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The Undesired Self: Deadly Connotations

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Abstract

Two studies were conducted to examine the hypothesis derived from a juxtaposition of the undesired self and terror management theories that making aspects of the undesired self salient produces effects comparable to those obtained in response to making mortality salient. In Study 1, participants reminded of either death or aspects of their undesired self were more supportive of President George W. Bush and his policies in Iraq, relative to participants in exam salient or desired self salient control conditions. In Study 2, participants reminded of death or aspects of their undesired self showed greater accessibility of implicit death thoughts, relative to participants in pain salient or desired self salient control conditions. Implications of these findings for future theory and research are considered.

The Undesired Self: Deadly Connotations

*And the guilt is all mine—
can never be fixed on another man,
no escape for me...
Take me away, quickly, out of sight.
I don't even exist—I'm no one. Nothing.*

Creon (in Sophocles' *Antigone*)

At the turn of the 19th century, William James wrote, "man's interior is as a battleground for what he feels to be two deadly hostile selves, one actual, the other ideal" (1902, p. 135). Perhaps "deadly hostile selves" is a bit strong for the phenomenon James makes reference to, so it makes sense to soften his position somewhat by removing them from the battlefield. But, either way, at war or under conditions of cease fire, James set the stage for Carl Rogers' thinking about the real self and ideal self as residing on opposite ends of a single, measurable dimension (Rogers, 1954).

"Measurable" is the key word here because Rogers (1954) developed a quantitative means for assessing the relationship between a person's real and ideal selves. His method was an adaptation of an exercise in which respondents sorted two stacks of identical cards: one from the vantage point of their real self (how they perceived their self at the time) and the other from the perspective of the ideal self (how they would ideally like to be). The degree of correspondence between the two was dubbed the self-discrepancy score. A high positive correlation was indicative of good functioning, whereas a low correlation was taken as an indication that the real self had some catching up to do. Rogers' contribution spearheaded three decades of self-discrepancy research that featured the juxtaposition of real and ideal selves in comparison with a variety of outcome variables.

Breaking ranks with tradition, Ogilvie (1987) questioned the wisdom of using the ideal self as the sole standard for evaluating the status of the current or real self. He argued that a potential problem with ideal selves was that, in most instances, they are envisioned as abstract future selves that have no grounding in actual experience. Milan Kundera (1984, p.122) captured Ogilvie's concern in the following passage from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: "The goals we pursue are always veiled. A girl who longs to be married longs for something she knows nothing about. The boy who hankers after fame has no idea what fame is. The thing that gives our every move its meaning, is always totally unknown to us." How much credibility could be granted a number representing the distance between an individual and a phantom, the distance between one's "now" self and a self that is largely based on guesswork? The idea of another self, dubbed the undesired self, emerged in part from such considerations.

The Undesired Self

Ogilvie proposed that the *undesired self* might be a more stable anchor or "peg" for assessing the condition of the "real" self than the ideal self because the undesired self (see also in this regard Sullivan's (1953) discussion of the "bad me" and "not me") is more likely to be based on lived experiences. That is, we know what misery is like because, at least to some degree, we have already tasted it. In comparison with the ideal self and its oftentimes hazy, "maybe someday" quality, the undesired self can be accessed by way of memory traces of emotionally charged, upsetting events.

In support of the utility of the undesired self construct, Ogilvie (1987) reported a much stronger relationship between real/undesired discrepancies and scores on a measure of life satisfaction than was so between real/ideal discrepancies and life satisfaction. Ogilvie and Clark (1992) summarize results obtained by other investigators that confirmed that pattern.

Most relevant to the present paper, Ogilvie and Clark (1992) also report the results of probing more deeply into individuals' perceptions of being at their best and worst. A brief questionnaire was designed that first asked respondents: "At what age were you or do you think you will be at your best?" That question was followed by an instruction to write a description of what being at your best was, is, or will be like. The second question set pertained to the undesired self. It paralleled the first set with the lead-in question "At what age were you or do you think you will be at your worst?" After that prime, respondents were asked to write a description of being at their worst.

