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Could Social Media be a Mortality Salience Prime?

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Social media has had a profound impact on society. It has changed how people interact

with each other. People can share updates on their lives, make new friends, and so much more -

all digitally. It has become not only a world of its own, but also a part of people's daily lives.

Many studies have been done on how social media impacts humans - be it their relationships or

mental health. However, there is a gap in research when it comes to social media's possible role

in Terror Management Theory (TMT).

Mortality Salience (MS), a cornerstone of TMT, is normally triggered by reminding

people of their mortality. This can be through in-person events, interactions, objects, and news

articles. MS causes people to become more defensive of their worldviews and, oftentimes, more

aggressive to opposing worldviews. Interestingly, this often occurs in interactions on social

media platforms. It is possible that social media is a death prime. However, research has not been

done to see if the reason for these responses is due to TMT or something else.

Self-Awareness

Humans possess self-awareness, which is why they are aware that they will eventually

die. Arguably, humans are uniquely aware of their impending mortality and their own physical

limitations (Greenberg, Simon, Harmon-Jones, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1995). The

awareness of death has pushed humans to survive. It's evident that humans seem to have explicit

and implicit drives to continue existing (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus,

1994). These drives combined with humans' unique death awareness creates internal turmoil. For humans, the desire for a long life and the subconscious awareness of mortality can lead to terror (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). According to TMT, MS results from this death awareness. MS effects are directly caused by the thought of one's mortality (Greenberg, Simon, Harmon-Jones, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1995). Psychologists have come up with many hypotheses for why these effects occur. Some psychologists believe that anxiety of one's individual mortality may even be the underlying mechanism of psychological dysfunctions (Iverach, Menzies, & Menzies, 2014). Regardless of the reason for this connection, there can be no doubt death anxiety triggers MS effects.

According to TMT, the "conflict between humans' instinctual drive for survival and their awareness of their own mortality" produces existential anxiety that can be difficult to manage (Baka, Derbis, & Maxfield, 2012). TMT also states that much of the behavior humans engage in is a result of the need to cope with mortality (Baka, Derbis, & Maxfield, 2012). Research from terror management theory may suggest that the fear of death not only affects human behavior and the way we carry ourselves, however, it does not affect us in a superficial or logical way (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). It also affects human behavior in the way that we are motivated to maintain a positive image in our cultural worldview in order to mask the anxiety associated with our certain mortality (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Humans with high anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem may become either defensive or dismissive towards others' feelings of opposing worldviews. Subconsciously, humans may become overly judgemental and express odd behaviors as a result of their deep fear of mortality that they hide (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

According to the late Cultural Anthropologist Ernest Becker, fear of death is caused by the methods individuals use to cope with the subject (Hardie-Bick, 2015). He also explained that we must be highly aware of the cultural factors around us. The exposure to others reactions towards death may produce existential anxiety (Hardie-Bick, 2015). However, it is possible to help employ strategies to make our world less cruel and to become content with the inevitability of our own mortality. Becker explains that, "living with an awareness of the inevitability of death explains why people need to feel they can continue to have influence after they have died" (Hardie-Bick, 2015). Most people who become famous are not widely known until after their death.

According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), weakening people's convicted worldviews may rapidly provoke the fear of death (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007). Additionally, worldview threatening information causes death-related thoughts to become more accessible (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007).

With an increase in exposure to terrorist events due to a rapid increase in technology use over the past three decades, people have become more aware of their own mortality and it has even promoted more high-profile violence (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, & Vermeulen, 2009).

Worries about life after college, the purpose of life, thinking about large physical pain, and giving a speech in front of a large audience do not actually produce parallel effects in relation to mortality salience (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

Effects of Death Anxiety

Since humans are aware of their mortality, they need a way to buffer their death anxiety. Without a buffer, humans can have extremely negative responses to reminders of death and,

therefore, opposing worldviews. Exposure to terrorist attacks increases an individual's thoughts about their own mortality. This increases worldview defenses and thoughts of prejudice against those with opposing worldviews (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, & Vermeulen, 2009). Different groups of people respond to death anxiety differently. For example, there is a drastic difference between responses based on whether one is a minority or not. It has been found that the more shock a minority experiences while in contact with law enforcement, there is a significant decrease in the number of law enforcement officers who are killed. The opposite is true for caucasian non-minorities. Their increase in shock increases the likelihood of law enforcement officers experiencing violent retaliation (Bejan, Hickman, Parkin, & Pozo, 2018).

