

*Fatal Attraction: The effects of mortality salience on evaluations of charismatic, task-oriented,
and relationship-oriented leaders*

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Abstract

A study was conducted to assess the effects of mortality salience on evaluations of political candidates as a function of leadership style. Based on terror management theory and research, we hypothesized that people would show increased preference for a charismatic political candidate and decreased preference for a relationship-oriented political candidate in response to subtle reminders of death. Following a mortality salience or control induction, one hundred and ninety participants read campaign statements by charismatic, task-oriented, and relationship-oriented gubernatorial candidates, evaluated their preferences for each candidate, and voted for one of them. Results were in accord with predictions. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are considered.

Fatal Attraction: The effects of mortality salience on evaluations of charismatic, task-oriented, and relationship-oriented leaders

“Helpless and fearful people are drawn to magical figures, mythic figures, epic men who intimidate and darkly loom”

White Noise, Don DeLillo

In his classic analysis of authoritarian leadership in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Erich Fromm proposed that people in a state of psychological distress are especially prone to the allure of charismatic political leaders. Similarly, Ernest Becker (1973) proposed that the uniquely human awareness of mortality leads people to identify with leaders who provide the possibility of being a valued part of something great. Accordingly, the present study was undertaken to investigate how mortality salience alters political preferences and voting behavior as a function of the leadership characteristics of the candidates. We hypothesized that following a reminder of mortality, participants would be more attracted to, and likely to vote for, a charismatic leader because of the self-esteem bolstering qualities such individuals provide. In contrast, we expected that under such conditions, a relationship-oriented leader who emphasizes shared governance would be particularly unappealing.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 1991) is based primarily on cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker’s (1971, 1973, 1975) efforts to forge a comprehensive account of the motivational underpinnings of human behavior. According to TMT, human beings share with all other forms of life a basic biological predisposition toward survival, but are uniquely able, by virtue of their sophisticated cognitive capacity for abstract

symbolic thinking and self-reflection, to recognize the ultimate futility of this basic biological imperative. Only human beings are explicitly aware of the inevitability of death and that it can occur at any time for reasons that can never be anticipated or controlled. The awareness of death thus creates the potential for potentially overwhelming terror, which is managed by a dual component anxiety-buffer consisting of a cultural worldview and self-esteem. Cultural worldviews are humanly constructed beliefs about reality shared by individuals that convey sense that the world is meaningful, stable, and orderly—a world in which there is some hope of attaining either symbolic (e.g., by amassing a great fortune, writing a great book, or having children) or literal immortality (e.g., by the promise of an afterlife common in most of the world's religions) to those who meet the cultural standards of value. Self-esteem is the belief that one is a valuable participant in this meaningful universe and thereby qualified for the cultural forms of death transcendence.

Empirical support for TMT has been obtained in over 175 published experiments. These studies have demonstrated the anxiety reducing properties of self-esteem and the role of mortality concerns in conformity to and defense of one's cultural worldviews. The most heavily studied general hypothesis has been that, to the extent that psychological structures provide protection from the potential for death-related anxiety, reminders of death should intensify efforts to uphold the psychological structures -- cultural worldviews and self-esteem -- that provide this protection. Thoughts of one's own death have been shown to affect a wide range of human activities, including pro-social behavior, aggression, nationalism, prejudice, self-esteem striving, sexual attitudes, risk-taking, and close relationships (for reviews, see Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 2003; Solomon et al., in press). In addition, this research has shown that MS does not influence conscious affect or physiological arousal, and its effects are greatest

following a delay, when death thought is highly accessible but outside of focal attention (Greenberg et al., 1997). Recent work has demonstrated that it is the potential for anxiety signaled by heightened death thought accessibility which motivates worldview defense and self-esteem bolstering, which in turn reduces death thought accessibility to baseline levels (Greenberg, et al., 2003; Pyszczynski, et al., 1999).

