



## Terror management theory and scrupulosity: An experimental investigation

Thomas A. Fergus, David P. Valentiner\*

Department of Psychology, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 8 September 2011

Received in revised form

31 December 2011

Accepted 19 January 2012

Available online 1 February 2012

#### Keywords:

Scrupulosity

Terror management theory (TMT)

"Not just right experience"

Shame

Guilt

### ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the applicability of Terror Management Theory (TMT) to scrupulosity using a sample of nonclinical college students ( $N=92$ ). More specifically, we examined whether scrupulosity potentiated the relationship between exposure to conscious reminders of death (i.e., mortality salience) and four variables of interest (mistake-checking behavior, "not just right experience," shame, and guilt). Results were that individuals engaged in significantly greater mistake-checking behavior, as well as experienced significantly heightened "not just right experience," shame, and guilt in response to the mistake-checking task, following mortality salience at higher versus lower levels of scrupulosity. These patterns of relations were not found in a control condition. Finally, a "not just right experience," but not shame or guilt, mediated the potentiating effect of scrupulosity in relation to the increased mistake-checking behavior following mortality salience. Implications of these results for improving our conceptualization and treatment of scrupulosity are discussed.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Scrupulosity is a subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) (Greenberg & Huppert, 2010) that is marked by "persistent doubts about sin and irresistible urges to perform excessive religious behavior" (Abramowitz, Huppert, Cohen, Tolin, & Cahill, 2002, p. 825). Despite its long history as a psychological condition of interest, little systematic research has been conducted to examine scrupulosity (Miller & Hedges, 2008). To date, the available literature has largely focused on applying the cognitive-behavioral perspective of OCD to scrupulosity (e.g., Moore & Abramowitz, 2007; Nelson, Abramowitz, Whiteside, & Deacon, 2006). Although such studies have advanced our understanding of scrupulosity, other tenable perspectives of scrupulosity remain untested.

#### 1.1. An existential approach to scrupulosity

The existential perspective of scrupulosity is one such perspective. This perspective is based on the notion that "death anxiety, and its accompanying images of an afterlife, may play an influential role in the development of scrupulosity" (Miller & Hedges, 2008, p. 1048). Such existential concerns are central to Terror Management Theory (TMT; see Arndt and Vess (2008), for a recent review of TMT). Despite parallels between the existential

perspective of scrupulosity and TMT, no known published studies have examined whether TMT might allow for greater insight into the phenomenology of scrupulosity. The present study sought to examine this possibility.

TMT asserts that the evolution of humans' cognitive abilities led to the awareness of the inevitability of death. This awareness, coupled with the desire for life, leads humans to suffer from an intense fear of death (Arndt & Vess, 2008). However, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, and Schimel (2004) noted that humans quell their fear of death through two primary ways. First, humans developed cultural worldviews that provide literal or symbolic immortality to those who follow its standards. Forms of literal immortality include religious aspects of culture that promise a form of afterlife to individuals who follow its standards and teachings, whereas forms of symbolic immortality include individuals feeling a part of something that will transcend beyond their physical existence (e.g., connections to family members, professions, ideologies). Second, humans engage in self-esteem striving. According to TMT theorists, self-esteem represents the degree to which humans think they are meeting standards of value associated with important worldviews (Pyszczynski et al., 2004).

TMT theorists posit that religion is a prominent cultural worldview that allows humans to buffer their fear of death (Vail et al., 2010). Despite the protection afforded by a religious cultural worldview, this worldview can also lead to substantial distress. Edmondson, Park, Chaudoir, and Wortmann (2008) asserted that one type of distress associated with such a worldview is *religious struggle*. Specifically, Edmondson et al. opined that "in religious struggle, people perceive that God continues to

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +(815) 753 7086; fax: +(815) 753 8088.  
E-mail address: [dvalentiner@niu.edu](mailto:dvalentiner@niu.edu) (D.P. Valentiner).

exist and exert control but does not provide them with care and comfort, and this perception impairs the effectiveness of their religious worldview in defending against death terror” (p. 754).

Scrupulous individuals may be viewed as being in a state of religious struggle. Specifically, religion appears to be a cardinal cultural worldview for scrupulous individuals, as suggested by the connection between scrupulosity and religiosity (Abramowitz et al., 2002). However, scrupulous individuals are plagued by perceptions of having engaged in sinful behavior and thus may doubt their relationship with God. For example, Van Ornum (1997) noted that many scrupulous individuals feel “they committed sin against the Holy Spirit. This offense, mentioned briefly in the New Testament, suggests a type of alienation from God that even God won’t forgive” (p. 22). Edmondson et al. (2008) noted that individuals experience a sense of abandonment from their religious cultural worldview when in a state of religious struggle and that this sense of abandonment leads them to think that they are not valuable members of their religious cultural worldview. Consequently, and consistent with TMT, individuals have difficulty buffering their fear of death when in a state of religious struggle (Edmondson et al., 2008). Given their apparent state of religious struggle, scrupulous individuals might thus be conceptualized as lacking an effective buffer of their fear of death.

