

When American college students contemplate their eventual death, how pro-US are they?

Irene Howard, Genesis Alvarez, Ximena Leon, Nicholas Liddick, Samantha Dorazio, Aryssa Walters, Corie Levine, Alane Schmelkin, and Leigh Ann Vaughn

(472 words in the body of the abstract)

Introduction

Research on terror management theory (TMT) suggests that when people think about their own death, they can become more positive about their own country. For example, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, and Breus (1994) found that when American participants were subtly primed to think about their mortality, they showed more favoritism towards those who held pro-US opinions than toward those who held anti-US opinions. An important question is whether this effect is reproducible.

The Many Labs 4 project was created to examine a new variable in replication testing: exactness with regards to the original study. The aim of this project is to examine how results from the version of a study created by working closely with the original researchers ("expert version") compare with results from versions of the study created by individual labs ("lab versions"). Our study, which is part of the Many Labs 4 project, is a "lab version" of Greenberg et al.'s (1994) Study 1. Our hypothesis was that our lab version would reproduce the effects found in the original article.

Method

Participants were 98 Ithaca College students, who participated in this laboratory study in exchange for extra credit in their psychology courses.

The first set of materials included the mortality-salience manipulation. In the mortality-salience condition, participants wrote about the emotions that the thought of their own death aroused in them and what they thought would happen to them physically as they died and were dead. In the control condition, participants responded to similarly-worded writing prompts about watching TV.

The second set of materials asked participants to read and respond to two essays "which were written by a person from a foreign country." The pro-US essay emphasized themes of freedom and safety, whereas the anti-US essay emphasized themes of income inequality and self-centeredness of Americans. Following each essay, participants reported how likeable, intelligent, and knowledgeable they believed the author was.

As in the original article, we calculated an index of author evaluations on which higher scores indicated more positive attitudes about the pro-US author and more negative attitudes about the anti-US author. Additionally, we calculated separate indexes of evaluations of the pro-US and anti-US authors.

Results

The confirmatory analysis on the index of author attitudes revealed no significant effect for the mortality-salience manipulation, $t(95) = .07, p = .947$. Additional, exploratory analyses on the pro- and anti-US author indices revealed a significant effect of mortality salience on the pro-US author index, $t(95) = 2.01, p = .047$, and a marginal effect on the anti-US author index, $t(95) = 1.83, p = .070$.

Discussion

Our lab version of Greenberg et al.'s (1994) Study 1 failed to reproduce the original findings. Instead, participants reported more positive attitudes toward both the pro-US and the anti-US authors in the MS condition. Additionally, participants were more positive toward the anti-US author than the pro-US author.

References

Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., Simon, L., & Breus, M. (1994). Role of consciousness and accessibility of death-related thoughts in mortality salience effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*, 627-637.