Charismatic Leaders

Charismatic leaders have a “special magnetic quality that fills followers with awe and adoration.” (Lipman-Blumen, 1996, p. 30), and can become dangerous and unstoppable forces in certain conditions. In the early part of the 20th century, millions supported Hitler’s grand plan to purify the human race. The atrocities performed by his followers are often attributed to the Fuhrer’s ability to entrance the public; it was as though they were under his spell. Why do people become so slavishly devoted to such leaders?

There is currently burgeoning interest in understanding the dynamics of charismatic leadership. In a recent review, Ehrhart & Klein (2001), following Yukl (1998), make a distinction between charismatic (visionary), task-oriented (instrumentally effective), and relationship-oriented (emphasizing the need for leaders and followers to work together and accept mutual responsibility) leadership styles.¹ Ehrhart & Klein (2001) then propose that while there is general agreement that leadership is a dynamic interaction between leaders and followers, we currently know more about the characteristics of leaders than the dispositional or situational factors that account for leadership preferences of followers, and conclude that (p. 153): “More research is needed to gain further insights into the active role of followers in the formation of charismatic relationships.”

In this regard, Weber (1925/1968) proposed that followers' attachment to, and enthusiasm for, charismatic leaders is amplified by psychological distress; similarly, Fromm (1941) avowed that loyalty to charismatic leaders results from a defensive need to feel a part of a larger whole, and surrendering one's freedom to a larger-than-life leader can serve as a source of self-worth and meaning in life. Additionally, Avolio & Bass (1988) and Conger & Kanungo (1987) argued that because the radical visions of charismatic leaders are generally widely discrepant from existing conditions, they foster dissatisfaction among followers, thereby generating some of the distress that is ultimately responsible for their own empowerment. However, radical visions are unlikely to be attractive to secure and satisfied people. As Lipman-Blumen (1996, p. 30) observed, "Charismatic leaders have a way of appearing in times of great distress. They usually espouse a decidedly radical vision that promises to resolve the crisis... a period of great threat and uncertainty." And Becker (1973), following Redl (1942), argued that when mainstream worldviews are not serving people's psychological security needs, concerns about mortality impel people to devote their psychological resources to following charismatic leaders who bolster their self-worth by making them feel like they are valued parts of something great.

Based on these ideas, the present study was conducted to determine if affection for charismatic leadership increases when terror management needs are activated by a reminder of mortality. After a MS or control induction, participants were exposed to short campaign statements by political candidates with either charismatic, task-oriented, or relationship-oriented leadership styles. Our primary prediction was that reminders of death would increase preference for the charismatic candidate. We also expected that MS would decrease preference for the relationship-oriented leader, because as Becker argued, for terror management purposes, people

need a supremely confident leader with a grand vision who can provide self-worth through identification with the leader and the leader's vision. By emphasizing his or her own humanity and an egalitarian approach in which everyone participates, the relationship-oriented leader demystifies government; yet, for terror management purposes, mystification is precisely what people want (Becker, 1973, 1975). Because the task-oriented leader is focused on practical matters of getting the job done, we didn't have a clear sense of whether attraction to such a leader would be affected by MS or not.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and ninety students at Brooklyn College (122 females and 68 males ranging in age from 17 to 56, $M = 21.76$, $SD = 5.87$; 53% Caucasian, 13% African-American, 12% Latino/Hispanic, 6% West Indian, 4% Asian, & 12% other) were randomly assigned to mortality salient (MS) or exam salient control conditions. Participants completed the experimental materials individually.

Procedure. The experimenter approached individuals in the college cafeteria and asked them to participate in a short study of the relationship between personality attributes and how people form impressions of political candidates. After reading and signing an informed consent statement, each participant was given a questionnaire packet and asked to complete each question in the booklet in the order in which it appeared. The packet began with two filler questionnaires (the neuroticism subscale of the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1967) and an adult attachment scale (from Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988) to sustain the cover story and obscure the true purpose of the study, followed by the manipulation of mortality salience. In the MS condition, participants responded to two open-ended questions (used in previous TMT studies e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt et al., 1989): "Please

briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you” and “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.” Exam salient participants responded to parallel questions regarding their next important exam. All participants then completed a self-report mood scale (Watson and Clark’s PANAS-X, 1992) to assess possible affective consequences of the MS induction, and read a short literary passage to serve as a delay and distraction because previous research (Greenberg et al., 1994) has shown that mortality salience effects emerge more clearly over time.

