



# Sensation seeking and risk taking in mortality salience

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## Abstract

This study aimed to examine responses of sensation seekers concerning their tendency to take risks in driving in mortality salience. Ss completed the Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking scale (SSS). Two weeks later Ss were divided into two groups; the experimental group, which was exposed to a terrifying video film dealing with consequences of risky driving and a control group with a nature video film. After watching the films, each participant was asked to complete a risk-taking inventory (RT), which referred to the extent of risk s/he would take while driving. High sensation seekers reported more risk taking in driving than sensation avoiders. Furthermore, a significant interaction was found between Mortality Salience and Sensation Seeking regarding risky driving, especially speeding. The implications of these findings on the well-established educational approaches based on terror are presented in the discussion.

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## 1. Introduction

The human encounter with death has been considered as a source of terror, fear and anxiety for most people (Florian & Mikulincer, 1997). Early studies examined whether fear of death is a pathological or normal human emotion. Because emotional reactions to death are manifested in a variety of ways, the conceptualization of these reactions were quite contradictory (Kastenbaum & Aisenberg, 1972). Later, a multidimensional model of fear of personal death was proposed and referred to intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal consequences (Florian & Snowden, 1989).

While these studies have not examined how fear of personal death may influence human cognitions and behaviors, *Terror Management Theory (TMT)*, in parallel, proposed a theoretical framework for studying the effect of the salience of one's own mortality on human cognition and behavior (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). According to this theory, cultural belief systems evolved to protect individuals from the terror associated with the juxtaposition of

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awareness of inevitable mortality with an instinct for self-preservation. This theory suggests that the human abilities of causal analysis, future anticipation and self-reflection lead to the awareness of one's own vulnerability and ultimate mortality, which may be manifested by anxiety and terror. People take cognitive and behavioral steps to symbolically defend themselves against the paralyzing terror aroused by the awareness of their own mortality. These steps involve two kinds of mechanisms: The first kind of mechanisms are cognitive and behavioral efforts aimed at validating world views shared by other people in one's culture. These steps assist in giving meaning to the world they live in, and thereby to gain a sense of value along with symbolical immortality. The second kinds of mechanism are cognitive and behavioral steps aimed at increasing the sense of self esteem by living up to those standards of value expected by culture (Taubman Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2000).

More specifically, the combination of an instinctive drive for self-preservation with awareness of the inevitability of death creates the potential for paralyzing terror. This potential for terror is managed by a cultural anxiety buffer, consisting of the cultural worldview and self esteem. People with a high sense of self-esteem or a strong conviction on cultural world views would exhibit relatively low levels of anxiety related feelings and cognitions.

Terror management theory does not provide an explanation to the human phenomenon of risk taking. As mentioned before, people are motivated by instincts for self-preservation and yet get involved in actions that endanger their lives, not necessarily inevitably. Taubman Ben Ari, Florian, and Mikulincer (1999) considered reckless driving as a reflection of the action of the terror management mechanism. Based on the TMT premises that people deny their fear of death and raise their self esteem as a way of coping with it, they assumed that mortality salience may increase the subjective utility value of the potential gains over the potential losses involved in reckless driving. They found that people that perceive driving as relevant to their self-esteem reacted with more reckless driving to a mortality salience condition than to a control condition. People who did not perceive driving as relevant to their self-esteem did not react to mortality salience.

One of the personality traits highly correlated with risk taking behavior is sensation seeking (Jonah, 1997). The term *Sensation Seeking* (SS) refers to individual differences in optimal levels of arousal and stimulation, manifested as a character dimension (Zuckerman, 1994) and regulated by neuroregulators like the catecholamines, dopamine and norepinephrine (Zuckerman, 1999). While the *drive theory* (Freud, 1917/1952) postulates that pleasure is a consequence of drive reduction, the *optimal level theory* argues that drive increase can facilitate pleasure as well. High sensation seekers need more stimulation to maintain an optimal level of arousal, while low sensation seekers manage themselves better in relatively less stimulating settings.

The general trait of sensation seeking is composed of four components: (1) *Thrill and Adventure Seeking* (TAS)—attraction to thrill and dread; (2) *Experience Seeking* (ES)—aspiration to undergo variety of novel and unconventional experiences; (3) *Disinhibition* (Dis)—loss of self control; (4) *Boredom Susceptibility* (BS)—intolerance toward monotonous, repetitious or predictable people and events.

Sensation seekers differ from sensation avoiders in genetic and biological characteristics but also in their habits, preferences, and emotional and cognitive style as well. They are involved in activities like dangerous kinds of sport (Freixanet, 1991; Jack & Ronan, 1998; Shoham, Rose, & Kahle, 1998; Zuckerman, 1983), varied sexual initiations (Daitzman & Zuckerman, 1980; Ganstead & Simpson, 1990; Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978), and risky driving. High sensation

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