



Mortality salience increases death-thought accessibility and worldview defense among high Broad Autism Phenotype (BAP) individuals[☆]



Robert B. Arrowood^{*}, Cathy R. Cox, Naomi V. Ekas

Texas Christian University, 2800 S. University Dr., Fort Worth, TX 76129, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 November 2016

Received in revised form 27 February 2017

Accepted 7 March 2017

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Terror management theory

Broad Autism Phenotype

Rigidity

Mortality salience

Worldview defense

Death-thought accessibility

ABSTRACT

The Broad Autism Phenotype (BAP) is an individual difference whereby persons exhibit mild characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), including being socially aloof and having a rigid personality. Given that individuals high in BAP rigidity have difficulty adjusting to change, the present research examined whether rigid persons report greater concerns about death and adhere to their cultural beliefs following mortality salience (MS). In Study 1, we found that BAP rigidity was positively associated with greater mortality-related concerns. In Study 2, high rigid individuals evidenced increased death-thought accessibility following MS. Finally, Study 3 found that MS led to heightened worldview defense for individuals high in rigidity, while decreasing defensiveness for those low in rigidity. These results provide evidence for the moderating role of individual differences in terror management effects. Specifically, ASD characteristics in young adults, particularly in the area of rigidity, contribute to heightened death concerns and greater defensiveness.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder characterized by moderate to severe impairments in communication and social interaction (e.g., poor eye contact, lack of attention), as well as repetitive movements, limited interests or activities, and emotional distress as a function of changes in the environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The Broad Autism Phenotype (BAP; see Bolton et al., 1994; Rutter, 2000) is a term used to describe non-autistic persons who display milder traits of ASD, including being *aloof* (i.e., a lack of interest in social interactions), *rigid* (i.e., expressing little or no interest in change), and having *pragmatic language* problems (i.e., deficits in the social aspects of language; Hurley, Losh, Parlier, Reznick, & Piven, 2007). Given that individuals high in BAP rigidity experience difficulties in adjusting to change (Bolton et al., 1994; Hurley et al., 2007), the present studies examined how such persons respond to reminders of death. In light of a terror management theory (TMT) perspective suggesting that individuals adhere to their cultural beliefs when thoughts of death are salient (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), it was hypothesized that persons scoring high on BAP rigidity would experience

heightened worldview defense in response to a mortality salience (MS) manipulation. Additionally, we examined fear of mortality and death-thought accessibility scores as a function of BAP rigidity, with the expectation that higher scores would emerge given the rigid and inflexible nature of individuals' personalities.

1.1. TMT

Inspired by the work of existential theorists (e.g., Becker, 1973), TMT argues that humans' desire for life combined with their cognitive awareness of death has the potential to increase anxiety, or terror. Individuals assuage their fear of mortality by adhering to their worldview beliefs and/or by deriving self-esteem from their culture. According to TMT, a cultural worldview is a shared conception of reality that provides meaning, order, stability, permanence, and the promise of literal (e.g., heaven, nirvana) or symbolic immortality (e.g., identifying with a valued group, a *Personality and Individual Differences* publication). Self-esteem is a sense of personal value that is obtained by believing in the validity of one's cultural worldview and living up to the standards of that worldview. From the perspective of TMT, because of the important roles that faith in the cultural worldview and self-esteem play in managing existential concerns, many social behaviors are aimed at their maintenance and defense.

Over the past 30 years, a great deal of research has supported TMT's *mortality salience* (MS) hypothesis, which states that increasing the accessibility of personal mortality should increase the need for the psychological structures that provide protection against the awareness of death (see Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015 for a review). These studies generally show that reminders of mortality heighten

Abbreviations: ASD, Autism Spectrum Disorder; BAP, Broad Autism Phenotype; TMT, Terror Management Theory; DTA, Death Thought Accessibility; MS, Mortality Salience.

[☆] The authors' would like to thank Mike Kersten for his help with data collection and for reading a previous draft of the manuscript.

^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Texas Christian University, 2800 S. University Dr., Fort Worth, TX, 76129, USA.

E-mail address: r.b.arrowood@tcu.edu (R.B. Arrowood).

favorable reactions to people and ideas that support one's cultural worldview and increase negative reactions to people and ideas that threaten it. For example, after MS, Americans report greater affection for a pro-American author and their disdain for an anti-American author (Greenberg et al., 1990). The mortality-worldview connection is bi-directional in that threatening the validity of a person's worldview undermines its capacity to keep mortality concerns at bay, leading to increased death-thought accessibility (Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010). The extant literature thus indicates that cultural beliefs function, in part, to provide protection from the awareness of death.

Although TMT was initially proposed to explain the role of death concerns in the pursuit of a meaningful reality and positive evaluations of the self, there are individual differences in the degree and direction of MS effects (Landau, Sullivan, & King, 2010). Several studies have demonstrated that death-related defense mechanisms are moderated by a variety of personality characteristics, including authoritarianism (Greenberg et al., 1990), political orientation (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992), self-esteem (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997), and measures of well-being (e.g., depression, neuroticism; Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999; Simon, Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998). Adding to this work, the goal of the present research was to examine whether BAP rigidity also serves as a moderator of MS effects. Given that an attitudinally rigid person is someone who is characterized as being close-minded and less open to new experiences (Steinmetz, Loarer, & Houssemand, 2011), it was hypothesized that reminders of death would increase worldview defense and heighten mortality-related concerns for high (vs. low) BAP rigid persons.