Culture Buffers Death Anxiety

Humans created culture as a way to buffer death anxiety. Cultural worldviews and self-esteem buffer death anxiety, because this helps individuals believe that they are living up to their worldview's cultural standards (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). As humans, we all strive to have a continued existence for longer lives. Many times, this can provoke a fear of death within us. This is why we may become defensive about our cultural worldview. It is also why our self-esteem may take a negative hit. Mortality salience effects may be the reason that prejudice, racism, nationalism, defensiveness, authoritarian behavior, and sexual attraction exist (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

Reminders of Death Increase Culture

When humans are reminded of their death, they increase culture to better buffer MS effects. According to the Mortality Salience hypothesis, "reminders of mortality should increase the need for psychological resources that buffer anxieties about death" (Vess & Arndt, 2008). Individuals are motivated by the concept of blocking out death-related thoughts in order to

heighten their productivity and quality of life (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2001). An individual who is experiencing the effects of mortality salience has a higher need of validation towards their own cultural worldview (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992).

Studies have shown that awareness of one's own mortality will likely increase defensiveness towards their own culture (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997). This is what is known in the social sciences field as ethnocentrism, where one believes their culture is superior to others. Previous research based on TMT concludes that a fear of death increases negative reactions to those with a differing worldview (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). Past research has concluded that constantly reminding individuals of their mortality increases one's negative response to those with opposing worldviews or beliefs (Greenberg, Simon, Harmon-Jones, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1995). Those who agree with and validate an individual's cultural worldview gain increased positive reactions from that individual (Greenberg, Simon, Harmon-Jones, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1995). Cultural worldviews help to provide the coating of our certainty towards our own mortality, which helps us as humans to find comfort in a world of uncertainty, especially towards the uncomfortable subject of death.

Fear of death does not affect all equally. Death anxiety can be affected by one's conviction to their worldview, political opinions, level of depression, and self-esteem.

The stronger an individual's convictions are to their worldview, the less fear and anxiety they show to the threat of their own life (Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999). Individuals subconsciously turn to the worldview from the culture they were exposed to early in life when confronted with the reality of their death (Baka, Derbis, & Maxfield, 2012).

Liberals and conservatives (in political terms) have different viewpoints when it comes to thoughts of death (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). It was found that due to lower authoritarian levels and more open-mindedness in liberals, conservatives may actually be more threatened by opposing worldviews than their counterparts (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992).

It has been found that individuals who have been clinically diagnosed with mild depression are more likely to engage in defensive behaviors when exposed to negative views of their own cultural worldview (Simon, Greenberg, Jones, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1996). This has been proven to be especially the case after being exposed to their own mortality (Simon, Greenberg, Jones, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1996). What may also increase irrational behaviors is the fact that individuals who are mildly-depressed is the fact that they lose touch with reality while losing faith in themselves and others around them.

Those who had higher levels of depression reported having more defense towards their own worldview and strongly opposed those who went against it (Simon, Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1994). This is a symptom of those who are clinically depressed, as these people tend to have lost hope and grip on reality. As a solution, it is proposed to take people who are mildly-depressed and have them contemplate their mortality, having them see their worldview as important, while being open to other worldviews that may work for them (Simon, Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1994).

An individual's level of self-esteem has a great impact on how they perceive death (Vess & Arndt, 2008). Participants with low self-esteem who are reminded of their own deaths have given more positive feedback to those who validate their worldview and negative feedback to those who oppose it (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997). According to

Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, "The mortality salience (MS) hypothesis states that reminders of mortality increase the need for faith in the worldview and thus increase favorable responses to anyone or anything that supports the worldview and unfavorable responses to anyone or anything that threatens it" (1997). It is the human need for comfort and certainty for a subject that tends to be very uncomfortable and turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Social support can also have a major impact on death anxiety. There has been scientific proof that social support groups are the most effective way of handling terror and fear, such as the fear of one's mortality, which proves that the real fear should be being 'socially disconnected' (Baron, 1997).