The first conclusion reached by Ogilvie and Clark (1992) after reviewing the results of several studies that used this instrument was: *When people are asked to describe themselves at their best, successful fulfillment of social roles came to mind.* For example:

I will be at my best when I am married and have children.

I will be at my best when I have a good job and am able to buy nice things.

I was at my best when I had two jobs, paid all the bills on time, and my wife liked me better than she does now.

Things will be much better for me when I graduate from college and take over my father's business.

I will be at my best when I am ordained.

I was at my best when I was in the military and had the respect of the troops under my command.

Second, *when people were asked to describe themselves at their worst, they tended to recall (or project into the future) instances when social roles were disrupted, lost, were not available, or were not functioning properly.* For example:

It (being at my worst) was a couple of years ago when my mother was so angry with me that she came close to kicking me out of the house.

I lost my job as a result of downsizing.

I was at my worst when I discovered by boyfriend had been cheating on me.

I'm afraid it might be coming up in the future. I have been working in industry and I'm not sure its what I want to do for the rest of my life. It scares me when I worry about having made a bad career choice.

It was when I finally realized that my marriage was not going to work out.

Things were really bad for me when I was discharged from the army.

I failed to perform well enough on my MCAT tests (4 of them) to get accepted into any medical schools so I had to give up on my life dream.

So, ideal, or best, selves are typically envisioned as times when social roles are functioning properly, whereas undesired, or at worst, selves are unveiled when roles collapse. (Grodkiewicz, 2007, has recently confirmed that robust pattern).

These results and the ideas associated with them went into a period of dormancy until they were resurrected by the recognition of their compatibility with Ernest Becker's notion that social roles are culturally constructed defenses against death anxiety (Becker, 1973). From that perspective, it makes perfect sense that the ideal self is most thought about in terms of well-functioning social roles and the undesired self in terms of the collapse of roles. The most promising way to explore this potential link with Becker's (1973) theory is to turn to Terror Management Theory.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) is derived from the work of Ernest Becker (1973). Becker argued that one of the critical consequences of human consciousness is our awareness that each one of us will die. Other species are spared from that burden due to their inability to freeze time and see themselves in the third person. But when we project ourselves into the

future, our abstract understanding of the ultimate fate of each living organism is suddenly personalized and we are struck with horror by our ultimate fate.

Recognition of our mortality, according to Becker (1973), runs more deeply than an intellectual understanding of Nature's design. The idea of our death registers emotionally and we are dumbfounded by the prospect of ceasing to exist. The prospect of dying is an outrageous contradiction to "instincts" to live. Becker argues that the dread that accompanies the thought of our own death can be so overpowering that it must be removed from consciousness as frequently and effectively as possible lest we become insane.

Becker (1973) wrote extensively about the numerous ways that cultural institutions are designed to shield us from being overwhelmed by the fear of death by providing us with a sense that we are persons of enduring value. Perhaps the most easily understood example that Becker offers is how religious beliefs function as buffers against death anxiety. Most religions make a distinction between the body and the soul or spirit. Acknowledging the fact that all bodies eventually die and decay, nearly all religions offer a partial reprieve from facing the full impact of that poignant reality by positing an immortal "essence" that is released at the moment that its temporary material "carrier" ceases to exist. Believers are told that death is not to be feared; it is to be welcomed as the next stage of existence.

The ways religious beliefs offer havens against the fear of death are easier to grasp than are the less obvious ways in which secular institutions serve the same purpose. Putting aside the nuances of Becker's (1973) arguments, the core feature of his position can be summarized in the following way. One of the major functions of any society is to guard against the eruption of death anxieties by making life meaningful to the majority of its members. Cultures offer protection by providing *social roles* and rules for appropriate conduct in those roles. Successful

occupation of valued roles promises: 1) a sense of being connected to the cultural worldview; 2) self-esteem; and 3) most important, a consequent reprieve from ruminations about death. There is a sense of stability and permanence associated with social roles, a sense of fitting in or being part of the cultural shield that protects us. From Becker's perspective, it is no wonder that self-conceptions (for better and worse) are so consistently loaded up with role terminology.

