



The Scrooge effect revisited: Mortality salience increases the satisfaction derived from prosocial behavior



Tomasz Zaleskiewicz^{a,*}, Agata Gasiorowska^a, Pelin Kesebir^b

^a University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty in Wrocław, Ostrowskiego 30b, 53-238 Wrocław, Poland

^b University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- People reminded of their mortality act more generously in simple economic games
- Under mortality salience, satisfaction increases with more generous decisions
- Satisfaction derived from generosity is linked to lower death thought accessibility

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 May 2014

Revised 26 March 2015

Available online 8 April 2015

Keywords:

Terror management theory

Mortality salience

Prosocial behavior

Satisfaction

ABSTRACT

According to terror management theory, people deal with the potential for anxiety that results from the knowledge of the inevitability of death by holding on to sources of value that exist within their cultural worldview. Acting prosocially is one such source of value, and previous research suggests that reminders of mortality increase the desire for prosociality. In three studies, we tested the hypothesis that mortality reminders would lead to more generous allocation of financial resources and to more satisfaction derived from acting generously. Using the dictator game (Study 1), the ultimatum game (Study 2), and a quasi-naturalistic giving situation (Study 3) we showed that participants reminded of their mortality were not only more generous but also more satisfied the more money they donated. Moreover, Study 3 demonstrated that people reminded of their mortality derived higher satisfaction from prosocial behavior and such behavior was associated with better suppression of death-related thoughts. We conclude that acting prosocially in the face of mortality thoughts effectively soothes death anxiety and in turn produces psychological satisfaction.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Classical economic theory assumes that in situations involving decisions about the allocation of financial goods between oneself and different targets, people are motivated by material self-interest, and strive to maximize personal benefits (Mullainathan & Thaler, 2001). However, as empirical studies are increasingly making clear, people frequently reveal social (other-regarding) preferences in economic decision-making and show a willingness to share their material assets with even anonymous interaction partners (Camerer, 2003; Cartwright, 2011). A concern with preventing unfairness in allocation decisions and punishing free riders also emerge as prevalent behavior patterns in these studies (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). That said, prosociality concerns in economic decision-making are affected by various situational factors (Camerer, 2003). One such factor is the salience of thoughts related to one's mortality. Previous research has established that under certain conditions, thinking about one's mortality increases prosocial attitudes and behavior. The aim of

the current paper is to inquire into how awareness of personal mortality affects prosociality in economic decision-making and in particular, how it affects the satisfaction one derives from prosocial behaviors.

Terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) posits that in order to manage the anxiety born from the awareness of their mortality, people strive for value and meaning in the context of their worldviews. Based on this insight and previous research on the topic demonstrating the "Scrooge effect" (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002), we expected that reminders of mortality would increase the desire for prosociality, leading to more generous and less selfish allocation of financial resources. More importantly, we hypothesized that mortality salience would increase people's satisfaction with their prosocial behaviors. If mortality reminders induce a shift in the more prosocial direction and make people genuinely interested in giving and sharing, then we would find that in the face of mortality thoughts, participant satisfaction would increase with more generous allocation of resources, as such a behavior would help to suppress death-related thoughts. That satisfaction, in turn, should be related to lower accessibility of death-related thoughts. Such a pattern

* Corresponding author. Fax: +48 71 7507208.

E-mail addresses: tzaleskiewicz@swps.edu.pl (T. Zaleskiewicz), agasiciorowska@swps.edu.pl (A. Gasiorowska), kesebir@gmail.com (P. Kesebir).

of results would support our argument that unselfish economic behaviors in the face of mortality thoughts soothe existential anxiety and produce genuine satisfaction.

Terror management theory

Humans, unlike other animals, are sophisticated enough in their mental abilities to be aware of the fragility of life and the inevitability of ultimate death. Terror management theory (TMT; for overviews, see Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2012; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Koole, 2010) proposes that the awareness of mortality has the potential to generate paralyzing anxiety and that the management of this potential anxiety is essential for effective functioning. According to the theory, people develop an anxiety buffering system that, as long as it is functional, protects against existential anxiety and provides psychological equanimity. The key ingredients of this anxiety buffer are a sense of meaning, security, value, relatedness, and transcendence. These ingredients are typically found in cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close personal relationships. Because these psychosocial entities buffer against death anxiety, people are highly motivated to seek and maintain them and defend them against threats (Greenberg et al., 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Since the inception of TMT, a large body of research has supported hypotheses generated by the theory (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). Accordingly, when thoughts of mortality are activated, people become more invested in their cultural worldview, self-esteem, and close relationships. Conversely, when one's cultural worldview, self-esteem or close personal relationships are threatened, anxiety increases and death-related thoughts become more salient in the consciousness (Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010).

