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The Effect of Mortality Salience on Attitudes Toward Women

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Abstract

Research on mortality salience shows that when people are faced with the awareness of their eventual death their thoughts and behaviors change. In one recent study, participants' self-esteem was damaged through negative feedback and their tendency to stereotype increased. The purpose of this study is to determine if the thought of death increases sexist thinking, more specifically attitudes toward women. Participants completed one of two writing prompts about either their ideal date or their own death. The goal of the writing prompts was to have a negative and positive emotion elicited. It was found that males were more sexist towards women than the females were in both the ideal date and own death conditions.

The Effect of Mortality Salience on Attitudes Toward Women

What process would you like your body to go through after death? It is a question people are not often asked about and one that many people feel uncomfortable with. However, this is exactly the type of question that researchers interested in mortality salience ask participants in their studies. The purpose of exploring mortality salience is to determine where stereotypes come from and how they continue throughout history. Researchers believe that attacking peoples' beliefs or existence leads them to stereotype and make themselves feel better.

Research on mortality salience shows that when people are faced with the idea of their eventual death their thoughts and behaviors do change and sometimes in surprising ways. For example, people who are reminded of their eventual death purchase and consume greater amounts of food (Mandel & Smeesters, 2008) and are more likely to recommend military intervention (Pyszczynski, Abdollahi, Solomon, Greenberg, Cohen, & Weise, 2009).

More importantly for the purposes of the present study, this literature also demonstrates that, when reminded of their own mortality, people are more likely to comply with cultural values and to become upset when others threaten these values (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Consistent with this notion, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon and Breus (1994) found that mortality salience increased nationalism. Participants in this study read Pro-American essays or Anti-American essays. Participants who were primed with mortality salience liked the author of the Pro-American essay and agreed with the arguments of the essay more than those who were not primed with mortality salience.

The reason that mortality salience predicts increased compliance with cultural world views (and the expectation that others will also comply with these worldviews) has been

explained by Terror Management Theory (TMT). Schimel et al. (1999) wrote that Terror Management Theory

“...proposes that an individual’s cultural worldview is a culturally derived yet individualized conception of reality that provides protection against deeply rooted fears of human mortality and vulnerability”.

This means that when a person is faced with the thought of their own death that they will rely on stable beliefs or worldviews. They lean on the beliefs within their culture, as well as religion and stereotypes, and agree with those thoughts to increase their self-esteem. When people live up to the standard of thinking in their culture it makes them feel as if they are doing the right and correct thing and that they are promised “literal or symbolic immortality” (Schimel et al., 1999). Terror Management Theory is a defense mechanism in which people can stabilize their anxiety and move away from the negative feelings related to one’s own death by using culture beliefs which are supposed to be true and stable.

Given the assumptions of Terror Management Theory, it seems likely that people may also be more prone to endorse culturally-prescribed stereotypes when they are confronted with thoughts of their own death. Support for this hypothesis comes from a study conducted by Schimel et al. (1999) regarding mortality salience and feelings toward traditional gender roles. In this study participants were given a set of 22 sentences. Six described gender-stereotype-consistent behaviors (e.g., Katherine baby-sat the kids), 6 described gender-stereotype-inconsistent behaviors (e.g., Mary paid for dinner), and 10 described gender neutral behaviors (Tom ate a sandwich). The participants had an option of explaining the behavior in each sentence. Participants felt a greater need to explain stereotype inconsistent behavior (Mary paid for dinner, because her boyfriend forgot his wallet, as compared to Mary paid for dinner because

she wanted to) when they were primed with mortality salience. This suggests that when participants are faced with their own death they tend to utilize traditional beliefs and thinking.

The study by Schimel et al. (1999) suggests that Terror Management's compliance and expectations of cultural worldviews includes attitudes toward women. We expected that mortality salience will have an effect on attitudes toward women. Our study differs from those in the past because we are exploring an avenue of sexism based on previous research on Terror Management Theory. Other research has found an increase in stereotyping, therefore it is possible that attitudes will become more sexist towards women when the participants are faced with the thought of their own death. Since mortality salience leads to stereotyping and traditional thinking, we expect that participants who are primed with mortality salience will display more sexist thinking towards women than those participants who are not primed with mortality salience.

To test this hypothesis we conducted an experiment involving a convenience sample of college students. The participants were given either a writing prompt regarding mortality salience or one describing their ideal date. Following these writings, the participants were then given a questionnaire regarding attitudes toward women.