As one might expect, Becker's (1973) sweeping statements about the psychological foundation of human civilization were met with mixed reactions in academic circles (generally negative and dismissive) and public discourse (here a bit more favorably). Whether one was attracted to or offended by Becker's theoretical positions, they were pretty much relegated to the realm of philosophic speculations by empirically-oriented psychologists and anthropologists. But that changed upon the arrival of TMT as a basis for testing hypotheses derived from Becker's core set of ideas. Most of this research is based on the *mortality salience hypothesis*, which states that if cultural worldviews and the personal significance they afford serve a death-denying function, then asking someone to think about their own death (*mortality salience*; MS) should increase their need for the protection normally afforded by the cultural worldview and the self-worth derived from it, and consequently, should provoke judgments and behaviors that uphold faith in that worldview and one's self-worth within the context of that worldview.

In a typical study, participants are told they are in a study of personality traits, and that they consequently would complete some standard personality assessments. Embedded in several standard personality inventories to obscure the true purpose of the study is what is described as a new projective measure consisting of two open-ended questions to render mortality momentarily salient. Participants in control conditions complete parallel questions about other topics.

Participants are then given an opportunity to evaluate others who either share or differ from their cultural worldviews or to assert their self-worth.

For example, Greenberg et al. (1990, Study 1) had Christian participants rate Christian and Jewish targets (who were portrayed as quite similar except for religious background) after a mortality salience or control induction. In the control condition there were no differences in participants' evaluations of the targets; however, a reminder of death in the experimental condition produced increased affection for the fellow Christian target and exaggerated hostility for the Jewish target. The general tenor of this work is that MS increases conformity to and defense of the worldview to which the individual subscribes. Mortality salience effects have been obtained using a wide variety of operationalizations of MS; e.g., subliminal reminders of death (Arndt et al., 1997), or interviews in front of a funeral parlor (Pyszczynski et al., 1996). In addition, studies have found MS effects to be quite different than the effects of reminders other aversive events, such as uncertainty, failure, intense pain, social exclusion, general anxieties and worries, giving a speech in public, and paralysis. Nearly 300 published experiments by independent researchers in at least 13 countries have successfully used this design to obtain evidence in accord with hypotheses derived from TMT (for reviews, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004).

Finally, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon (1999) developed and empirically corroborated a dual-process model of conscious and unconscious defenses to death that provides an account of the cognitive processes that underlie mortality salience effects (research has shown that subtle reminders of death do not engender negative affect or physiological arousal and MS effects are not mediated by affect) and how they unfold over time, pinpointing heightened

accessibility of death-related thought outside of consciousness as the cause of these effects (for a recent review, see Arndt et al., 2004). Consistent with this model, research has demonstrated that threats to: a close relationship (Mikulincer, Florian, and Hirschberger, 2003), belief that the world is just (Hirschberger, 2006; Landau, et al., 2004a), the righteousness of one's nation or credibility of one's cherished religious beliefs (Schimel, et al., 2006), and the belief that humans are different from animals (Goldenberg et al., 2001) increase the accessibility of death-related thought, and produce effects comparable to those obtained in response to making mortality salient.

Deadly Connotations

In a recent study, Landau, et al. (2004b, Study 1) found that following a mortality salience induction, participants rated a strongly-worded patriotic statement praising President George W. Bush's responses to attacks on the World Trade Center and his policies in Iraq more favorably than control participants. The mortality salience paradigm in general, and the finding that reminders of death increase support for President Bush and his policies in Iraq in particular, provides us with an opening to test the link we have been forging between death anxiety and the undesired self. We have used Becker's writings to understand why ideal selves are largely comprised of internal images of ourselves securely linked to the cultural worldview by way of social roles. We have also argued that the undesired self is exposed when such roles no longer provide their real or imagined protection against the fear of death.