1.2. BAP

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defines ASD as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by impairments in communication, social interaction, and repetitive and restricted behavior. Research has demonstrated that traits associated with ASD are not specific to clinical diagnoses; rather, milder, non-clinical characteristics of autism can be found in the general population (Rutter, 2000). For instance, in his study of children with autism, Kanner (1943) discovered that parents reported interest in different activities (e.g., art, science, literature), but had little to no interest in other people (Rotatori & Deisinger, 2015; Wolff, 2004). These observations led to a set of traits associated with relatives of individuals with ASD, which is now referred to as the BAP (Bolton et al., 1994; Rutter, 2000; Sucksmith, Roth, & Hoekstra, 2011). Early work on the BAP among family members of individuals with ASD showed that relatives exhibited higher rates of language, learning, cognitive, and psychiatric problems (Bartak, Rutter, & Cox, 1975; Bolton, Pickles, Murphy, & Rutter, 1998), with the prevalence of the BAP in first degree relatives being between 14 and 23% (Sasson et al., 2013). Although it is unclear whether BAP in family members is the same as BAP in persons without a family history of ASD (Ingersoll & Wainer, 2014), several studies using convenient samples of participants (e.g., college students) have replicated the results of the BAP observed in relatives with that of individuals in the general population (Jobe & White, 2007; Wainer, Ingersoll, & Hopwood, 2011).

While ASD is characterized by a specific set of diagnostic criteria, there are no accepted criteria for the BAP (Ingersoll & Wainer, 2014). Although some researchers have defined the BAP as experiencing difficulties in one area of functioning (Losh et al., 2009), other researchers have required two or more deficits needing to be present (Hurley et al., 2007). In an article review of milder phenotypic expressions of ASD, Bailey, Palferman, Heavey, and Le Couteur (1998) described some of the traits commonly associated parents and siblings of persons with ASD. These include a preference for solitude, having few friends, employing poor communication skills, and having deficits in

empathy and affection. With respect to communication, they have been shown to produce language delays, have problems with speech articulation, and they experience difficulties with reading and spelling. Although repetitive behaviors were found in only a small number of ASD relatives, Bailey et al. noted that a rigid personality type was quite common among family members of persons with ASD. Finally, with respect to the personality profile of individuals with the BAP in the general population, they have been found to score lower on the traits of extraversion and agreeableness and higher on neuroticism when administered a five-factor personality scale (Austin, 2005; Wakabayashi, Baron-Cohen, & Wheelwright, 2006).

For the past two decades, researchers have been focused on understanding the characteristics of the BAP as they believe this individual difference will yield greater insights into understanding ASD (Rotatori & Deisinger, 2015). Although a variety of structural interviews and observational ratings have been used to understand features of BAP (e.g., Autism Family History Interview [AFHI]; Bolton et al., 1994; the Modified Personality Assessment Schedule-Revised [MPAS-R]; Piven et al., 1994; the Broader Phenotype Autism Symptom Scale [BPASS]; Sasson et al., 2013), questionnaires are also available to study this individual difference variable. The Broad Autism Phenotype Questionnaire (BAPQ; Hurley et al., 2007), which was used in the current work, was created to assess BAP characteristics in relatives of individuals with ASD. As a result, the scale has been shown to have high convergent validity with interview assessments of BAP (e.g., MPAS-R), and strong test-retest and interrater reliability among parents of children with ASD (Hurley et al., 2007).

Several recent studies, however, have used the BAPQ to assess personality characteristics in college students (Jobe & White, 2007; Lampert & Turner, 2014; Trevisan & Birmingham, 2016; Wainer et al., 2011), with other work demonstrating that the BAPQ is correlated in meaningful ways with self-report measures of interpersonal difficulties and psychopathology (e.g., depression, anxiety) in non-clinical populations (Ingersoll, Hopwood, Wainer, & Donnellan, 2011; Wainer, Block, Donnellan, & Ingersoll, 2013). Importantly, Wainer et al. (2013) found approximately 18% of non-diagnosed college students' score above the clinical cutoffs for the BAP.

1.3. The present research

Combining research on the BAP with a TMT perspective, the present work examined the associative link between characteristics of the BAP and concerns about personal mortality. In developing the BAPQ, Hurley et al. (2007) recognized that three individual difference variables occur more frequently in parents of ASD children than other BAP traits. These include *pragmatic language problems*, *aloof personality*, and *rigid personality*. Pragmatic language refers to an ability to use language in specific contexts and for specific reasons (Prutting & Kitchner, 1987). These individuals experience difficulties with the social aspects of language, resulting in an inability to communicate effectively or to hold reciprocal, fluid conversations (Whitehouse, Coon, Miller, Salisbury, & Bishop, 2010). Social aloofness is characterized by having limited interest in, and experiencing reduced enjoyment from, social interactions. This trait has been found to be associated with feelings of shyness, anxiety, hypersensitivity, and/or being overly-conscientious (Sasson et al., 2013). Finally, individuals scoring high on BAP rigidity have been shown to have a strong preference for routine and experience difficulty in adjusting to change. These persons may become upset when their routines deviate away from expectations, or they may become hesitant in learning new ways of doing things because of alterations in long-held strategies (Hurley et al., 2007).

Utilizing the BAPQ assessment, Study 1 was largely exploratory to see if any of the characteristics of BAP correlated with fear of mortality scores. We were specifically interested in the trait of rigidity given that the inflexibility of persons' belief systems may make them particularly vulnerable to the awareness of death. This is consistent with prior

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5035764>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5035764>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)