Next, participants read campaign statements purportedly written by three political candidates in a hypothetical upcoming gubernatorial election. The candidates varied in leadership style: charismatic, task-oriented, or relationship-oriented, and their campaign statements were modified from Erhart and Klein’s (2001) study of leadership preferences of managers in business settings. Based on Erhart and Klein’s analysis of the characteristics of different leadership styles, the charismatic leader was portrayed as having high expectations of followers, confidence in the follower’s abilities, engaging in risky but calculated behavior, and emphasizing the importance of the overarching vision and identity of the group as a whole:

I will be the perfect governor for this great state because I am committed to this state and this nation's future. I work hard to communicate my vision for this state to my constituents. I set high standards for my cabinet members and myself and expect them to work as hard as they can to reach those standards. However all this hard work is done not just for the sake of productivity; I want everyone, state employees and private citizens alike, to reach their potential and do the best job that they can. I want all citizens to realize how good they can be and how much they have to offer to our great state and great nation. My goal is to do things

differently than my predecessors have done and I'm willing to take some chances to show my voters how things can be improved. I rely on each and every citizen to be creative and help build our state and our nation. You are not just an ordinary citizen, you are part of a special state and a special nation and if we work together we can make a difference.

The task-oriented leader was characterized as setting high, yet achievable, goals and effectively achieving those goals by efficient allocation of resources and delegation of responsibilities:

I will be the perfect governor for this state because I can accomplish all the goals that I set out to do. I begin by working with my staff and cabinet to set work goals. I do not promise to change the world; the goals set out before us are realistic yet challenging. I am very careful in laying out a detailed blueprint of what needs to be done so that there is no ambiguity. Once my cabinet and I have all the goals and objectives laid out I will implement statewide plans to provide the resources to get the job done. Finally everyone on my staff has their own specific role so that their task is performed with the utmost efficiency.

The relationship-oriented leader treats followers compassionately and respectfully, places emphasis on communication by listening to followers, shows followers trust and confidence, and acknowledges followers with recognition and appreciation:

I will be the perfect governor for this state because I worry about the citizens' well being. I treat everyone that I come into contact with, with consideration and respect. I am committed to being friendly and respectful no matter how high the political tension may rise. I emphasize communication among my staff and all citizens. I inform every one of all-new programs or policies and am open for

suggestions. I encourage all citizens to take an active role in improving their state.

I know that each individual can make a difference. Everyone's contributions are recognized and appreciated.

Order of presentation of the candidate's statements was counterbalanced. After reading each political candidate's statements, participants responded to five questions evaluating the candidate: How much do you believe this candidate can contribute to society? How much would you enjoy living in this state if this candidate were elected? How much do you admire this candidate? How much do you find this candidate's beliefs in agreement with your own? To what extent would this candidate be an ideal governor? Responses were on five point Likert scales (1 = not at all; 3 = somewhat; 5 = a great deal). Then after evaluating the third candidate, participants were asked which of the three they would vote for in an election. Finally, participants responded to demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, and ethnicity) before being debriefed and thanked for partaking in the study.

Results

Evaluations of the candidates. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the five questions evaluating the merits of each leader, and yielded alphas of .90, .91, and, .93 for the charismatic, task-oriented, and relationship-oriented candidates respectively. Consequently, the average of participant's responses to the five questions evaluating each candidate were summed and averaged to form a composite general evaluation. These composite scores were then subjected to a 2 (mortality salient, exam salient) X 3 (charismatic leader, task-oriented leader, relationship-oriented leader) mixed ANOVA² which yielded a significant main effect for the leadership style of the candidates ($F_{(2,376)} = 6.62, p = .001, R^2 = .034$) qualified by

the predicted Mortality Salience X Leadership Style interaction ($F_{(2,376)} = 5.78, p = .003, R^2 = .03$).

