

Literature as Mortality Salience?

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Terror Management Theorie (TMT)

- “Terror is (...) a uniquely human response to the threat of annihilation.”
- “TMT is about how humans cope, not with the imminent threat of extermination but with the awareness that such threats are ubiquitous and will all eventually succeed”

T. Pyszczynski, S. Solomon & J. Greenberg: *In the Wake of 9/11. The Psychology of Terror.*
Washington, DC: APA 2002, p. 8

‘mortality salience’

- Such reminders of one’s finality are described as *mortality salience* (Hence MS).
- They call for reassurance of prevailing world views.
- And strengthen behavior related to those world views.
- While repudiating anyone calling these in doubt.
- One consequence is an increase in prejudice and animosity against outsiders (who do not share our values.)

Studies so far

- The Mortality Salience (MS) hypothesis has been confirmed in > 120 studies in 9 different countries, both in laboratory and in field studies.
- So why do we think we can add something to this?
- Because we believe that MS calls forward different reactions when it occurs in literature.
- Our hypothesis: MS in literature does *not* boost prejudices against outsiders.
- To test this, we ran an experiment, in which 1 group of readers read a text with MS, another without MS.

Study 1

- Materials: (as MS text) part of the chapter “Ilyusha” from Dostojevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* (Book X, chapter 7) in which a young boy is dying.
- Control text: “History of the tooth brush”.
- Students (N = 57, all female) from the M.A. in English at Boris Grinchenko University in Kiev participated in the experiment.
- The Dostojevsky text was presented in its original, Russian version.

- The control text (history of the tooth brush) equally in Russian,
- As were the 10 questions they had to answer on a 4-point scale (in order to force participants to make an unambiguous choice).
- E.g.:
- *A family from the Caucasus moves into the apartment next door. I feel threatened by it.*
- *I am of the opinion that one should pay more attention to heroism in our society.*
- *The police found a young man red-handed while stealing an iPod. He deserves to be punished severely.*

Results

- The polarity of the responses to the questions were reversed in some cases, so that all answers pointed in the same direction.
- In 8 questions, reactions were in the direction predicted by TMT, i.e. higher negative reactions to outsiders for the MS condition.
- Except: ‘mentally handicapped’ + ‘my country is doing better’ (but that was immediately prior to a violent confrontation between opposition and riot police in Kiev!)
- But ...

- An ANOVA revealed only one significant difference: for the 'heroism' question: a score of 3.7 for the MS condition, and of 3.4 for the control condition ($p < .049$).
- Note, however, the very small effect size!
- Out of ten questions, that is not very convincing for TMT:
- if TMT is right in its predictions generally, they seem NOT to hold for mortality salience (MS) when produced through the reading of literature.
- It remains unclear why MS works differently with literary texts.

Study 2

- 74 students from Munich university, 57 German native speakers, 64 female, 12 male.
- All texts and the questionnaire were presented in German.
- The same texts (Dostojevsky + Toothbrush) + a passage from Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*.
- This is a literary text, like Dostojevsky's, but without MS.
- The same 10 questions about social prejudice as in Study 1.

- No significant differences between responses to the text-condition.
- A reliability analysis was carried out for all items: Cronbach's $\alpha = .358$.
- Hence no data reduction can be carried out, meaning that the test items are independent of each other.
- A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that the data (not surprisingly) were not normally distributed.
- Hence non-parametric tests of comparison of means had to be used: Kruskal-Wallis and Median test.

Results

- They revealed no significant differences by text-response, to none of the 10 items, so the null-hypothesis has to be retained.
- Hence inter-cultural agreement between Ukrainian and German participants.
- No significant differences between native and non-native speakers (of German).
- No significant differences for gender.
- Conclusion: mortality salience, as evoked by text content, does not operate in the way described by TMT so far.
- Why???

Participants?

- In Study 2 participants were students from the Institute for German as a Foreign Language, with very strong intercultural background and experience.
- So they could be less easy to be influenced by MS.
- But this was *not* the case at all in Study 1: those students in Kiev had almost no intercultural experience or background.
- So this is certainly not an alternative explanation.
- Our presumption: it is the *materials* that caused it.

We believed

- That the researchers on TMT have overlooked one important cultural source of MS:
- Art and literature, which are literally FULL of MS,
- From the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Greek tragedies, through Beowulf and medieval romances, Shakespeare's dramas or Goethe's *Sorrow of Young Werther*.
- In literature, theatre and film, as well as in the visual arts, MS is ubiquitous.
- So it is really remarkable that the TMT authors have overlooked this important cultural source.

Until a week ago...

- We then discovered that TMT researchers did *not* overlook this source of MS:
- J.L. Goldenberg *et al.*: “The Appeal of Tragedy: A Terror Management Perspective”. In: *Media Psychology* 1, 1999, 313-329.
- “We suggest that culture, created by humans at least in part to manage the terror associated with our fragile existence, uses tragedy to provide a safe vicarious expression of the fear associated with one’s own mortality.” (p. 317)

Experimental evidence

- After MS was induced (through having participants write a brief essay about their emotions when confronted with their own death)
- But without such MS in a control group:
- “the present findings indicate that when death is on the fringes of consciousness the appeal of tragedy is actually heightened.” (p324)
- However, this does NOT account for our data, where the usual effects of MS were not effected through reading literature (but without the essay).

In Art theory

- This phenomenon has been dealt with from the very beginning.
- E.g. in Aristotle's *Poetics*, under the label of catharsis (κάθαρσις):
- Through Fear (*phóbos*) and Pity (*éleos*) the spectator (reader) experiences an (emotional) purification.
- From our perspective: MS in literature has as its effect not a defense mechanism, as in TMT,
- but a psychological valve, that makes us accept our biological vulnerability.

This, however,

- Is only a conjecture.
- While the Aristotelian notion of catharsis has been almost repudiated in the social sciences.
- Our conjecture is the best we can think of so far in order to clarify the blatant differences between our findings and all the other experiments on TMT.
- How to test this conjecture?
- In any case our findings do throw a light upon the very special status that literature occupies in the minds of readers when it comes to MS.

- The latest issue of *Scientific Study of Literature*
- Contains contributions which seem to underpin our hypothesis.
- Emy Koopman demonstrated how in part catharsis-like feelings played a role in the decision to read about a child's death (or the fear thereof).
- But beyond that also the feeling of support in suffering, and of seeking clarification.
- “for those who are grieving, reading about grief can help to put such personal experiences into perspective.” (SSOL 3:2, 2013, p. 202)
- Clearer still: “‘terror’ does not appear crucial to gaining this type of insight.” (p. 203).

- This view is also corroborated by the research of Guan Soon Khoo and Mary Beth Oliver (same issue, pp. 266-293).
- In the same issue, Paul Sopčák, on the basis of two studies in which readers confronted their own finitude, comes to the conclusion: “that for some readers engagement with these texts not only moves them to the understanding of their own finitude, but also affords them an embodied experience of this finitude.” (p. 234)
- All this then clearly demonstrates that readers may actually *seek* MS in literature,
- and that its effect is not what TMT describes...
- We will keep you posted!