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Brief Report

Mortality salience and namesaking: Does thinking about death make people want to name their children after themselves?

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ABSTRACT

According to terror management theory, people cope with the awareness of death by investing in practices that lead to symbolic immortality. The purpose of the present research was to investigate whether naming children after oneself stems from a desire to symbolically extend one's life. Participants were primed with thoughts of death or a control topic and then asked the likelihood that they would name future offspring after themselves or relatives. Results showed that people in the mortality salience condition reported a greater likelihood of naming their children after themselves, but not after relatives. Attachment orientation moderated this effect in that anxious individuals in the mortality salience condition expressed an even greater desire to name their children after themselves.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2000, former heavyweight boxing champion George Foreman appeared in several commercials for Meineke Discount Mufflers. One of the ads featured Foreman and five of his children. In the ad, Foreman stated to the audience that his trust in the company's integrity could be assured by the fact that he had "included George, George, George, George, and Georgetta" in the commercial alongside him. Some viewers may have been perplexed by Foreman's comment—surely he did not name all of his children after himself? However, the line was not a gimmick. Foreman did, in fact, give all of his children his own name.

George Foreman is certainly not the only individual to name his child after himself or another family member. Landmark studies conducted in the 1960s and 1980s found that nearly 70% of boys and 50% of girls were named after a relative (Alford, 1988; Rossi, 1965). It is important to note that, while some parents may choose to give their child a first name that is the same as another relative's (as in the case of Foreman), the tradition of giving children family names is not limited to this specific form. For example, a mother and daughter may share the same middle name or a father may choose to use his own name as his daughter's middle name (as in the case of another of Foreman's daughters, "Freeda George").

Why do people choose to name their children after themselves or a loved one? Some researchers have argued that the desire to *namesake* (naming a child after another person) serves an evolutionary purpose. For example, namesaking can be thought of as a method of conveying genetic relatedness, thereby increasing the feelings of attachment experienced by the child's parents. A study of single mothers provided support for this claim, in that children who were named after the purported father received more contact and financial assistance from this man compared to children who were not namesaked in this way (Furstenberg & Talvitie, 1979). However, research conducted by McAndrew, King, and Honoroff (2002) found mixed support for the notion that namesaking serves an evolutionary function. On the one hand, males were more likely to be namesaked than females, which was predicted given that names are a limited resource that should be invested in the child for whom wealth and status matter the most. On the other hand, girls were not any more likely to be namesaked from the paternal versus maternal side of the family, which was predicted given paternal uncertainty. In sum, evolutionary theory may help to explain the phenomenon of namesaking, but only to a limited extent.

Recent research in terror management theory may help to shed new light on the namesaking process. The "terror" of terror management theory stems from the conflict that people are programmed to survive, yet also have the ability to understand their own mortality (Becker, 1973). To deal with this terror, people rely on two mechanisms. First, people cling to cultural worldviews that provide them with a sense of symbolic immortality by allowing them to feel a part of something that is more enduring. For instance, people who have been reminded of their own death tend to increase their preference for people who share their beliefs (Greenberg et al., 1990). Second, people act in ways that enhance their self-esteem and are looked upon positively by a culture

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(Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). For example, Mikulincer and Florian (2002) found that reminding people of death led them to attribute positive outcomes to internal causes and negative outcomes to external causes, thereby bolstering self-esteem.

Several researchers (Fritsche et al., 2007; Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005) have suggested that having children may be another way of managing existential terror. Not only can having children increase one's feelings of self-worth, but having children can also result in both a symbolic and literal sense of immortality. For instance, people can attain symbolic immortality through their children's memories of them or through the values, beliefs, and characteristics that are passed along. Immortality can also be obtained through children in a more literal sense, in that approximately 50% of a person's genes are passed onto his or her child—a child who is potentially then perceived as a physical extension of oneself. In a series of studies, researchers had participants write about either their own death (the "mortality salience" condition) or a control topic and then answer questions regarding how many children they would like to have in the future. Results demonstrated that men in the mortality salience condition desired more children compared to men in the control condition (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005). In a similar study, researchers found that both men and women were more likely to desire children following mortality salience (Fritsche et al., 2007).

