

**Prosocial Benefits of Terror Management Theory:  
Extended Abstract of Honors Thesis**

Justin Siejk

Department of Psychology, Wagner College

Terror management relies on the premise that human beings are purely biological organisms. Similar to others in the animal kingdom, the human's only true goals are self-preservation and survival (Greenberg et al., 1997). However, humans have self awareness, including awareness of their inevitable demise. Culture brings meaning to the individual that transcends death and combats death anxieties (Jonas et al., 2002). Self-esteem, the confidence that one is behaving in line with culture, saves the individual from the anxiety of death (Volini, 2017). Just as individuals go through defense mechanisms when their self-esteem is explicitly threatened, terror management theory posits individuals will go to great lengths to protect their self-esteem when made aware of their own mortality. Past research has relied heavily on the derogation of other cultures to restore self-esteem; this thesis focuses prosocial behaviors as another avenue of defense (Kunzendorf et al., 1992; Hirschberger et al., 2008).

Terror management effects are predicted to be especially strong in young adults as they are not particularly focused on their own mortality while still possessing solidified core values of their culture (Helson & Moane, 1987; Greenberg et al., 1992). Statements pertaining to their own mortality may have a greater effect on them than on older adults more aware of their aging.

Twenty research participants (ages 19-21, recruited through the Wagner College Psychology Department participant pool) were each paid four \$1 bills at the start of the study. Participants then responded to a filler survey, followed by the experimental manipulation.

Participants were randomly assigned either to two questions about emotions when visiting the dentist (control condition) or two questions that made mortality salient (“describe the emotions the thought of your own death arouses” and “describe, in detail, what you think happens to you after death”). The experimenter was unaware of each participant’s condition.

Following a second filler survey, all participants watched a video from Save the Children. A time lapse has been shown to be critical for allowing death thoughts to become unconscious (Greenberg et al., 1992). Following the video, the experimenter stated he was raising money for Save the Children. Participants were welcome to donate cash or use venmo.

A non-significant trend suggests participants who experienced mortality salience ( $M = \$6.78$ ,  $SD = 2.68$ ) donated somewhat more than those in the control group ( $M = \$4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ),  $t(18) = 1.88$ ,  $p = .077$  (see Figure 1). Given that Cohen’s effect size value ( $d = 0.86$ ) suggests a high practical significance, the small sample size might not have provided enough statistical power to test the hypothesis.

Since self-esteem is maintained by acting in line with internalized worldviews, and prosocial behavior is a value internalized by many cultures, engaging in prosocial behavior is a suitable way for an individual to restore their self-esteem (Jonas et al., 2008). Individuals regularly deal with primes of death; therefore, this research is vital to figure out a way to perpetuate prosocial behaviors and promote acceptance, rather than hostility, towards other cultures (Yum & Hamlin, 2005).

**References Cited in Abstract**

- Greenberg, J., Simon, L., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & Chatel, D. (1992). Terror management and tolerance: Does mortality salience always intensify negative reactions to others who threaten one's worldview? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *63*, 212-220.
- Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & Pyszczynski, T. (1997). Terror management theory of self-esteem and cultural worldviews: Empirical assessments and conceptual refinements. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol. 29. (pp. 61–139). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Helson, R., & Moane, G. (1987). Personality change in women from college to midlife. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *53*, 176-186.
- Hirschberger, G., Ein-Dor, T., & Almakias, S. (2008). The self-protective altruist: terror management and the ambivalent nature of prosocial behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *34*, 666–678.
- Jonas, E., Martens, A., Niesta Kayser, D., Fritsche, I., Sullivan, D., & Greenberg, J. (2008). Focus theory of normative conduct and terror-management theory: The interactive impact of mortality salience and norm salience on social judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *95*(6), 1239–1251.
- Jonas, E., Schimel, J., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2002). The scrooge effect: Evidence that mortality salience increases prosocial attitudes and behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*, 1342–1353.

Kunzendorf, R., Hersey, T., Wilson, J., & Ethier, M. (1992). Repressed self-consciousness of death and insensitivity to religious genocide. *Unpublished manuscript*, University of Lowell, Lowell, Massachusetts.

Volini, L. A. (2017). An introduction to global family therapy: Examining the empirical evidence of terror management theory within the family and social system. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 45(2), 79–94.

Yum, Y.-O., & Schenck-Hamlin, W. (2005). Reactions to 9/11 as a function of terror management and perspective taking. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 145(3), 265–286.

**Figure 1**

*Mean Donations (With Standard Error Bars) as a Function of Experimental Condition*