Consequently, in Study 1 we compared the effects of mortality salience, exam salience, self-at-worst (undesired self) salience, and self-at-best (ideal self) salience on impressions of President Bush and his policies in Iraq. We predicted that research participants assigned to the

mortality salience and self at worst salience conditions would more strongly support the President than participants assigned to the exam salience and self at best salience conditions.

Study 1

Participants

Two hundred and thirty four undergraduates at Rutgers University (162 females and 72 males) volunteered to participate in return for extra credit in their psychology class in October, 2003.

Procedure

Participants were run in a single session in a psychology class. The experiment was described as a short study of the relationship between personality attributes and opinions about social issues. Each participant was given a questionnaire packet and asked to complete each question in the booklet in the order they appeared. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: mortality salience, exam salience, self-at-best salience, or self-at-worst salience.

Two "filler" questionnaires preceded each manipulation. These brief questionnaires were included to sustain the cover story and obscure the true purpose of the study. In the mortality salience condition, participants responded to two open-ended questions (used in previous TMT studies, e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt et al., 1989): "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you" and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead." Exam salience control participants responded to parallel questions about taking an examination. In the self-at-best salience condition, participants responded to three open-ended questions: "At what age were you or do you think you will be at your best?" "Describe what is

was, is, or will be like when you are at your best." And lastly, "Write down as specifically as you can, what has happened, is happening, or will happen to you physically when you were, are, or will be at your best." The self-at-worst salience condition participants responded to parallel questions about themselves at their worst.

All participants then completed a self-report mood scale (Watson & Clark's PANAS-X, 1991) to assess possible affective consequences of the manipulations, and read a short literary passage to serve as a delay because previous research (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994) has shown that MS increases worldview defense most strongly when there is a delay between the MS induction and dependent variable assessment.

Participants then read the following passage (from Landau et. al, 2004b, Study 1) expressing a highly favorable opinion of the measures taken by President Bush with regards to the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq:

It is essential that our citizens band together and support the President of the United States in his efforts to secure our great Nation against the dangers of terrorism. Personally I endorse the actions of President Bush and the members of his administration who have taken bold action in Iraq. I appreciate our President's wisdom regarding the need to remove Saddam Hussein from power and his Homeland Security Policy is a source of great comfort to me. It annoys me when I hear other people complain that President Bush is using his war against terrorism as a cover for instituting policies that, in the long run, will be detrimental to this country. We need to stand behind our President and not be distracted by citizens who are less than patriotic. Ever since the attack on our country on September 11, 2001, Mr. Bush has been a source of strength and inspiration to us all. God bless him and God bless America.

They were then asked to respond to three questions: "To what extent do you endorse this statement?" "I share many of the attitudes expressed in the statement," and "Personally I feel secure knowing that the President is doing everything possible to guard against any further attacks against the United States." All responses were made on 5-point scales (1=*Strongly agree*,

5=*Strongly disagree*). These responses were then reversed-scored so that higher numbers were indicative of greater support for the President.

Results

The responses on the three questions demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$) so they were combined to yield a composite agreement score, which was submitted to a 4 (ms v. exam v. self-at-best v. self-at-worst) x 2 (gender) ANOVA. There was no main effect or interaction for gender, p 's > .83. However, the predicted main effect for experimental conditions was obtained ($F(3,224)=9.09, p<.001; \eta^2 = .11$). Mean "Support for the President" scores for each experimental condition is presented in Figure 2. Pair-wise comparisons (LSD with 95% confidence interval) revealed that support for the President was significantly higher in the MS condition (mean = 3.46) relative to the exam salient control condition (mean=2.30; $p<.001$) and the self-at-best condition (mean = 2.44; $p<.001$). More importantly for the present purposes, support for the President was also significantly higher in the self-at-worst condition (mean = 3.08) than the exam salience control group ($p = .003$) and self-at-best condition ($p = .014$). The difference between the exam salience and the self-at-best condition was not significant ($p = .686$), however, support for the President was marginally higher in the MS condition than the self-at-worst condition ($p = .082$).¹