The main effect was due to participants reporting significantly more positive evaluations of the task-oriented candidate ($M = 3.38$) than of both the relationship-oriented candidate ($M = 3.16$; $T_{(1,376)} = 2.38, p < .05$) and the charismatic candidate ($M = 3.05$; $T_{(1,376)} = 3.59, p < .01$); the ratings of the relationship and task-oriented candidates did not differ. More importantly, however, participant's evaluations of the candidates varied as a function of mortality salience conditions; the means for this interaction are presented in Figure 1. One way to examine the interaction between mortality salience and leadership style is to conduct one-way ANOVAs comparing mortality salient and exam salient participants for each leadership style. The evaluations of the task-oriented leader did not differ between mortality salient and exam salient participants. However, as predicted, mortality salient participants had significantly higher evaluations of the charismatic leader than exam salient participants ($F_{(1,188)} = 7.24, p = .008, R^2 = .037$). Additionally, as expected, evaluations of the relationship-oriented leader declined in response to mortality salience relative to the exam salient control group ($F_{(1,188)} = 3.83, p = .052, R^2 = .02$). Thus, the high opinion of the task-oriented leader was unaffected by mortality salience; however, mortality salience increased participant's enthusiasm for the charismatic leader, while simultaneously diminishing their regard for the relationship-oriented leader.

Another way to examine the Mortality Salience X Leadership Style interaction is to compare preferences for each leadership style within the mortality salient and exam salient conditions separately. Accordingly, one-way within group ANOVAs for each condition were conducted, which produced significant effects for leadership style for both the exam salient ($F_{(2,188)} = 8.052, p < .001, R^2 = .079$) and mortality salience ($F_{(2,188)} = 4.13, p = .02, R^2 = .042$)

conditions. Pair-wise comparisons (LSD) in the exam salient condition subsequently revealed that the charismatic leader was significantly *less* well-liked than both the task-oriented leader ($p < .001$) and relationship-oriented leader ($p < .001$), who were equally regarded. However, in the mortality salient condition, the charismatic leader was as highly evaluated as the task-oriented leader, but the relationship-oriented leader's evaluations were now significantly lower than the task-oriented leader ($p = .004$); the ratings of the charismatic and relationship-oriented leader did not differ. In sum, the charismatic leadership style was held in substantially lower regard than the task-oriented and relationship-oriented styles in the control condition; but, in accord with our predictions, evaluations of the charismatic leader increased in response to MS. Additionally, MS decreased participants' evaluations of the relationship-oriented leader (relative to the task-oriented leader).

Votes. Besides evaluating each of the candidates, participants were asked to choose which one they would vote for in an election. Results of the "election" are presented in Table 1. A two-way chi-square test confirmed a significant interaction between experimental conditions and leadership styles, $\chi^2(4, N = 180) = 28.66, p < .01$. Pearson chi-square tests were then conducted to detect differences in participants' voting as a function of mortality salience. MS did not have a statistically significant effect on the number of votes for the task-oriented leader $\chi^2(1, N = 180) = .28, p = .60$. However, as predicted, mortality salient participants were significantly more likely to vote for the charismatic leader compared to exam salient participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 180) = 20.83, p < .01$. Conversely, participants were less likely to vote for the relationship-oriented leader when primed with thoughts of death versus thoughts of an upcoming exam, $\chi^2(1, N = 180) = 7.56, p < .01$. Thus, participants' votes for specific candidates were completely parallel (as one would hope they would be) with their evaluations of the candidates reported above.³