There are 4 main ways to eliminate or decrease the anxiety caused by worldviews that conflict with one's own. These are derogation, assimilation, accommodation, and annihilation. Degorgation is talking down to groups. Assimilation is converting people to one's views. Accomodation is accepting that people have different beliefs (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991).

Social media may increase MS. Social media has already been found to lead to negative moods and reactions to others. Negative posts on Twitter, followed by a negative mood could lead to a cycle of negativity (Sasso, Giovanetti, Schied, Burke, & Haeffel, 2019). Past-focused events on social media, specifically on Twitter, were positively correlated with depressive symptoms and cognitive vulnerability. Sasso, Giovanetti, Schied, Burke, and Haeffel believed this was due to a negative and "brooding" nature of past-focused events (2019). Participants' twitter account were monitored over a 3-month period and the BDI and CSQ were given as pre- and post-tests.

An experimental study that manipulated the Facebook content provided to users found that reducing the number of positive posts to which users were exposed significantly decreased the frequency of positive words they used in subsequent posts (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). A similar effect was found for decreasing posts with a negative connotation, leading to the use of fewer negative words. This experiment could mean that "in-person interaction and nonverbal cues are not strictly necessary for emotional contagion" (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). Social media can be a platform for these interactions to occur. Therefore, other emotions, like fear of death, may be able to spread through social media. If this occurred, then mortality salience would increase.

There is no doubt that the rapidly increasing media presence in the social environment has changed our lives in a big way. Most individuals have used media as a way to find information they want to know in order to validate their viewpoints. The desire for novelty and emotional stimulation has created a heavy addiction towards engagement in keeping up with what individuals want to have knowledge on (Cappella, Kim, & Albarracín, 2015). There may be a spreading fear of death, since modern technology has made it easier to become exposed to such violent acts (Tarabah, Badr, Usta, & Doyle, 2016).

When people are on social media, they should increase cultural buffers, due to death anxiety. This is the biggest aspect that needs to be researched. Thus far, there is no research that has been done that directly links social media and TMT.

Mortality Salience Measures

Once this research is underway, there must be a way to manipulate or measure MS. Oftentimes, studies are trying to trigger MS with a question. In a study by Gebauer, Raab, and Carbon, existential threats were issued using two prompts: (1) "please briefly describe the

emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you" and "jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you when you physically die" (2017).

There are other ways that MS can be measured. These are best for circumstances where a researcher is trying to see if some other object or situation is an MS prime. One of these measures is the Death Anxiety Scale. In a study by Lopes and Jaspal, this scale was used after participants watched a news report on a terrorist attack or watched a child's sleeping patterns, which was the control (2015). The scale was used to determine the "level of anxiety the participant feels in relation to death" after watching the new report (Lopes & Jaspal, 2015).

There are 7 popular scales that psychology studies often use to measure death-anxiety. These scales are the Boyar, Collett and Lester, Dickstein, Handal, Lester, Templer, and Templer/McMordie scales (McMordie, 1982). These scales also measure MS, not prime it. Rather, they help determine MS primes. When examining psychometric measures (including internal consistency reliability, test-retest reliability, content validity, construct validity, convergent validity, discriminant validity, concurrent validity, predictive validity and absence of response set), McMordie found the Templer scale was the most adequate scale (1982). Although the Templer/McMordie scale attempted to improve upon the Templer Scale, it did not significantly improve any psychometric aspect of the original scale. Therefore, the Templer Scale would probably be the best scale to measure death-anxiety for this experiment.

Conclusion

It is important to know if social media increases MS, because it may then lead to certain behaviors associated with TMT. This includes defending one's worldview and attacking opposing worldviews. This also influences what people think about others based on the content that others post online. People may have positive opinions of those who make posts that align

with their worldview. On the other hand, they may have negative opinions of those who make posts that oppose their worldview.

Research should be done to determine what impact, if any, that social media has on death anxiety. This research would shed light onto interactions on social media. It may also demonstrate that social media has more in common with physical interactions than was previously thought.

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