Discussion

The results of Study 1 support the idea that thinking about being at one's worst produces effects comparable to a mortality salience induction, in that participants in both the mortality salient and self-at-worst salient conditions reported increased support for President Bush and his policies in Iraq, relative to exam salient and self-at-best salient control conditions. However, the fact that reminders of death produced marginally higher evaluations of President Bush than

reminders of self-at-worst is potentially problematic for the hypothesis that making the undesired self salient and making mortality salient instigate similar defensive reactions in the service of terror management. Perhaps this hypothesis is simply incorrect, and the differences between the mortality salient and self-at-worst condition reflect qualitatively dissimilar psychological processes. But this need not be the case however; it is also possible that the differences between the mortality salient and self-at-worst condition are quantitative rather than qualitative, because thinking about death directly is more “deadly” than thinking about the undesired self (like “death-light” – still deadly but a tad less daunting and permanent than being completely divested of one’s corporeal crust).

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to address this issue by comparing reminders of death with reminders of the undesired self using a different dependent measure; specifically, the accessibility of implicit death thoughts. Terror management research has demonstrated that thoughts of death lead to distal terror management defenses when such thoughts are in a state of deep activation (Wegner & Smart, 1997), on the fringes of consciousness, highly accessible, but outside of current focal attention. The conditions that lead to high levels of death-thought accessibility, such as delay and distraction or subliminal reminders of death, are the same ones that produce high levels of worldview defense even if these conditions have nothing to do with death per se. For example, Landau et al (2004b, Study 3) demonstrated that reminders of 9/11 produced similar effects to a mortality salience induction. Similarly, Goldenberg et al (2002) demonstrated that participants displayed comparable reactions to reminders of physical sexuality, and in Israel Mikulincer, Florian & Hirschberger (2003) revealed that separation from a loved one is analogous to a mortality salience induction. Study 2 therefore assessed the accessibility of

death-related thoughts after a reminder of mortality or after a "self at worst" induction. Research participants were exposed to the mortality salience, exam salience, self at best or self at worst inductions used in the previous experiment, and the accessibility of death-related thoughts was assessed with a word-fragment completion task, a measure similar to ones that have been used effectively in past research (Bassili & Smith, 1986; Greenberg, et al., 1994).

If thinking of oneself at worst instigates the same defensive reactions as a mortality salience induction, then those participants in the self-at-worst condition should exhibit the same heightened levels of death accessibility as those in the mortality salience condition.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and twenty seven undergraduates at Rutgers University (132 females and 95 males) volunteered to participate in return for extra credit in their psychology class in March 2006.

Procedure.

Study 2 was identical to Study 1 in that participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: MS salience, exam salience, self-at-best salience, and self-at-worst salience. The only alteration of materials in this study was an instrument for measuring death accessibility was substituted for the support the President rating exercise in the Study 1. Having participants complete a set of word fragments by filling in two missing letters assessed death theme accessibility. Six of the 20 words could be complete as either neutral or death-related words. For example, participants saw the letters C O FF __ and could complete the word with the

neutral term coffee or with the death-related term coffin. The possible death-related terms were coffin, grave, dead, skull, corpse, and stiff.

Results

The death theme accessibility scores were submitted to a 4 (ms v. exam v. self-at-best v. self-at-worst) x 2 (gender) ANOVA. There was no main effect or interaction for gender, p 's > .22. However, the predicted main effect for experimental conditions was obtained ($F(3,219) = 3.0, p < .001; \eta^2 = .02$). Death accessibility means for each experimental condition are presented in Figure 2. Pair-wise comparisons (LSD with 95% confidence interval) revealed that Death Accessibility was higher in the MS condition (mean = .95) relative to the exam control condition (mean = .61; $p < .06$) and the self-at-best condition (mean = .60; $p < .06$). More importantly for the present purposes, Death Accessibility was significantly higher in the self-at-worst condition (mean = .98) than the exam control condition ($p = .02$) and the self-at-best condition ($p = .02$). The difference between the exam and the self-at-best conditions was not significant ($p = .91$). Additionally, there was no difference for Death Accessibility between the MS and self-at-worst conditions ($p = .73$).

