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Motivation for Military Service: A Terror Management Perspective

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This study examined the effects of mortality salience on the motivation for military service in Israel using the terror management theory framework. Shortly before conscription into the army, 156 young men completed a self-esteem scale and were then randomly assigned to either a mortality salience condition or a control condition. The dependent variables were self-reported motivation to serve in the army and anticipation of physical and mental hardships. Mortality salience was found to be associated with a higher level of motivation for military service and a higher anticipation of physical hardships in the army than the control condition, but only for high-self-esteem respondents. The results are discussed in view of the self-esteem and worldview defense mechanisms proposed by the terror management theory.

The notion that higher existential threat leads to a greater willingness for life-threatening behaviors appears to be counterintuitive. However, it has repeatedly been observed that in times of security risk (e.g., war, frequent terror attacks), people in Israel typically display higher motivation for military service. What could account for this increased willingness to engage in behavior that may endanger life?

The solution to the paradox might be found with the help of terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997), which attempts to explain a wide range of human behaviors in terms of the defense mechanisms by which people protect themselves from the terror of their own finitude. TMT has gained extensive empirical support in the last decade (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2002), and recent studies indicate that it may serve as a valuable basis for the study of life-endangering behaviors (e.g., Taubman–Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999, 2000).

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TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY

TMT (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1997) posits that the human ability to anticipate the future and the capacity for self-reflection lead to awareness of one's own mortality, which, in turn, may be manifested emotionally in anxiety and terror. Two psychological mechanisms are said to be employed to manage this terror. The first involves cognitive and behavioral efforts aimed at validating one's cultural worldviews, enabling people to understand and give meaning to the world in which they live and thereby gain a sense of value along with the promise of symbolic immortality. The second mechanism consists of cognitive and behavioral efforts to live up to the standards and values set by one's society and culture, thus increasing the sense of self-esteem.

Research on TMT has focused mainly on two basic hypotheses derived from the theory. The hypothesis of self-esteem as an anxiety buffer holds that enhancement of self-esteem moderates death-related anxiety and terror. Therefore, a person with high self-esteem is less likely to exhibit anxiety-related feelings and behaviors when faced with concrete or symbolic threats to life. The mortality salience hypothesis argues that reminding people of their own finitude activates terror management mechanisms and increases the need for cultural worldview validation and self-esteem enhancement (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1998).

Both hypotheses have received extensive empirical support in recent years. However, most studies of TMT have employed measures of social judgments and attitudes, whereas only a few have assessed behavioral intentions and actual behaviors (e.g., Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995; Taubman-Ben-Ari et al., 1999, 2000), rarely regarding life-endangering behaviors. These issues are addressed in this study in the context of an actual life-threatening situation in Israel, namely, willingness to serve in the army.

MOTIVATION FOR MILITARY SERVICE

Military service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is compulsory. Active duty for men typically lasts for 3 years, starting at the age of 18, after which they do several weeks of annual reserve duty. As security is, without doubt, the highest priority among Israel's national goals, military service is associated with high social status and prestige, which amplify its psychological significance (Dar & Kimhi, 2001; Gal, 1986). Moreover, the high turnover of recruits allows for rapid advancement and offers young soldiers opportunities to display responsibility and initiative and to assume command over other soldiers, thereby rendering the army a conducive setting for personal growth (Dar & Kimhi, 2001). The image of contributing to one's country and participating in a prestigious organization while gaining social

and symbolic capital that can facilitate future integration into society may serve to enhance the self-concept of young people (Izraeli, 1997; Seginer, 1999).

On the other hand, at the very time when adolescents crave independence, Israeli youngsters are forced to direct most of their personal resources to adjusting to the rigid and demanding military context (Dar & Kimhi, 2001). What is more, many of them may be engaged in actual combat, making the possibility of being wounded or even killed very real. Nevertheless, motivation for service in the IDF among Israeli youth is quite high (Gal, 1986; Orr, Liran, & Meyer, 1987).

The fact that military service is compulsory does not explain the high level of motivation, which may be expressed in a wide range of options. A recruit can volunteer for a special combat unit, can aspire to become an officer, can plan to remain in the army after the compulsory 3 years of service, and so on. Moreover, youngsters can attempt to evade the draft by various means, such as obtaining an unwarranted medical or psychological exemption. Thus the variance in motivation to serve is much higher than the variance in draft rates.

THIS STUDY

This study attempts to explore the worldview and self-esteem defense mechanisms suggested by TMT in the context of motivation for service in the IDF. As military service is a normative phase for young Israelis, it is a well-established element of their worldview. In addition, Orr et al. (1987) found that adolescents facing conscription focus mainly on two issues: the personal challenge of military service versus the threat to individual self-expression. In other words, they are concerned with two aspects of their self-esteem: their inner subjective worth, and their value in the eyes of family, friends, and society.