Methods

Participants

Forty-two students from a small Midwestern college volunteered to participate (51% female). One participant was removed from the data as a result of incomplete data. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 22. The participants received extra credit in a psychology course, if given the option by the professor.

Materials

The participants were given writing prompts. Those in the mortality salience condition were asked to write about the process that they wished their body to go through after death. Participants in the control condition were asked to write about their ideal date. Participants were also asked to complete a survey assessing their attitudes toward women. The survey consisted of 22 statements taken from Glick and Fiske's 2001 Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Appendix 1). These statements were either positive statements about women (e.g. "A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man") or negative statement about women (e.g. "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men"). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each item on a scale from one to six with one meaning strongly disagree and six meaning strongly agree. The inventory was split into two eleven statement inventories (benevolent, $\alpha = .827$, and hostile, $\alpha = .906$). These were score so that higher scores indicated greater amounts of benevolent sexism and hostile sexism respectively.

Procedure

The participants were given an informed consent form (Appendix 2) before the study was conducted. The participants were randomly assigned to conditions (mortality salient or control). Both conditions participated in the same room, at the same time. Participants were given one of the two writing prompts and then given 8 minutes to write a short essay. The participants were told that the study was being conducted to examine writing styles and beliefs about gender roles. The researchers told the participants that their responses and information sheets would only be seen by the researchers.

After completing the writing assignment and surveys, the participants filled out a demographics sheet (Appendix 3) and were given a written debriefing (Appendix 4), thanked for their participation and dismissed.

Results

We expected that those participants who were primed with morality salience would have more benevolent attitudes towards women than those who were not primed with mortality salience. To determine whether there was a difference in the mean scores of benevolent sexism between the mortality salient condition and the control condition, a between-subjects two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) using gender and condition was conducted. There was no significant main effect of condition, $F(1,37) = .473, p < .50$. There was a significant main effect for gender such that males had more benevolent sexism than females, $F(1,37) = 10.37, p < .01$. However, this main effect was not qualified by significant gender by condition interaction, $F(1,37) = .37, p = .55$ (See Figure 1).

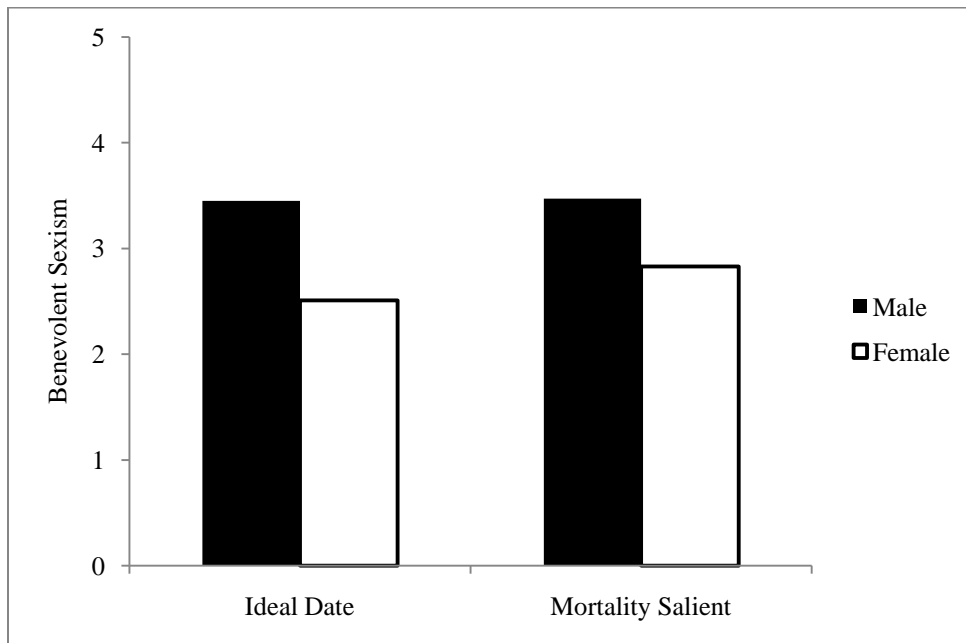


Figure 1. Comparison of benevolent sexism score between conditions and gender.

To determine whether there was a difference in the mean scores of hostile sexism between the mortality salient condition and the control condition, another between-subjects two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on gender and condition was conducted. There was no significant main effect of hostile sexism for condition, $F(1,37) = .206, p < .66$. There was a significant main effect for gender such that males had more hostile sexism than females, $F(1,37) = 4.81, p < .04$. However, this main effect was not qualified by significant gender by condition interaction, $F(1,37) = 1.75, p = .19$ (See Figure 2).

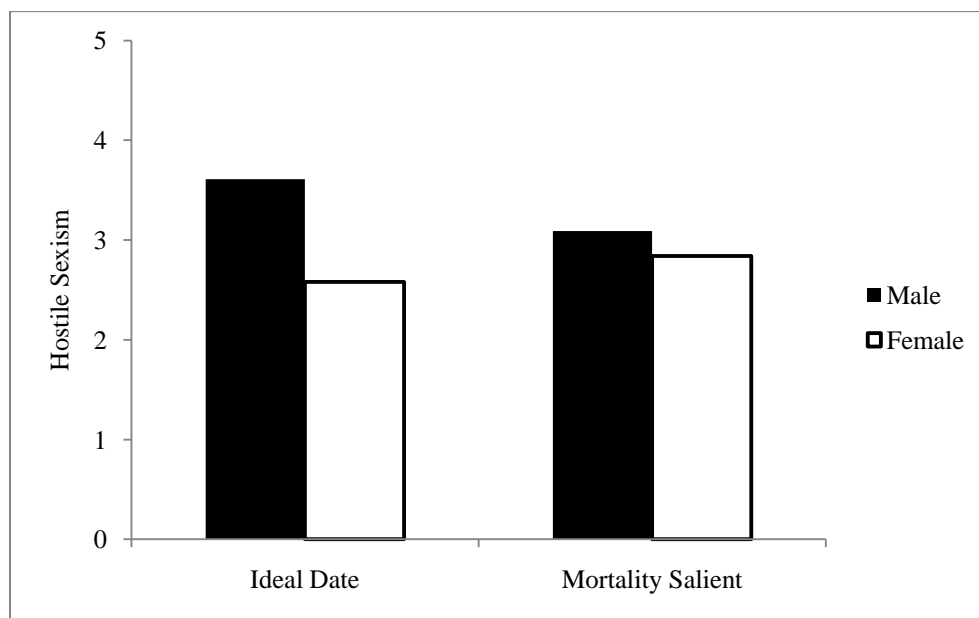


Figure 2. Comparison of hostile sexism score between conditions and gender.

Discussion

Our hypothesis was that participants who were primed with mortality salience would display more sexist thinking towards women than those participants who were not primed with mortality salience. The hypothesis was not supported; however we found that males were significantly more sexist than females. Males showed greater benevolent sexism ($M = 3.46$) than

females ($M = 2.67$), $p < .01$. Males also showed greater hostile sexism ($M = 3.35$) than females ($M = 2.71$), $p < .04$.

These findings may mean that males have a higher level of sexism to begin with. The fact that males had higher hostile sexism than females may mean that males are very uncomfortable when it comes to dates especially. In the ideal date condition, males had higher hostile sexism and may become very aggravated when thinking about an ideal date because it is a stereotype or commonly believed notion that men must pay for things and men must change their behavior around women to try to impress or make a woman happy. This could mean that men get very hostile when placed in a dating position or thinking about how men are supposed to act in certain situations. The females perhaps, were not affected by the mortality salience or ideal date because they are very in tuned with their emotions and thoughts and this experiment did not catch them off guard as it may have with the males.

There are limitations to this study for instance, the control condition asked participants to write about their ideal date which may have evoked thinking about gender roles and possible sexism. All the essays written were examined by the researchers and coded for gender references (See Table 1). The mortality salient condition only included three essays that mentioned gender while the ideal date condition included ten essays that mentioned gender. Of the ten essays from the ideal condition, four contained negative views of gender (See Table 2). This gender mention in the ideal date condition was unexpected and may have affected our results because we were looking at sexism. Thinking about an ideal date may have evoked stereotypical or traditional thinking pertaining to gender roles and what is supposed to happen on a typical date instead of an “ideal” date. The ideal date was not supposed to evoke gender thinking and was not meant to make participants angry, but were supposed to make them feel

happy and imagine their dream date, not what society wanted them to think a date was meant to be. Some males do not like the fact that they have to pay and do things that will make the female happy and therefore wrote about a traditional and a more accepted date than what the male actually wanted.

	No Gender Reference	Gender Reference
Mortality Salient	18	3
Ideal Date	10	10

Table 1. Gender references in essays.

	Positive	Negative
Mortality Salient	3	0
Ideal Date	6	4

Table 2. Positive and negative gender references in essays.

A difference in this study might be that the participants may have had preconceived notions of death such as the belief in an afterlife. Also participants of this study were between the ages of 18-22 and therefore, death may not be as much of a concern to them as older participants may have been. In addition, this study contained no mechanism of measuring how engaged the participants were in their writing.

Future studies may want to look at the effects of religion on beliefs about death. Also, the control condition used in this study evoked gender thinking, other studies may want to use other conditions that do not evoke such thinking. Other studies may also want to look at the effects of mortality salience on the older population instead of college age students.

As a result of this study, some conclusions can be made that males show greater sexism than females. Previous studies could have been looking at other factors in addition to mortality saliency. Lastly, Schimel et al. (1999) found that people need to explain stereotypic inconsistent behaviors more when thinking about their own death than those who were not. While this study was important to our research, it is possible that the acceptance of women in stereotypic consistent and stereotypic inconsistent behavior is different than sexism.

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Appendix 1

Please rate the following statements on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 meaning disagree strongly and 6 meaning agree strongly.

1. No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.

1 2 3 4 5 6

2. Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for “equality.”

1 2 3 4 5 6

3. In a disaster, women ought to be rescued before men.

1 2 3 4 5 6

4. Most women interpret innocent remarks as being sexist.

1 2 3 4 5 6

5. Women are too easily offended.

1 2 3 4 5 6

6. People are not truly happy in life without being romantically being involved with a member of the other sex.

1 2 3 4 5 6

7. Feminists are seeking for women to have more power than men.

1 2 3 4 5 6

8. Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.

1 2 3 4 5 6

9. Women should be cherished and protected by men.

1 2 3 4 5 6

10. Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them.

1 2 3 4 5 6

11. Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.

1 2 3 4 5 6

12. Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores.

1 2 3 4 5 6

13. Men are incomplete without women.

1 2 3 4 5 6

14. Women exaggerate problems they have at work.

1 2 3 4 5 6

15. Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.

1 2 3 4 5 6

16. When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.

1 2 3 4 5 6

17. A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.

1 2 3 4 5 6

18. Many women get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.

1 2 3 4 5 6

19. Women, compared to men, tend to have superior moral sensibility.

1 2 3 4 5 6

20. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.

1 2 3 4 5 6

21. Feminists are making unreasonable demands of men.

1 2 3 4 5 6

22. Women, as compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Appendix 2

Informed Consent Form

This research is being conducted by Meredith Cotton, and Stephanie Goss as a part of their Independent Study at Hanover College. In this experiment, you will be asked to complete a short writing assignment and then answer a short survey.

The entire experiment will not take more than 30 minutes. There are no known risks involved in being in this study, beyond those of everyday life. The information you provide during the experiment is completely anonymous; at no time will your name be associated with the responses you give. If you have any questions about what you will be doing in the study or about the study itself, feel free to ask them now or at any other time during your participation.

If you have any questions after the study, please contact Meredith Cotton at cottonm10@hanover.edu or Stephanie Goss at goss10@hanover.edu.

I acknowledge that I am participating in this study of my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time. Incomplete participation will not result in credit for participating, but I may complete an alternative assignment of equal time commitment in order to receive credit. If I wish, I will be given a copy of this consent form.

Signature

Date

Appendix 3

1. Age: _____

2. Gender: (please circle)

Male

Female

3. Year in school: (please circle one)

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

4. Estimated GPA: _____

5. Ethnicity: _____

Appendix 4

Debriefing Form

The study in which you just participated was designed to measure the effect of mortality salience on attitudes toward gender roles. You wrote a short essay (describing either what you want to be done with your body after you die or what you would like to do on an ideal date) and filled out an Ambivalent Sexism inventory. We will be testing whether the different writing experiences affected attitudes toward female gender roles. We expect that those who wrote about what they want to be done with their body when they die will be more likely to hold more “traditional” attitudes toward gender roles than those who wrote about the ideal date. This hypothesis is supported by Terror Management theory which states that people are more likely to turn to more traditional thinking when faced with the idea of their own mortality in order to maintain their own self-esteem (Schimel, J. et al, 1999).

Please do not discuss this study with other potential participants until the semester is over. If people know what we’re testing before the study begins, they may respond differently, jeopardizing our results.

If you have any questions or comments about this research please contact Stephanie Goss at goss10@hanover.edu or Meredith Cotton at cottonm10@hanover.edu or contact Dr. Krantz at krantzj@hanover.edu or in room 151 of the Science Center.