Discussion

This study was conducted to determine if preferences for political candidates of varying leadership styles would be affected by subtle reminders of death. Based on a juxtaposition of terror management theory with analyses of the psychological allure of charismatic leaders, we predicted and found that a mortality salience induction increased favorable evaluations of, and voting for, a charismatic political candidate; additionally, the MS induction produced more negative evaluations of, and fewer votes for, a political candidate with a more egalitarian relationship-oriented leadership style. The results of the mock election were especially striking: while the task focused candidate fared well in both conditions (approximately 50%), the charismatic candidate received a paltry 4% of the votes in the control condition but was the beneficiary of a mortality salience induced boost to almost 33%; and these votes were at the expense of the relationship focused candidate, who's very solid 45% of the "electorate" in the control condition diminished substantially (22%) in response to mortality salience.

At the theoretical level, this study adds to the large body of empirical evidence attesting to the pervasive influence reminders of death have on wide range of human activities. These findings fit particularly well with prior studies showing how MS leads people toward individuals, groups, and actions that can help enhance their self-esteem (for a review of this work, see Solomon et al., in press). For example, Arndt et al. (2002), and Dechesne et al. (2000) found that MS increased optimism about and identification with home sports teams and fellow ingroup members, while reducing identification with home sports teams and ingroups that were framed negatively. Thus in response to MS, people want to identify with special, great things, and charismatic leaders typically offer the promise of just that.

From a practical perspective, the implications of these findings are considerable. We have argued elsewhere (Pyszczynski, et al., 2003) that the events of 9/11 have left a pervasive sense of mortality salience throughout America (also see Cohen-Silver et al., 2002) and the results of this study suggest this may have consequential effects on electoral outcomes. The fact that intimations of mortality enhanced preferences for charismatic leaders and diminished regard for relationship-oriented leaders who encourage their constituents to assume responsibility for political outcomes is certainly antithetical to the ideal that voting behavior be the result of rational choice based on an informed understanding of the relevant issues. National elections are no guarantee against totalitarian outcomes. Hitler and Mussolini were duly elected; perhaps terror management concerns have contributed to some of these historical examples of bad choices by the electorate (see especially, Becker, 1973; 1975).

The best antidote to this problem may be to take great pains to encourage people to vote with their “heads” rather than their “hearts” – as past research (Simon et al., 1997) has demonstrated that mortality salience effects are attenuated by instructions to think rationally. Based on this finding, asking participants to think rationally about which candidate to vote for should eliminate the preference for charismatic leaders in response to mortality salience. Of course, in scary times, when mortality salience is often high, or when national self-worth is particularly shaky, rationally driven decisions may be unlikely. But perhaps raising awareness of how concerns about death affect human behavior can assist participants, and hopefully actual voters, to make choices based on the political issues and qualifications of the candidates rather than defensive needs to preserve psychological equanimity in the face of death.

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Figure 1

Mean evaluations of candidates by condition. Error bars represent one standard error above and below the mean.

