



How terrorism news reports increase prejudice against outgroups: A terror management account

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ABSTRACT

Three studies tested predictions derived from terror management theory (TMT) about the effects of terrorism news on prejudice. Exposure to terrorism news should confront receivers with thoughts about their own death, which, in turn, should increase prejudice toward outgroup members. Non-Muslim (Studies 1–3) and Muslim (Study 3) participants were exposed to news about either Islamic terrorist acts or to control news. When Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered in Amsterdam by an Islamic extremist during data collection of Study 1, this event was included as a naturally occurring factor in the design. Consistent with TMT, terrorism news and Van Gogh's murder increased death-related thoughts. Death-related thoughts, in turn, increased prejudiced attitudes toward outgroup members, especially when participants had low self-esteem, and when terrorism was psychologically close. Terrorism news may inadvertently increase prejudiced attitudes towards outgroups when it reminds viewers of their own mortality.

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Introduction

In recent years, terrorist attacks have become a salient threat to Western countries. News broadcasts frequently report about the threat of Muslim extremist terrorist acts, using vivid pictures of terrorist bombings, buildings crashing down, and people being killed in the name of the Islam and Allah. At the same time, different socio-cultural and religious groups appear to be drifting apart. For example, European adolescents set ablaze Muslim schools after news reports on Muslim extremist terrorism, and individuals with an Arab background have been reported to foster more extreme anti-European sentiments (BBC, 2004). This rift between groups with different backgrounds may not be a coincidence; the immense fear elicited by terrorism news reports may inadvertently increase prejudice against outgroups.

The present research tests the effects of terrorism news on prejudice against Arabs and Europeans. Terror management theory provides the theoretical foundation for the research. Terrorism news was manipulated across studies, and also induced by real-world events in Study 1. On November 2nd, 2004, the well-known Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered by an Islamic extremist, two months after the release of his highly controversial film about the abuse of Muslim women, titled *Submission*. Because the murder occurred in the middle of data collection, it allowed us

to test whether real-life terrorism news produces the same effects as our experimental manipulation of terrorism news.

A terror management account of prejudice

According to terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), human beings are biologically predisposed toward survival, just like all animals. The uniquely human capacity for self-reflection, however, makes people aware that someday they will die. TMT proposes that thoughts of one's inevitable death create a potential for terror. To avoid becoming paralyzed by this terror, people immerse themselves in cultural systems and worldviews that offer them literal immortality (e.g., the promise of an afterlife after one's death) or symbolic immortality (e.g., being remembered by others after one's death). Faith in one's cultural worldview thus functions as a buffer against death-related anxiety.

TMT provides a powerful theoretical framework for explaining the origins and consequences of terrorism and political violence (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2003). Recent studies support a TMT account of the origins of political ideology and violence by showing that mortality salience increased violent resistance against political interventions (Hirschberger & Ein-Dor, 2006), support for violent military interventions (Pyszczynski et al., 2006) and willingness to sacrifice one's life for political or religious ideology (Pyszczynski et al., 2006; Routledge & Arndt, 2007). Because the main goal of terrorist acts is the 'intentional generation of mas-

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sive fear' (Cooper, 2001, p. 883), terrorism news may also increase worldview defense – such as prejudice against outgroups, or increased support for one's country and government. This may be especially likely for terrorist attacks that are perceived as psychologically or physically close.

Unfortunately, empirical evidence about the consequences of terrorism is mainly indirect, by focusing on the role of mortality salience rather than directly testing the effects of terrorism news. One study showed that experimentally induced thoughts of death enhanced support for US president George W. Bush. Also, priming participants subliminally with 9/11 stimuli increased death-related thoughts (Landau et al., 2004). Another study showed that after a mortality salience manipulation, securely attached participants increased their support for a liberal presidential candidate, whereas less securely attached participants increased their support for a conservative presidential candidate (Weise et al., 2008). One study conducted more direct tests of the effects of terrorism news reports, but could not establish effects on death thought accessibility (Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007).

The present studies add to the literature by providing an extensive test of a TMT account of terror-induced prejudice. A TMT account of prejudice differs from other perspectives in three important ways. First, several theorists have argued that prejudice is an inevitable consequence of categorization processes (e.g., Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1981). For instance, when news reports link Arabs to terrorist acts, this automatically reinforces the 'Arab equals bad' stereotype, thus increasing prejudice against Arabs. In contrast, TMT proposes that prejudice can be regarded as a specific type of worldview defense that results from the suppression of death-related thoughts. Contrary to a stereotype generalization account of prejudice, TMT attributes a pivotal role to thoughts about death in predicting prejudice. However, empirical support for a link between death-related thoughts and prejudiced attitudes is lacking. Although there is evidence that mortality reminders can increase worldview defenses against people of a different race or religion (Greenberg, Schimel, Martens, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 2001; Greenberg et al., 1990), death-related thoughts have remained the missing link.