Assuming children provide a means to defend against the terrors of mortality, it is possible that naming one's child after oneself would fulfill a similar purpose. To investigate this issue, participants in the present study were primed with either thoughts of death or of failing an exam and were then asked how likely they would be to name their future children after themselves or various relatives. It is unclear whether the practice of naming a child after another relative also would serve the purpose of symbolically extending one's own life. On the one hand, perhaps namesaking after relatives serves a similar purpose because this individual shares one's own genes or because there is an emotional bond to the person whose name is being carried on. On the other hand, it is not one's own life that is symbolically represented.

There may be other factors that interact with mortality salience to influence this namesaking desire. Specifically, attachment orientation has the potential to be relevant because it has been found to be related to the appraisal of stressful events and methods of coping with these events (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995), as well as to the fear of death (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998). Indeed, research has demonstrated that attachment moderates the effects of mortality salience in that, following reminders of death, highly anxious individuals (who are characterized by their fear of rejection and constant worry about a relationship) and highly avoidant individuals (who are characterized by their lack of trust and reliance on others) are *more* likely to respond with an activation of worldview defenses (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). Mikulincer and Florian (2000) argued that more secure individuals (who are lower in anxiety and avoidance) were less likely to activate worldview defenses because of their strong internal resources that allow them to deal with distress. Given these findings, it may be the case that both anxious and avoidant individuals will respond to mortality salience with an increased desire to namesake. On the other hand, it is possible, considering differences in prototypical functioning in regards to relationships with others, that anxious and avoidant individuals will differentially respond concerning the desire to namesake. Specifically, individuals high in avoidance tend to prefer emotional distance from others and adopt a self-reliant orientation, perhaps making it less likely that they would respond to death concerns with a desire to behave in a manner (namesake) that would represent a close association with another individual. Individuals high in anxiety, however, tend to have a strong need for closeness, which would potentially lead to a greater desire to namesake.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 116 undergraduates from a Midwestern university who participated in exchange for course credit. The median age was 19 (M = 19.13, SD = 1.17). Fifty-one percent of participants were female.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants first completed a demographics survey and the Experiences in Close-Relationships-Revised inventory (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), a 36-item questionnaire designed to measure attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. Cronbach's alpha for the present sample was .90 for anxiety and .94 for avoidance.

Participants were then randomly assigned to write about either their own death or a control topic with an aversive outcome (i.e., failing an exam). Specifically, they were asked to write about the emotions that thinking about the experience aroused in them as well as what they thought would happen as this experience occurred and afterward. Participants then completed a crossword puzzle as a filler task.

Participants were then asked to imagine that they were to have a child in the next 5 years that was the same gender as him or herself. Participants were asked four questions about the likelihood that they would name the child after themselves. Specifically, they were asked the likelihood of giving their future child their own first name (e.g., Michael James naming his son Michael), giving their future child a middle name that is the same as their own first name (e.g., Michael James naming his son Ryan Michael), giving their child a middle name that is the same as their middle name (e.g., Karen Marie naming her daughter Jessica Marie), and giving their child a variant of their own name (e.g., Carol naming her daughter Caroline). Response options ranged from one (not very likely) to seven (very likely).

Participants were asked similar questions regarding the likelihood of giving their children their own mothers', fathers', grandmothers', and grandfathers' names. In each case, the question specified that the child was the same gender as the target individual (e.g., "How likely would you be to give your son a first name that is the same as your father's first name?").

3. Results

For the sake of simplicity, the scores for the questions concerning each individual target were averaged together to create a composite score for each target. In other words, the responses concerning the likelihood of participants giving a child their own first name, a middle name that is the same as their first name, their same middle name, and a variant of their name were averaged together into a composite score (Cronbach's alpha = .61). Average scores for father, mother, grandfather, and grandmother were computed in the same way (Cronbach's alpha = .69, .66, .82, and .71, respectively).

To determine whether thoughts of death, attachment, or the interaction between these variables influenced the naming of one's offspring after oneself, anxiety and avoidance were centered in relation to their mean and condition was dummy coded such that the MS condition was coded as 1 and the control condition was coded as −1. In Step 1, the composite score for participants' own names being used for the offspring was regressed on condition, anxiety, and avoidance. In Step 2, the interactions between anxiety and condition and avoidance and condition were entered.