Discussion

The results of Study 2 confirm that reminders of the undesired self are comparable to intimations of mortality in that participants in both conditions reported higher levels of accessibility of death thoughts relative to control conditions. And the fact that there were no differences in death thought accessibility between the mortality salient and undesired self salient conditions in this study buttresses our claim that the findings of Study 1 are the result of qualitatively similar underlying psychological processes.

Additionally, these findings bear directly on recent claims that mortality salience effects have nothing to do with death per se. Some have proposed that feelings of uncertainty (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001), the desire to form and maintain coalitions with other human beings (Navarrete & Fessler, 2005), and/or deficits of meaning (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006) cause of effects attributed to matters pertaining to death by TMT theorists. Heine et al (2006) asserted that a more generic threat to meaning management theory should be favored over TMT until increased death thought accessibility was found in response to threats to meaning-related threats, which is precisely what Schimel et al. (2006) demonstrated in five studies where challenges to cherished cultural beliefs produced increased death thought accessibility (DTA; using multiple measures thereof). Schimel et al. (2006, p. 802) in turn concluded that:

We should also point out that although the present test of the DTA hypothesis focused exclusively on the cultural worldview component of the cultural anxiety buffer, it should equally apply to self-esteem, as it too functions to buffer people from thoughts of death. Future research should therefore examine the effect of threats to self-esteem on DTA. In a similar vein, the possibility that other types of threats increase DTA should also be considered. Indeed, any substantial threat to those psychological structures that provide people with meaning and self-worth...should bring death thoughts closer to awareness.

To our knowledge, the results to Study 2 provide the first empirical confirmation of this assertion by demonstrating the reminders of the undesired self brings death closer to home, psychologically speaking.

General Discussion and Conclusions

We observed at the beginning of this article that the ideal has served social scientists well as a standard for self comparison. It is a major focus point for assessing personal value and one need not wonder why it seems so natural to strive to bring the real self into closer proximity to it.

In that regard, it is fitting that numerous social scientists have designed ways to compute discrepancies between "now" and this "aimed for" self. But William James (1902/1958) had something to say about this topic, as he did about almost every other topic in psychology at the turn of the last century, when he warned us that this sort of healthy-minded attitude is "inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it so positively refuses to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes at the deepest levels of truth."

It is questionable if the undesired self qualifies as one of the "evil facts" James had in mind, but its contents are not pleasant and, for the most part, the field of discrepancy research has been reluctant to accept it (or its contents) as a genuine portion of reality. When asked about the dark side of life, the undesired self, there is a strong tendency to describe past, present, or future times when social roles are either disrupted, lost, or otherwise unavailable. That discovery led to an unanticipated crossing of the border between self discrepancy research and Ernest Becker's (1973) work and terror management theory's empirical corroboration thereof about how the occupation of social roles (and, at a much broader level, cultural worldviews) operate as buffers against the fear of death.

We have described two studies that demonstrate parallel effects of making death salient and making the undesired self-salient. That's a start, but clearly two investigations are not sufficient to validate our argument. However, if more research confirms a connection between the undesired self and death anxiety, our eyes might be opened to deeper levels of truth regarding the operation of the self in the cultural milieu.

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Endnotes

1. To assess whether MS affected mood, we performed analyses of variance on the subscales of the PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1992) including Positive Affect and Negative Affect.

Consistent with previous TMT research demonstrating that mortality salience does not engender affect, there were no significant differences found for any of these analyses (all p. values > .1).

2. As with Study 1, MS did not affect mood.

Figure 2. Mean Accessibility of Implicit Death Thoughts by condition.