This research tests the full causal chain from terrorism news to death-related thoughts to prejudice against outgroup members. The classical TMT account is that death-related thoughts mediate between terrorism news and prejudice. We compare these findings to a model in which death-related thoughts moderate the relationship between terrorism news and prejudice. This is reminiscent of well-known priming theories of news effects (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). According to these theories, news determines not so much what people think, but what they think about (the agenda setting effect, McCombs & Shaw, 1972). What people think about, in turn, becomes an important evaluation standard for judging 'reality' (the media priming effect, Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). For example, news about economic crisis may increase the accessibility of thoughts and fears about such a crisis in the public, which, in turn, may 'prime' public perceptions of employment policy, or political actors, and cause a shift in voting behavior. Likewise, terrorism news reports may increase the accessibility of thoughts of one's own mortality, which, in turn, may become an important evaluation standard for judging outgroup members, public policies, and politicians. Studies 1 and 2 test both mediation and moderation models of terrorism news effects.

A second difference between a TMT account of prejudice and other accounts concerns the role of self-esteem. TMT proposes that self-esteem protects individuals from the anxiety that arises as they become aware of their own demise, and thus functions as a buffer against mortality reminders (Greenberg et al., 1992, 1993; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). The anxiety buffering function of self-esteem is unique to a TMT account of prejudice and sets it apart from an intergroup threat account of terrorism news effects on prejudice.

According to intergroup threat accounts, terrorism news poses a threat to one's group and therefore threatens collective and personal self-esteem, which in turn affects reactions to outgroup members (see Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006, for a meta-analysis). Importantly, in conditions of threat, high self-esteem promotes rather than reduces prejudice (e.g., Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987). In contrast, TMT proposes that in conditions of a specific threat of death, high self-esteem reduces rather than promotes prejudice. However, empirical support for this proposition is lacking. Study 2 is the first to test the effects of self-esteem on terror-induced prejudice.

A third difference between a TMT account of prejudice and other accounts concerns the role of specific outgroups. According to a stereotype generalization account of terror-induced prejudice, news about Muslim extremist terrorist threats is most likely to increase prejudice against Arabs among Westerners, because the stereotype "Arab = bad" generalizes to all individuals who are thought to belong to this socio-cultural group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In contrast, TMT proposes that terror-induced prejudice is not contingent upon the socio-cultural group portrayed in the news, or upon a viewer's background. Rather, terrorism news may increase prejudice against any outgroup, regardless of a viewer's socio-cultural background, when it confronts viewers with their own mortality. Thus, terrorism news may increase prejudice against Arabs for Europeans, and prejudice against Europeans for Arabs. This assertion is tested in Study 3.

Overview

Three studies tested the effects of news on terrorism on prejudice against outgroups. According to TMT, terrorism news may increase prejudice against outgroups when it confronts viewers with their own mortality. In Study 1 we manipulated news on terrorism and included the murder of filmmaker Van Gogh as a real-world factor in the design, and tested whether death-related thoughts mediated or moderated the effects of terrorism news on prejudice. Study 2 extended these findings by testing whether the effects on death-related thoughts and prejudice are mitigated by self-esteem. Finally, Study 3 tested the effects of terrorism news on prejudice against outgroups among Muslim and non-Muslim respondents.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants viewed news content about Islamic terrorist attacks or about the Olympic Games (control). Theo van Gogh was murdered by an Islamic extremist in the middle of data collection. Thus, half of the participants in Study 1 were also exposed to Van Gogh's murder. We test the classical TMT model in which death-related thoughts mediate the relationship between terrorism news and prejudice, and compare it to a model in which death-related thoughts moderate the relationship between terrorism news and prejudice.

Method

Participants and design

To ensure a diverse sample, 100 white European volunteers (40 men, 60 women) recruited via advertisements across different regions of the Netherlands. To avoid a selection bias, participants were told that the researchers were studying a variety of issues (e.g., news content, multicultural societies). The mean age of participants was 35 ($SD = 10$ years). About 48% of the participants were Protestant, 10% Catholic, and 42% were atheist. None were Muslim.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups in a 2 (terrorism news vs. Olympic game news) between-subjects

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