### 1.2. TMT and scrupulosity

As of a meta-analytic review completed by Burke, Martens, and Faucher (2010), approximately 277 studies examined effects related to TMT. The majority of these studies examined the mortality salience (MS) hypothesis. This hypothesis states that the extent to which “a psychological structure provides protection against fear, reminders of the source of that fear should increase one’s need for that structure” (Pyszczynski et al., 2004, p. 439). Pursuant to the present study, a few studies have examined the MS hypothesis in relation to psychopathology (Simon, Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998; Simon, Greenberg, Harmon-Jones, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1996; Strachan et al., 2007). For example, Strachan et al. found that MS exacerbated anxiety disorder symptoms, including OCD symptoms (i.e., compulsive hand washing), in individuals with high existing anxiety disorder symptoms. Strachan et al. purported that individuals with anxiety disorders have a poorly buffered fear of death, and thus “anxiety disorders may stem from maladaptive attempts to cope with insufficiently buffered death anxiety” (p. 1149). Given that scrupulosity is best conceptualized as an anxiety disorder (i.e., a subtype of OCD; Greenberg & Huppert, 2010), Strachan et al.’s findings, and the existential perspective of scrupulosity (Miller & Hedges, 2008), there is strong support for the notion that features of scrupulosity might represent an attempt to quell an underlying fear of death.

More specifically, and consistent with findings from Strachan et al. (2007), we propose that compulsive behaviors associated with scrupulosity might represent one way in which scrupulous individuals attempt to cope with an insufficiently buffered fear of death. Checking is one purportedly common type of compulsive behavior associated with scrupulosity, with Nelson et al. (2006) noting that scrupulous individuals frequently check with religious authorities, as well as for harm or mistakes. Compulsive behaviors within scrupulosity are believed to function as a way for scrupulous individuals to restore their relationship with God (Miller & Hedges, 2008). As such, compulsive behaviors might be conceptualized as a way for scrupulous individuals to maintain the belief that they are meeting standards of value associated with their religious cultural worldview.

Many compulsive behaviors seen within OCD can be viewed as attempts to achieve a perfect state (e.g., Pitman, 1987). Moreover,

scrupulous individuals often appear to demonstrate perfectionistic tendencies in relation to their religious cultural worldview. For example, Greenberg and Huppert (2010) noted:

“Most religions do not expect perfectionism from their adherents. People are expected to try their best but also expected to fall short at times. It is within this framework that the religious scrupulous patient gets stuck: is it not necessary to devote an excessive amount of energy to ‘try one’s best?’” (p. 287).

More broadly, scrupulous individuals are typically highly perfectionistic in most activities of daily living, with Van Ornum (1997) asserting that scrupulous individuals “try to do everything right or they try to do one small thing perfectly” (p. 160). In support of these noted links between scrupulosity and perfectionism, empirical studies have found that measures of these two constructs share significant moderate correlations ( $r$ s ranging from 0.27 to 0.40; Inozu, Clark, & Karanci, 2012).

It is our position that perfection-seeking behavior, such as compulsive behaviors, seen in scrupulosity might serve as a way for individuals to engage in self-esteem striving in relation to their religious cultural worldview. As described earlier, self-esteem can be defined as the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as meeting important standards of value associated with cultural worldviews (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). Religion appears to be a dominant cultural worldview for scrupulous individuals. Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, and Hamilton (1990) purport that goals associated with self-esteem striving are hierarchically organized, such that lower level standards of value (e.g., getting an article published) need to be met in order to meet higher level standards of value (e.g., receiving recognition for research). Pyszczynski et al.’s (1990) hierarchical conceptualization of self-esteem striving might help account for the compulsive behaviors, as well as the perfectionistic tendencies more broadly, evidenced by scrupulous individuals. More specifically, scrupulous individuals might seek to be perfect in most facets of their lives, in part, to help maximize perceptions that higher level standards of value are attained (e.g., thinking that they are a valuable member of their religious cultural worldview). Following from TMT, such perceptions would ultimately lead to an adequately buffered fear of death.

### 1.3. Present study

With the above information in mind, the present study examined the applicability of TMT to scrupulosity. More specifically, we sought to extend Strachan et al.’s (2007) findings to the scrupulosity domain by examining whether conscious reminders of death (i.e., MS) exacerbated perfection-seeking behavior for highly scrupulous individuals. We chose to examine mistake-checking behavior in the present study. As noted above, mistake-checking behavior is an important compulsive behavior associated with scrupulosity (Nelson et al., 2006). Further, links between checking behavior and perfectionism have been long noted in the OCD literature (e.g., Bouchard, Rheaume, & Ladouceur, 1999; Frost & Steketee, 1997; Tolin, Woods, & Abramowitz, 2003).

As discussed, the MS hypothesis suggests that psychological entities that provide protection against an underlying fear of death should be exacerbated under conditions of conscious reminders of death (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). As such, if perfection-seeking behavior functions as a buffer against fear of death for scrupulous individuals, then highly scrupulous individuals should evidence increased perfection-seeking behavior under conditions of MS. Strachan et al. (2007) found that MS only exacerbated behavioral manifestations of anxiety (e.g., compulsive hand washing) for individuals with high levels of anxiety symptoms. As such, the MS effect observed in relation to anxiety pathology appears to depend on levels of anxiety symptoms.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/912374>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/912374>

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