

Abstract for review

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Experimental Applications of Terror Management Theory to Charitable Bequest Decision-making

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Abstract:

A seminal description of Terror Management Theory suggests that death reminders result in two types of defenses: a proximal defense of avoidance and a distal defense of pursuit of symbolic immortality (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, S., 1999).

Some experimental evidence suggests that the avoidance response is relevant to charitable bequest decision-making. For example, James (2016) found that respondents were significantly less likely to express interest in a bequest gift when the word "death" was added to the gift description. James and Routley (2016) found that stories of living planned bequest donors were more influential on intentions to leave a charitable bequest than otherwise identical stories of deceased bequest donors. Pursuit of symbolic immortality may also be important. Routley and Sargeant (2015) identified the importance of "living on" in a series of interviews with planned bequest donors. Both Sanders and Smith (2016) and James (2016) found powerful effects of social norm statements in the context of bequest decision-making.

The current study experimentally investigates the impact of inducing mortality salience (as might be expected in a typical estate planning process) on charitable preferences, with a particular focus on the potential impact of mortality-salience-induced pursuit of symbolic immortality.

Research Questions

Will inducing an increased level of mortality salience alter charitable preferences in accord with predictions of the pursuit of symbolic immortality, to wit,

1. Increased attraction to post-mortem charitable impact as compared with current consumption
2. Increased attraction to local causes as compared with international causes
3. Increased willingness to comply with stated social norms
4. Increased preferences for supporting organizations with greater anticipated permanence

Methods

Participants are randomly assigned to receive mortality salience induction (writing a personal mortality related essay) or a control experience (writing a personal dental pain related essay) prior to answering questions and making choices related to charitable preferences.

Data sources

Online surveys completed by over 3,000 U.S. respondents

Description of results

Preliminary descriptive results indicate support for hypotheses 1 and 3, but mixed support for hypotheses 2 and 4. Additional analysis will be completed to verify and detail the differences in the full version of the paper.

Most important references:

Greenberg J, Arndt J, Simon L, Pyszczynski T, Solomon S. 2000. Proximal and distal defenses in response to reminders of one's mortality: evidence of a temporal sequence. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26: 91-99.

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Routley, C., & Sargeant, A. (2015). Leaving a Bequest Living on Through Charitable Gifts. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 44(5), 869-885.

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