Moreover, whereas previous research on TMT has focused primarily on reactions to people who either support or threaten an aspect of the respondents' worldview, here we wished to investigate a different dimension of the cultural worldview: the willingness to contribute to shared social goals. Such an attitude can be expected to enhance self-esteem and self-worth in a manner similar to prosocial behaviors (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989).

Thus, in line with the premises of TMT, we predicted that mortality salience would increase motivation to serve in the IDF, activating a worldview defense and striving for self-esteem validation. Moreover, we anticipated that mortality salience would have differential effects on the reported motivation, depending on the individual's level of self-esteem. It was expected that high-self-esteem individuals would regard military service as a device for enhancing self-esteem, and would therefore tend to be more affected by reminders of death, reporting a higher willingness to serve in the army after a mortality salience induction than participants in

the control condition. This effect was not expected among respondents with low self-esteem, who are probably more threatened by the notion of personal death and their ability to cope with the service demands and hardships.

Finally, we explored the effects of mortality salience and self-esteem on the anticipated physical and mental hardships of military service, and examined whether or not motivation to serve in the army is similar to expectations of an easy or difficult service. On the one hand, reminders of death might amplify anticipated hardships, as they might make the individual more aware of his or her existential vulnerability. On the other hand, however, enhancement of self-esteem might imply a heightened sense of self-efficacy, leading to a lower perception of difficulties.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and fifty-six male students from various high schools in Israel¹ (M age = 17.55, SD = 0.85) agreed to participate in the study. All were in their last year of school (i.e., about 6 to 12 months prior to conscription into the army). Only men were selected for the study, as women do not serve as combat soldiers in the IDF. Seventy-two participants were randomly assigned to a mortality salience condition, and the other 84 to a control condition.

Measures

Self-esteem scale. Rosenberg's (1979) 10-item self-esteem scale was used to measure this variable. Answers were given on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*I don't agree at all*) to 4 (*I thoroughly agree*). As the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale in this study was high (.80), we averaged the 10 items into a total score, with higher scores reflecting more positive self-esteem. We then divided the participants into two groups: low self-esteem (below the median; $n = 81$) and high self-esteem (above the median; $n = 75$).

Mortality salience induction. A two-item open-ended questionnaire was used to manipulate mortality salience. Participants in the mortality salience condition were asked to write their answers to these questions: "What do you think will happen to you when you physically die?" and "What emotions does the thought of your own death arouse in you?" Participants in the control condition answered these questions: "What is your favorite food?" and "What emotions does the

¹Although an effort was made to collect representative data from various geographical regions in Israel, the final sample of participants cannot be considered a random selection.

thought of this food arouse in you?" This procedure was similar to that employed by Rosenblatt et al. (1989).²

Filler-distractor scale. Research has shown that participants must first be distracted from mortality salience for it to produce increased distal defense (Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). For this purpose, the participants in this study completed a 13-item TV preferences scale, which was not statistically analyzed.

Motivation for army service scale. A nine-item self-report scale was employed to assess the participants' motivation to serve in the IDF. Constructed especially for this study, the scale made use of indicators utilized by the IDF Department of Behavioral Sciences to examine the perception, attitudes, and knowledge of prospective draftees toward military service (Gal, 1986). Items were related to willingness to serve in the army; the degree of a sense of pride generated by knowledge of their future service; willingness to enlist in the army if it were not compulsory; interest in becoming an officer; willingness to join a combat unit; agreement with the statements that (a) everyone who is able to should serve in a combat unit, and (b) everyone in Israel should be obligated to perform some kind of military or national service; and the anticipated physical and mental hardships of military service. For purposes of standardization, the first seven items related to motivation to serve in the army were recoded as *t* scores. As the Cronbach alpha coefficient for these items was adequate (.84), the average was used as a single total score, with higher scores reflecting higher motivation for military service. The last two items related to anticipated physical and mental hardships, and were analyzed as two separate variables. The Pearson correlations among the three measures were low to moderate ($r = .02$ and $r = -.26$ between motivation and physical and mental hardships, respectively; $r = .45$ between physical and mental hardships), indicating that they tap similar issues, but are reasonably differentiated.

Demographic questionnaire. On this instrument, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information.

Procedure

The instruments were administered to the participants individually in their classrooms. They were told that they were taking part in a study on social attitudes toward a variety of topics, and that their answers would remain anonymous. All

²Although a neutral control topic was employed in this study, other studies have contrasted the effects of mortality salience with a variety of other aversive topics, with mortality salience producing similar unique effects.

participants completed the questionnaires in the order in which they appeared in the preceding sections.

RESULTS

To examine the study's hypothesis, a 2×2 analysis of variance (ANOVA; Mortality Salience \times Self-Esteem) was performed on motivation to serve in the IDF. The results appear in Table 1.

The analysis yielded a significant main effect for self-esteem, $F(1, 152) = 4.21$, $p < .05$, whereas the main effect for mortality salience was not significant. Thus, respondents scoring high on self-esteem expressed greater motivation to serve in the army ($M = 51.62$) than those scoring low on self-esteem ($M = 49.59$). In addition, a significant interaction effect emerged, $F(1, 152) = 6.15$, $p < .05$.³ Tests for simple main effects support our hypotheses. As predicted, participants with high self-esteem reported a higher level of willingness to serve in the IDF in the mortality salience condition than in the control condition, $F(1, 151) = 3.63$, $p < .05$. In the case of participants with low self-esteem, the difference in motivation for military service between the two groups was not significant. Moreover, whereas in the control condition there was no significant difference in motivation between high- and low-self-esteem individuals, in the mortality salience group, high-self-esteem participants reported a higher level of motivation than those displaying low self-esteem, $F(1, 151) = 9.54$, $p < .01$.

A 2×2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA; Mortality Salience \times Self-Esteem) was then performed on the other two dependent variables: anticipated physical and mental hardships. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

The MANOVA yielded a significant main effect for self-esteem, $F(2, 150) = 3.17$, $p < .05$, whereas the main effect for mortality salience was not significant. In addition, a significant interaction effect was found, $F(2, 150) = 4.74$, $p < .01$.

A univariate ANOVA was performed on each dependent variable, and revealed a significant main effect for self-esteem on anticipated mental hardships, $F(1, 151) = 5.74$, $p < .05$. Thus, men with high self-esteem anticipated less mental hardship during their army service ($M = 48.38$) than those with low self-esteem ($M = 51.48$). The analysis also revealed a significant interaction effect for anticipated physical hardships, $F(1, 151) = 6.79$, $p < .01$. Tests for simple main effects showed that, for participants high on self-esteem, the mortality salience induction was linked to a higher anticipation of physical hardships than the control condition, $F(1, 151) = 10.47$, $p < .001$. No difference in anticipated physical hardships was found for par-

³Analysis of the data using hierarchical regression procedures produced the same two-way interaction between the experimental conditions and self-esteem after controlling for the main effects, $\beta = -.87$, $F(3, 151) = 5.61$, $p < .001$.

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Motivation to Serve in the Army
by Self-Esteem and Experimental Condition

	<i>High Self-Esteem</i>		<i>Low Self-Esteem</i>	
	<i>Mortality Salience Condition</i>	<i>Control Condition</i>	<i>Mortality Salience Condition</i>	<i>Control Condition</i>
<i>M</i>	53.34	50.20	48.37	50.67
<i>SD</i>	5.13	8.20	7.33	6.04
<i>n</i>	34	41	38	43

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Anticipated Hardships of Military Service
by Self-Esteem and Experimental Condition

	<i>High Self-Esteem</i>		<i>Low Self-Esteem</i>	
	<i>Mortality Salience Condition</i>	<i>Control Condition</i>	<i>Mortality Salience Condition</i>	<i>Control Condition</i>
Anticipated physical hardships				
<i>M</i>	52.45	44.92	51.18	51.75
<i>SD</i>	9.01	9.51	9.91	9.93
<i>n</i>	34	40	38	43
Anticipated mental hardships				
<i>M</i>	48.83	47.22	53.12	50.81
<i>SD</i>	10.09	10.52	9.50	9.27
<i>n</i>	34	41	38	43

ticipants low on self-esteem. Furthermore, whereas in the control condition, low-self-esteem individuals anticipated a higher level of physical hardship than those high on self-esteem, $F(1, 151) = 9.16, p < .01$, there was no significant difference between high- and low-self-esteem participants in the mortality salience condition.

DISCUSSION

This study lends further support to TMT as an explanatory framework, providing new empirical evidence of the effects of mortality salience on self-esteem strivings and worldview validation. However, unlike previous research on TMT that examined attitudes and perceptions, and to a lesser degree hypothetical behavioral intentions, here we focused on a real-life situation with life-threatening implications: motivation for service in the IDF. The findings are consistent with

those of previous studies indicating that terror management may affect behaviors that appear to contradict the biological imperative of self-preservation (e.g., Hirschberger, Florian, Mikulincer, Goldenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002; Miller & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2004; Taubman-Ben-Ari et al., 1999).

The results reveal that mortality salience led to higher motivation to serve in the army among young men with high self-esteem. In addition, after a mortality salience induction, participants with high self-esteem perceived more physical hardships than those in the control condition.

One explanation for these findings is that youngsters with low self-esteem might perceive military service as a threat to their mental and physical well-being, whereas those with high self-esteem might tend to view it as a challenge and an opportunity to test their abilities and competence, at the same time living up to normative social expectations. This is in line with the notion that the self-esteem attenuation of increased worldview defense following mortality salience (e.g., Harmon-Jones et al., 1997) depends on the extent of convergence between the manner in which individuals are led to feel good about themselves and the beliefs of their worldview that are threatened (Arndt & Greenberg, 1999). Adolescents with high self-esteem may rely on their inner resources and confront their own mortality by maintaining an optimistic outlook regarding their ability to cope effectively with life's demands. On the other hand, those with low self-esteem may possess fewer inner resources and feel less obligated to social demands. Consequently, they may not evidence the same reaction to mortality salience.

This study provides further evidence of the relevance for coping with death awareness of inner resources, such as self-esteem (Greenberg et al., 1993; Greenberg et al., 1992), hardiness (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2001), attachment styles (Taubman-Ben-Ari, Findler, & Mikulincer, 2002), and self-efficacy (Miller & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2004). Future studies might expand this understanding by examining additional personality traits that have been found to be associated with coping styles, such as optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985) and sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1979). Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate the effects on coping behaviors of external events, such as political upheavals, terror attacks, or personal losses—rather than experimental mortality salience manipulations—and the interactions between such events and personality traits.

Contrary to previous findings that suggest that self-esteem provides protection against concerns about death by reducing death-related anxiety and symbolic defensive responses (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997), this study indicates that high-self-esteem individuals can indeed be affected by death awareness, as long as the reaction to the mortality salience serves to enhance their self-esteem (see also Arndt & Greenberg, 1999). This is in line with prior research that found that people who perceive driving as relevant to their self-esteem reacted to a mortal-

ity salience induction with a higher level of reckless driving than those for whom driving was not relevant to self-esteem (Taubman–Ben-Ari et al., 1999). Moreover, they are in line with recent findings showing that self-protective efforts may serve an anxiety-buffering function, so that people are more likely to report self-serving attributions after exposure to death reminders (Mikulincer & Florian, 2002). Viewing the results from a different perspective, this study provides further evidence of the positive effects of mortality salience, demonstrated mainly in investigations of the effects of death awareness on prosocial behavior (e.g., Jonas et al., 2002). Thus, when defensive reactions against the terror of death can be used to sustain or even enhance self-worth, high-self-esteem persons can be expected to adopt courses of action aimed at achieving these goals. It would appear, therefore, that high self-esteem does not necessarily shield individuals from the effects of mortality salience; rather it channels their defenses in particular directions. This study provides one example of such a direction in the military context. Future studies might attempt to provide further evidence of this mechanism in specific aspects of the military setting, as well as in additional contexts.

Although the pattern of findings could be explained in TMT terms, one can alternatively suggest other theoretical views, like the ego development model of Erikson (1963), or the sensation-seeking motivational model of Zuckerman (1979), as explanatory frameworks. However, these models could not easily account for the differences found in this study between the mortality salience and control conditions.

A note of caution is required before any conclusive generalizations can be derived from our findings. First, all the participants were young men shortly before their conscription into the army. Future studies might employ a longitudinal research design, exploring the dynamics of motivation at various stages of military service. Second, the data were obtained through self-report measures, which may be biased by social desirability and other cognitive sets. It might be worthwhile to attempt to design more objective measures of motivation for further investigation of this issue. Finally, beyond the centrality of personal resources, such as self-esteem, additional variables might contribute to the motivation for military service (e.g., social status, school achievements). Future studies should replicate this finding, using a range of psychosocial and demographic variables.

Despite these limitations, the study further clarifies the nature of terror management mechanisms and opens new avenues of research into the dynamics of self-esteem enhancement in the context of worldview validation. In addition, it provides additional empirical confirmation of the impact that the awareness of one's existential condition may have on the psychological processes underlying decision making in respect to life-endangering behavior, an issue of particular relevance in the military context. As military psychologists are continuously confronted with soldiers' existential concerns regarding life and death issues, awareness of the

complex effects of soldiers' thoughts about their own death on their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors may serve military psychologists to gain insights and help them cope with their professional challenges.

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