of personal wealth (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000) but sometimes also promotion of generosity toward ingroup charities (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Moreover, MS was found to motivate aggression against worldview-threatening others (McGregor et al., 1998). To explain these mixed patterns of behavior, Jonas et al. (2008) connected TMT with the focus theory of normative conduct (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991), stating that norms only influence behavior to the extent that an individual's attention is focused on the norms. That is, like every cognitive construct (e.g., Higgins & Bargh, 1987), norms have to be salient in attention or high in accessibility. This may be because people dispositionally follow a norm and/or because certain conditions of the situation itself account for the norm's salience. Based on that reasoning, Jonas et al. (2008) presented four studies in which they tested and found support for the hypothesis that after MS, people will strive to live up to the social norms that are made salient or

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activated by the situation. For example, they provided evidence that MS elicited both prosocial and prosocial attitudes toward helping children, depending on the norm that was made salient (proself vs. prosocial). Results of four studies by Gailliot et al. (2008) also supported this idea. They indicated, for example, that MS increased self-reported and actual helping behavior, but only when the cultural value of helping was salient. Thus, a consistent pattern of results were found in this literature: According to research on TMT, MS increases people's motivation to follow social norms in order to bolster their cultural worldview, depending on which cultural standards and norms are salient or activated in a specific situation.

Reciprocity: A basic value for social life

Following social norms can be a means to achieve a goal (e.g., Axelrod, 1984), but social norms can also be strongly internalized so that following them can be seen as a goal in itself (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1991; Kerr, Garst, Lewandowski, & Harris, 1997; Schlenker, 1980). A widespread internalized moral principle for social life – that has been largely neglected by TMT so far – is the norm of reciprocity (e.g., Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Compared to previously investigated social norms in TMT literature (e.g., pacifism, conservatism), the principle of reciprocity has been discussed as being fundamental for the evolutionary development of human altruism and cooperation (Field, 2004). As Gouldner (1960) stated, reciprocity is “one of the universal ‘principal components’ of moral codes” (p. 161) that exists in all known societies. The norm prescribes that people should support, and not injure, those who previously supported them (Gouldner, 1960; Uehara, 1995). A great deal of research supports the idea that a favor leads to higher compliance toward a following request of the favor-doer (e.g., Cialdini, Green, & Rusch, 1992; Edlund, Sagarin, & Johnson, 2007; Regan, 1971; Whatley, Webster, Smith, & Rhodes, 1999). Research has further indicated that reciprocal behavior is shown even in a setting where participants behave anonymously with unknown partners (e.g., Gallucci & Perugini, 2000; Goren & Bornstein, 1999; Rind & Strohmetz, 1999), supporting the idea that people see reciprocal behavior as an important social value, independent of the presence of others or external sanctions. Nevertheless, there is also evidence that reciprocity produces stronger compliance in a public condition compared to a private condition (Whatley et al., 1999). Additionally, stronger compliance occurs under self-regulatory resource depletion (Fennis, Janssen, & Vohs, 2009) or when people have a strong belief in a just world (Edlund et al., 2007).

Besides the positive form of reciprocity (returning a favor), literature also mentions a negative dimension called the principle of retaliation, purporting that people should retaliate upon those who have been detrimental to their own interests (e.g., Eisenberger, Lynch, Aselage, & Rohdieck, 2004; Gouldner, 1960; Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003). According to findings of Eisenberger et al. (2004) and Perugini et al. (2003), retributive beliefs form a unitary factor that is distinct from beliefs concerning the reciprocation of positive treatment, and are also less valued. They further demonstrated that people who strongly endorse the negative reciprocity norm are also likely to take strong revenge and, additionally, that such retributive beliefs varied in strength among individuals. This seems plausible considering that this “eye for an eye” principle contradicts widespread humanistic values, such as the inviolability of human dignity, pacifism, tolerance, or compassion (e.g., Fromm, 2005). Nevertheless, if taking revenge and reciprocating a favor are important values in people's worldview, then they should also serve a terror management function. We assume that the extent to which the norm of reciprocity becomes relevant to people differs between situations (i.e., some situations call for reciprocity, others don't) and also between the dispositional relevance between individuals (i.e., for some individuals reciprocity is highly relevant, for others not).

The present research

Based on findings of TMT research, people under MS strive to live up to social norms that are made salient or activated by the situation. Assuming that the positive norm of reciprocity is a universal, strongly internalized moral norm – and therefore an important value in people's worldview – we hypothesized that MS increases the motivation to comply with this norm in a situation that calls for reciprocating a favor (Study 1). Supposing that striving to live up to dispositional values can also serve a terror management function, we hypothesized that in cases of unfavorable treatment, MS should increase participants' motivation to retaliate when they strongly believe in the value of retaliation. This should further affect their response toward the favor-denier: Under MS, participants who strongly believe in the value of retaliation should punish more severely than should participants in the control condition (Study 2).

Study 1

In this study, we focused on participants' behavioral intentions of returning a favor under MS. Research has indicated that a favor of a server increases tip percentages (Rind & Strohmetz, 1999). Thus, in a fictitious scenario, participants read that they had received a favor from a server. Afterwards, they were asked about the amount of tip they would give. According to our idea that MS increases the motivation of reciprocating a favor because of its high value in people's worldview, people should give a higher tip under MS after having received a favor. In this case, the norm of reciprocity is activated and participants strongly strive to live up to the norm; that is, they clearly want to return the received favor by giving an exceptionally high tip.

Method

Subjects and design

Participants in this study included 69 students (36 women and 33 men) recruited on the campus of a German university ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.93$, $SD = 1.48$). They were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions in a 2 (MS: mortality vs. dentist condition) \times 2 (norm activation: favor vs. no-favor condition) between-subjects factorial design. Participation was paid and voluntary.

Procedure and measures

Participants came into the lab and were assigned to a computer by the experimenter. The cover story was as follows: Participants read that the experiment was about personality and decision making. After participants filled out the demographic measures, they received the MS or the dentist-visit control treatment, which has successfully been used in previous studies (e.g., Dechesne et al., 2003; Jonas et al., 2008): Individual participants were asked to write down the first sentence that came to their mind when they thought about their own death (mortality condition) or about their latest dentist-visit (control condition). When using such explicit death primes, a distractor is necessary to elicit effects of distal defense (Arndt, Greenberg, & Cook, 2002; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). Therefore, as in most studies on TMT, participants filled out 20 items of the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Then, they were instructed that in the following part they would receive a description of a scenario and that it would be important to read it carefully in order to have a clear, realistic picture of it. They were further told to imagine as vividly and precisely as possible how they would feel in such a situation. The scenario in the favor condition read as follows:

Imagine you go out for food at a restaurant. There you are served by the owner of the restaurant. You perceive the owner as polite

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