Mortality salience and prosociality

According to TMT, acts that provide a person with a sense of value, meaning, relatedness, and self-transcendence help to buffer death anxiety. In virtually any culture, prosocial behaviors are widely endorsed, and are capable of producing the aforementioned key ingredients. TMT also predicts that reminders of mortality increase the perceived importance of social norms and conformity to them. People adhere to social standards, because this offers a sense of security and self-esteem. It thus stands to reason that making death thoughts salient would cause people to become more generous and less selfish in their choices. Acting in this way would affirm people's faith in their worldview and enhance their sense of security and value, thereby creating a buffer from death fears.

Supporting this line of reasoning, research has revealed that thinking about one's mortality leads to increased prosocial attitudes and charitable behaviors. In a first demonstration of this, Jonas et al. (2002) found that people interviewed in front of a funeral home, compared to those interviewed several blocks away, reported more positive attitudes toward charities. They furthermore showed that participants reminded of their mortality donated more money to a national (but not foreign) charity than participants in the control condition. The researchers dubbed this the "Scrooge effect" in reference to Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's novella *A Christmas Carol*, who was transformed into a kind and generous person from a miserly and bitter one after an intimate encounter with his own mortality. Further research on the Scrooge effect has revealed some moderators and boundary conditions of this phenomenon. For example, mortality reminders have been demonstrated to lead to a prosocial shift mainly among individuals who endorse more prosocial attitudes (Joireman & Duell, 2005) and lower self-transcendent values (Joireman & Duell, 2007, Study 1) to begin with, and not necessarily among people already high in prosocial orientation. Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, and Almakias (2008) furthermore showed that whereas mortality reminders increase prosocial behaviors, the nature of the prosocial cause plays a decisive role. For prosocial causes that

arouse personal fear or remind participants of their own vulnerability, such as signing an organ donation card or helping to a wheelchair-bound person, they in fact found that mortality thoughts significantly decreased support instead of increasing it.

More recently, Jonas, Sullivan, and Greenberg (2013) applied *focus theory of normative conduct* (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991) to further refine the conditions under which mortality reminders lead to a prosocial shift, particularly towards an outgroup. They found that although mortality reminders reduced donations to a foreign charity, in line with research showing that MS induces negativity toward the outgroup (Greenberg et al., 1997), this effect of MS on decreased outgroup charity was eliminated when the norm of generosity was primed. Similarly, the researchers demonstrated that MS led to higher generosity toward a stranger at the expense of the self in a dictator game paradigm, but only when combined with a fairness prime. As demonstrated by this study, a concern for fairness may also contribute to people making more generous monetary choices when they are reminded of their mortality. Given that a fair world is a more benevolent, safe and controllable place and the importance of fairness to societies (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999), upholding the fairness value could confer protection against anxiety in the face of death thoughts. Indeed, Van den Bos and Miedema (2000) showed that thinking about death made fairness a more important issue to participants.

In summary, considerable evidence suggests that mortality thoughts lead to more prosocial attitudes and behaviors, especially toward the ingroup. In the present work, we aimed to conceptually replicate this finding and more importantly, to refine our understanding of what drives this effect. Specifically, we hypothesized that in the face of mortality thoughts, people would derive higher satisfaction from acting prosocially, as prosocial behaviors are a potent source of existentially protective ingredients such as meaning, value, safety, and self-transcendence. Generosity toward another person or a prosocial cause can fulfill crucial psychological needs including self-esteem, belongingness, and competence, which in turn would soothe concerns about one's finiteness and fragility. We thus were interested in the hypothesis that in the presence of mortality thoughts, people would derive more joy from giving than in the absence of such thoughts. In addition, we expected that the joy of acting prosocially would be associated with more effective suppression of the death-related thoughts.

Overview of the studies

To test these hypotheses, we conducted three experiments, in which participants received a financial endowment and were asked to allocate it between themselves and another, anonymous person (Studies 1 and 2) or a prosocial cause (Study 3). The first experiment employed the dictator game, and the second experiment the ultimatum game. Both games have been extensively used to study people's economic decisions (Camerer, 2003; Chaudhuri, 2009). Study 3 adopted a less structured and more real-world-like scenario than economic games, in which participants (university students) were given some money and then asked to divide it between themselves and their Student Government. To examine the effects of mortality thoughts on monetary choices, in all studies participants were randomly divided into two groups: the mortality salience group and the control group. We also examined the effects of mortality salience on participants' satisfaction with their decisions and on their death thought availability. Participants were asked to report their own satisfaction as well as their estimates of the satisfaction experienced by the other player (in Studies 1 and 2, which employed economic games).

We expected, in line with the Scrooge effect, that participants in the mortality salience condition would be more generous in their allocation decisions than participants in the control condition. Moreover, we hypothesized that higher prosociality would be associated with stronger personal satisfaction in the mortality salience condition and reduced accessibility of death-related thoughts.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات