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Mortality Salience Effects on Sex Role Adherence as Measured on the Bem Sex Roles inventory

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Abstract

This article proposed a study that would examine the effects of mortality salience on Ss scoring on a Bem Sex Roles Inventory (BSRI). A majority of the research involving mortality salience has focused on its effects on Ss judgments of various aspects of other individuals. This study proposed to extend mortality salience effects to Ss judgements of themselves. Such a finding would provide compelling support of terror management theory. It was hypothesized that subjects who scored moderately masculine, moderately feminine, and moderately androgenous on a pretest of the BSRI would score more masculine, more feminine, and more androgenous respectively on a second exposure to the BSRI after receiving a mortality salience manipulation. The BSRI was administered to 300 subject. 120 subject, 40 scoring moderately masculine, 40 scoring moderately feminine, and 40 scoring moderately androgenous were selected to return the following week and receive either mortality salience or TV salience manipulations. The proposed results of a between subjects 2 (sex-typed, non-sex-typed) X 2 (mortality salience, TV salience) ANOVA supported the proposed hypotheses.

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The most compelling evidence compiled in support of terror management theory has come from experimental manipulations involving mortality salience (thoughts of death). We have seen that mortality salience can result in harsher penalty assignment for alleged prostitutes, more unfavorable ratings of individuals different from subjects, more favorable judgements for individuals similar to subjects, increased tolerance of different others in politically liberal subjects, more negative reactions to those who violate cultural values, and more positive reactions to those who uphold cultural values (Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989; Greenberg, Simon, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1991; Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, in press). According to terror management theory when a person's world-view is threatened or the reality of one's inevitable death is made accessible that person will react in a way which bolsters their world-view assuage the anxiety associated with such threats (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991).

Terror management theory is based on the idea that Homo sapiens are the only species of animal capable of a level of cognitive complexity that would allow them to foresee and understand the inevitability of death and the possibility of ultimate annihilation. The terror associated with this knowledge would make it impossible for humans to function if it were not controlled in some fashion. According to terror management theory this need for control is satisfied through a unique, symbolic social construction of a controllable reality; this is called culture (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Terror management theory draws many of its concepts from the writings of Ernest Becker. In his book "The Birth and Death of Meaning" Becker states that "man needs to predicate his symbolic action upon an entirely fictional

psychological world; but he then acts as if this world were real, true, and good for all time," (1962). It is through the adherence to culturally defined values that humans are able to overcome the anxiety of possible nonexistence.

When a person's world view, which is the internalization of culturally defined values, is threatened (s)he must react in a way that is consistent with her/his world view to avoid anxiety. Anxiety is held at bay by maintaining a sense of positive self-esteem which "consists of viewing oneself as a valuable participant in a meaningful cultural drama," (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). In a study involving self-esteem manipulations, subjects with elevated self-esteem showed less anxiety in response to a video of real people dyeing than did subjects with a neutral self-esteem manipulation (Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, Rosenblatt, Burling, Lyon, Simon, & Pinel, 1992).

Research involving mortality salience effects has been limited to the analysis of subjects ratings of things external to the subject. If mortality salience effects are really the result of a bolstering of one's world view then it is important to establish that mortality salience has an effect not just on people's judgements of others, but also upon their judgements of themselves. Such a line of research would greatly extend the generalizability of mortality salience effects as well as provide crucial support for terror management theory. One possible avenue for satisfying this condition is to examine the effects of mortality salience on a personality scale which reflects attitudes and perceptions of some aspect of an individual's world view.

The sex role is considered to be an integral part of a person's world-view; such that it provides a repertoire of culturally defined behaviors to guide one's actions in daily functioning (Bem, 1981). In this study I would like to examine the effects of mortality salience on subjects

scoring on the Bem Sex Roles Inventory (BSRI). The BSRI provides a measurement of one's agreement with characteristics associated with specific sex roles. This scale consists of 60 characteristics (masculine, feminine, or neutral) that a person judges as to how well each characteristic describes her/himself. Judgements are made on 7-point, equal-interval scale ranging from one ("Never or almost never true") to seven ("Always or almost always true") (Bem, 1974). The BSRI provides a measure of how masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated a person is. A masculine or feminine score represents the extent to which a person both agrees with characteristics associated with one sex and divorces one's self from characteristics associated with the other (Bem, 1974). If a person agrees highly with characteristics associated with both sexes then that person would be scored as androgynous. If a person divorces her/himself from characteristics of both sexes then (s)he is scored as undifferentiated.

In this study, I propose to give subjects who score moderately in the masculine, feminine, or androgenous categories of the BSRI a manipulation that will make the subjects think about their own death and then have them complete the BSRI again. Terror management theory suggests that when people are exposed such a condition it should evoke the realization that each of us faces, at some unknown time, total and ultimate annihilation. In order to avoid the anxiety associated with such thinking subjects should respond in a way that is not only consistent with their world-view, but in a way that will bolster their world view. Thus it is hypothesized that subjects who receive the same mortality salience probe as used in previous mortality salience studies (see Greenberg et al. 1991) will show a shift in their BSRI score that is consistent with their world-view. Subjects who scored moderately masculine or feminine should show a higher

mean masculine or feminine score after a mortality salience probe than subjects who received a non-death related probe. Subjects who scored moderately androgenous should show a higher mean androgyny score after a mortality salience condition than a group under a neutral condition. Though the BSRI does provide a score for undifferentiated people, I have chosen not to include this group in the study simply because their inclusion would complicate data analysis. However terror management theory would predict that their mean androgyny score would decrease (that is they would become less androgenous and more undifferentiated) when exposed to a mortality salient probe as compared with a non-death salient probe group.

Support of the proposed hypotheses would provide evidence that threats to a person's ever vigilant anxiety buffering mechanisms result not only in a shift in perception of referents external to the individual (i.e. different others) as has been shown in previous studies, but also in a shift in perception of internal referents (i.e. sex role adherence) in order to maintain anxiety free functioning. Though the results would not illuminate the exact nature of the mechanisms involved in the anxiety buffering process, they would show that they are not strictly limited to the external environment. Such a limitation would be damaging to the terror management paradigm.

Method

Subjects

The subjects would consist of 300 undergraduate psychology students attending a medium sized South-Eastern university who were given course credit for their participation. Participants are expected to range in age from 17 to 35, with a mean age of 19.36. A majority of the participants are expected to be female (55%) and 45% male. Also, a majority of the

participants are expected to be Caucasian (86%), 10% African-American, 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, less than 1% Native-American, less than 1% Hispanic, and 2% reporting “other” ethnicity. A majority of the participants are expected to be freshmen (83%), 12% sophomores, 3% juniors, and 2% seniors. The average GPA reported is expected to be 3.09 with a range of 2.40. Of these 300 subjects 120 of them will be selected to participate in the actual experimental manipulation. The 120 subjects would consist of three groups of 40 subjects who scored either moderately masculine, moderately feminine, or moderately androgynous respectively on the BSRI.

Measures

A measure of gender role will be obtained using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). This measure asks participants to rate 60 masculine, feminine, and neutral items on a 7-point numerical rating scale ranging from one ("very un-descriptive of me") to seven ("very descriptive of me") as to how well the items describe them (Bem, 1974; 1981). Respondents receive both masculinity and femininity scores based on the mean of the responses to masculine and feminine items, respectively. Cronbach Alphas, calculated for masculinity and femininity, of .89 and .87 respectively, have been previously reported (Bem, 1981).

Procedure

Initially the 300 subjects, tested in groups of 25 to 30, would be asked to complete the Bem Sex Roles Inventory. The subjects inventories would be scored according to a method suggested by Bobko and Schwartz (1984) which gives an androgyny score that ranges between zero and 45 rather than a t-score as used in the original scoring procedure. Subjects who scored moderately masculine (a mean masculine score between five and six, a mean feminine score

between two and three, and an androgyny score between eight and 16); moderately feminine (a mean masculine score between two and three, a mean feminine score between five and six, and an androgyny score between eight and 16); or moderately androgynous (a mean masculine score between five and six, a mean feminine score between five and six, and an androgyny score between 27 and 34) will be contacted and invited to return to the lab the following week to presumably participate in an unrelated study, see Table 1. This method was used to control for possible ceiling effects that could attenuate manipulation effects. Half of the subjects in each of the three groups will be randomly assigned to either the mortality saliency or the TV saliency groups.

Upon arrival at the lab subjects will be told that we are trying to assess a new protective personality test and how well it correlates with an established personality inventory. After completing consent forms subjects are taken to a private cubicle and given either the mortality saliency or the TV saliency questionnaire (depending upon group assignment). The mortality saliency and TV saliency questionnaires consist of two questions of similar content and wording: "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouse in you," and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you physically as you die and once you are physically dead," for the mortality saliency questions and "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of watching television arouses in you," and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you watch television, and once you have physically watched television" (Greenberg et. al., 1994). Upon completing the questionnaire the subjects were given the BSRI to complete again. After completing the BSRI subjects were thoroughly debriefed and the true nature of the study was explained to them.

Results

The data from this study will be analyzed using a between subjects 2 (sex-typed, non-sex-typed) X 2 (mortality saliency, TV saliency) ANOVA design. The mean masculine score for the masculine group, the mean feminine score for the feminine group will be combined into a single overall mean and will be analyzed with the overall mean androgyny score for both groups as the sex-typed group, since mean score changes should be in the same direction and of the same magnitude. The mean masculine and feminine scores for the androgynous group will be combined and analyzed with the mean androgyny score of the androgynous group as the non-sex-typed group. The data analysis (refer to Table 2 and Table 3) should show that there is a significant difference between sex-typed group under the mortality saliency condition and the sex-typed group under the TV saliency condition, where the mortality saliency sex-typed group showed a higher overall mean for characteristics same as sex role and lower mean androgyny score than the respective scores for the TV saliency group. That is, there should be higher masculine and feminine scores in the mortality saliency group than in the TV saliency group. Also, there should be a significant difference between the non-sex-typed mortality saliency group and the non-sex-typed TV saliency group, where the overall mean score for sex role characteristics and the mean androgyny score is greater for the mortality saliency group than for the TV saliency group. There should be no significant difference between the mean sex role characteristic scores for the sex-typed group and non-sex-typed group.

Discussion

The expected major finding for this study is that mortality saliency will have an effect on self reports of sex role adherence such that subjects will fall into the same category as they did

on the original scoring of the BSRI and their scores will be even more extreme than they were in the original scoring. Subjects who adhere to the masculine sex role when threatened with death thoughts bolster their world view not only by rating masculine characteristics as more true for them, but also by rating feminine characteristics as less like them (consistent with the cultural standards of the masculine world view which values masculine traits over feminine traits; Bem, 1974). Feminine sex role adhering subjects defend their world view in the same way by rating feminine characteristics higher and masculine characteristics lower when given mortality saliency: consistent with a feminine world view. The androgynous subjects who value both masculine and feminine characteristics as part of their world view defend against mortality saliency by increasing their ratings of both characteristics. Thus the different effects mortality saliency should have on each type of sex role is the result of each sex role's differing value structure. This would be consistent with the findings of Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Chatel (in press) showing subjects who valued tolerance (politically liberal subjects) showed increases in tolerance in their ratings of different others as opposed to subjects who did not value tolerance (politically conservative subjects) and did not show an increase of tolerance in rating of different others (in fact they showed increases intolerance).

The findings of this study are important in that they provide measurable support to the notion that a cultural anxiety buffer not only influences our perceptions of others but that it influences our attitudes and perceptions of ourselves. Such evidence is crucial to terror management theory which posits that adherence to culturally defined standards of value allow a person to feel they have a stake in that culture, are doing the "right thing", and therefore gain self esteem which buffers that person against the anxiety of ultimate annihilation.

Questions have been raised as to whether the BSRI is really a personality scale that measures actual sex role orientation (Whitely, 1983) or whether it actually measures social desirability of the characteristics used in the scale (Pedhazur & Tetenbaum, 1979). These problems often accompany the use of personality scales in general. Further experimentation involving the manipulation of mortality salience and the measurement of a resulting behavior could prove useful in teasing apart the effects of the preceding criticisms. A possible experiment could involve the use of a design by Bem, Martyna and Watson (1976) which evaluated the independence and nurturing behavior of masculine, feminine, and androgynous scoring subjects. This study found that masculine and androgynous subjects showed higher independent behaviors and androgynous subjects showed more nurturing behaviors (feminine subjects failed to show either independence or nurturance; Bem, Martyna, and Watson, 1976). A mortality salience condition could easily be added to their design. Any resulting behavior shifts that follow the worldview directionalities proposed in this study would provide compelling support for the results proposed here.

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Table 1

	Mean Masculine Characteristic Score	Mean Feminine Characteristic Score	Mean Androgyny Characteristic Score
<u>Moderately Masculine</u>	5-6	2-3	8-16
<u>Moderately Feminine</u>	2-3	5-6	8-16
<u>Moderately Androgynou s</u>	5-6	5-6	27-34

 Table 1: Represents BSRI score requirements for subject selection

Table 2

	<u>Mortality Saliency Group</u>	<u>TV Saliency Group</u>
Sex-Typed	6.8	5.5
Non-Sex- Typed	6.8	5.5

Table 2: Shows the overall mean characteristic score for the sex-typed group for both conditions and the overall mean characteristic score for the non sex-typed subjects.

Table 3

	<u>Mortality Saliency Group</u>	<u>TV Saliency Group</u>
Sex-Typed	2.8	12
Non-Sex- Typed	44.9	30.5

Table 3: Shows the mean androgyny score for the sex-typed group for both conditions and the mean androgyny score for the non sex-typed subjects.