

Does Mortality Priming Increase Religious Thinking?

Evidence from Implicit Spatial-Religious Associations

Michael Rihs_a, Fred Mast_a & Matthias Maalouli-Hartmann_{a,b}

_a Institute of Psychology, University of Bern; _b Faculty of Psychology, Swiss Distance University

Theoretical Background

Terror management theory posits that people with lower self-esteem defend their cultural worldviews when reminded of their mortality (Mortality Salience; MS). These people strengthen the values of their worldview when confronted with death.¹

For religious beliefs, different effects have been found depending on the level of assessment: On an explicit level MS increases religious peoples religiosity while decreasing atheists religiosity. On an implicit level, MS increases religiosity not only for religious people but also for atheists.²

The implicit religiosity can be measured by using the vertical association of the deity.³ Several cultures associate God and positive values with the upper space while the devil and negative values are associated with the lower space.

Because the vertical association of the deity is part of the cultural worldview and MS increases cultural worldviews, a higher vertical association of the deity is expected under MS.

Discussion

Mortality salience lead to higher associations of God with the upper space and the devil with the lower space. People with a high self-esteem did not show this effect.

Increased implicit religiosity in order to manage one's terror induced by mortality.

Procedure

Measurement of self-esteem

IAT measurement 1*

Writing an essay with different topics:**

- One's own death (Mortality Salience; N = 67)
- Tooth treatment (Control condition; N = 67)

Delay task (word search puzzle)

PANAS

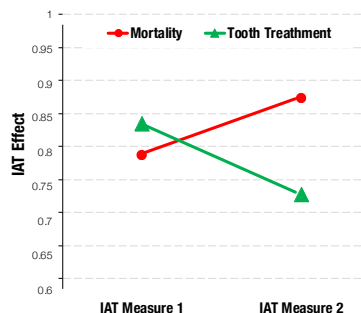
IAT measurement 2*

* The block order was counterbalanced: half of the participants first learned a congruent association (God-Up, Devil-Down), the other half first learned an incongruent association (God-Down, Devil-Up).

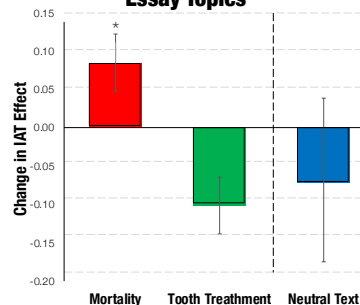
** An additional control condition (N=17) copied a neutral text

Results

Effect of Essay Topic on IAT Effect



Changes in IAT effect for different Essay Topics



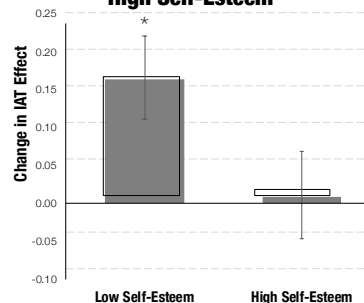
- Increase in IAT effect under Mortality Salience

- Decrease in IAT effect without Mortality Salience
- training effect

- Differences of IAT-scores under MS only for people with lower self-esteem

- No differences in PANAS due to Mortality Salience

Changes in IAT Effect for Low and High Self-Esteem



References

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- ² Jong, J., Halberstadt, J., & Bluemke, M. (2012). Foxhole atheism, revisited: The effects of mortality salience on explicit and implicit religious belief. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(5), 983-989.
- ³ Meier, B. P., Hauser, D. J., Robinson, M. D., Friesen, C. K., & Schjeldahl, K. (2007). What's "up" with God? Vertical space as a representation of the divine. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(5), 699-710.

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