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Gillian C. Butsch
Colby College

Melissa A. Crawford
Colby College

Lauren A. Erickson
Colby College

Cassie M. Green
Colby College

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Terror Management Theory and Belief in an Afterlife

Gillian C. Butsch, Melissa A. Crawford, Lauren A. Erickson, Cassie M. Green
Colby College, Waterville, ME

Introduction

Terror management theory (TMT) posits that all humans are born with a self-preservation instinct, or an innate desire to survive. This primal drive conflicts with the reality that humans are mortal, creating the potential for extreme fear and anxiety (Schmeichel and Martens, 2005). However, TMT proposes that humans use cognitive buffers, such as cultural world-views and self-esteem, in order to keep their terror under control. Peoples' beliefs and values help make an otherwise temporary life meaningful.

Furthermore, TMT suggests that people cling more strongly to their worldview when their mortality is made salient, and show signs of aversion towards those who challenge their beliefs (Schmeichel and Martens, 2005). Research has shown that belief in an afterlife, a form of symbolic immortality, can alleviate the negative emotions associated with one's mortality (Deschesne et al, 2003). We found this aspect of TMT particularly interesting, but lacking any substantial research. Therefore, we set out to determine if belief in an afterlife could diminish the effects of mortality salience. As far as we know, our study is the first to use a pre-screening process to determine participants' prior beliefs. One prediction might be that those who believe in an afterlife will be less affected by the effects of mortality salience.

Method

Participants:

• One hundred ten students from Colby College participated in this study in groups of seven to fifteen people. They were randomly assigned in a 2 (mortality salience vs. non-mortality salience) x 2 (belief in afterlife vs. no belief in afterlife) x 2 (persuasive communication supporting vs. persuasive communication refuting existence of an afterlife) factorial design.

Procedure:

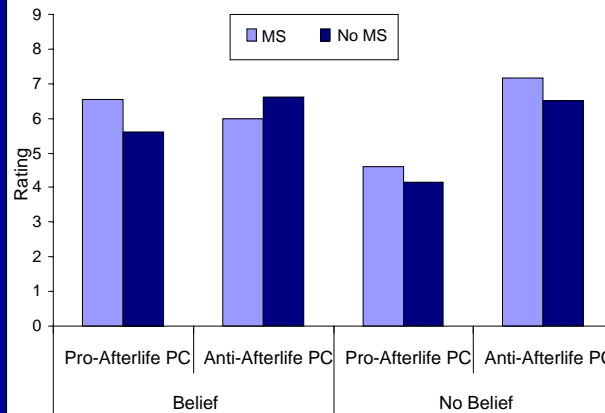
• Participants were first given a short pre-screening questionnaire to determine their belief in an afterlife. Based on these responses they were divided into two groups.

• **Mortality salience (MS) manipulation:** The MS condition asked participants to "Describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you" and to "Write about what would happen to you physically as you die." Control condition (Non-MS) participants were asked to "Describe the emotions that the thought of dental pain arouses in you" and to "Write about what would happen to you physically as you experience dental pain."

• After a filler task, participants were given one of two forms of persuasive communication (PC) that either argued for or against the existence of an afterlife.

• Finally, participants were asked to evaluate the article's truth and validity as well as the author's intelligence, likeability, and overall knowledge on a 9-point scale.

3-way interaction between MS x PC x Belief in Afterlife based on the Article Index



Results

Based on an analysis of correlations among the five scales, two indices were created:

- **Author Index** (likable, knowledgeable, and reliable)
- **Article Index** (truthful and valid)

There was a marginally significant 3-way interaction between MS and PC and belief in the afterlife $F(1,110) = 2.33, p = .13$, (see Figure 1). In order to detect the source of this effect, the 3-way interaction was broken down into two simple 2-way interactions and simple-simple effects when warranted.

- The 2-way interaction for non-believers was not significant, $F(1,40) = .079, p = .780$.
- The 2-way interaction for believers was marginally significant, $F(1,70) = 3.18, p = .079$.
 - The simple-simple effect for MS with the pro-afterlife article was marginally significant, $F(1,36) = 3.24, p = .081$. Those who believed in the afterlife in the MS condition rated the pro-afterlife article as more truthful and valid, while the participants in the Non-MS condition rated the anti-afterlife article as more truthful and valid.
 - The simple-simple effect for MS with the anti-afterlife article was not significant, $F(1, 35) = .562, p = .459$.

Discussion

The marginal 3-way interaction yields some interesting results. When mortality was not made salient the anti-afterlife essay seemed more valid, even though it did not coincide with the participants' beliefs. However, when confronted with thoughts of one's own death the expected reaction occurred: participants clung to their worldview and rated the pro-afterlife essay as more valid (therefore affirming their own beliefs). Other interesting results were recorded as well. PC had a main effect throughout the study, indicating that overall the anti-afterlife essay was seen to be more credible.

The breakdown of the 3-way interaction suggests that with more powerful manipulations and a larger number of participants, the analysis may have reached a conventional level of significance. There were not an equal number of participants who believed in an afterlife (70) versus those who did not believe in an afterlife (40). In the future, we would recruit more participants for the study, ensuring that each condition had a sufficient number of people to give the hypotheses a stronger test. We would also plan to develop a stronger manipulation of mortality salience.

References

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