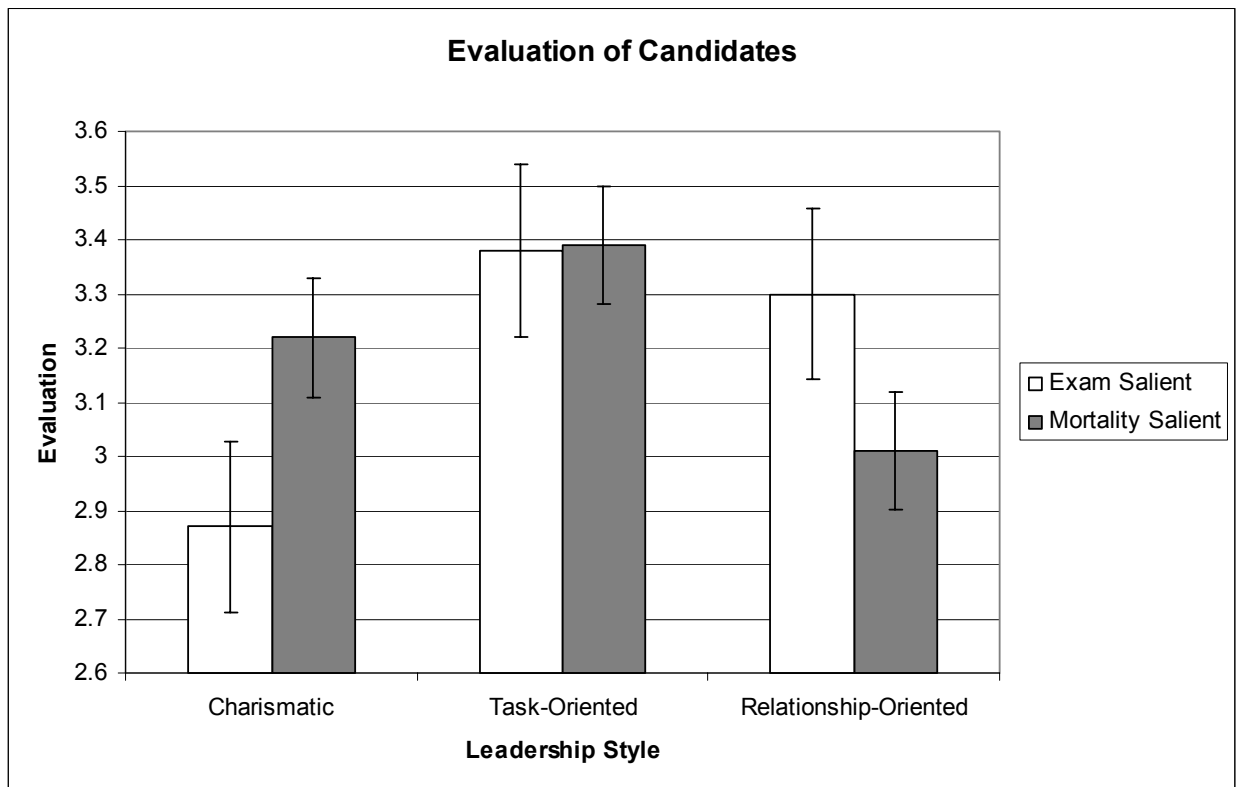


Table 1

Votes by Condition

	Charismatic	Task-oriented	Relationship-oriented
Exam salient	4	48	43
Mortality salient	31	43	21

Footnotes

1. Although these three leadership styles are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Bass & Avolio, 1993), they are clearly distinguishable by research participants (Howell & Frost, 1989).
2. This analysis was originally conducted with gender and order as between group factors. There were no main effects or interactions involving gender. There was however a main effect for the order of presentation of the candidates ($F_{(2,178)} = 4.98, p = .008$); pair-wise comparisons subsequently revealed that participants who were exposed to the charismatic, task-oriented and relationship-oriented candidates in that order had higher more positive evaluations of all three candidates ($M = 3.39$) than participants exposed to the candidates in the other two sequences: task-oriented, relational, charismatic ($M = 3.13; p = .05$); relational, charismatic, task-oriented ($M = 3.08; p = .004$). The latter two orderings of candidates did not differ from each other ($p = .90$). There were no interactions between order and any other factors in the experiment. Consequently, gender and order are not reported in subsequent analyses in order to simplify the presentation of the results.
3. To assess whether MS affected mood, we performed analyses of variance on the subscales of the PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1992) including Positive Affect and Negative Affect. Consistent with previous TMT research demonstrating that mortality salience does not engender affect, there were no significant differences found for any of these analyses. And to ensure that the evaluations of the candidates reported above were not mediated by affect, we conducted a 2 (mortality salient, exam salient) X 3 (leadership style: charismatic, task-oriented, relationship-oriented) analysis of covariance with the

affect subscale scores (including positive and negative affect) as covariates and the critical MS X Leadership Style interaction remained significant ($F_{(2,173)} = 6.93, p = .001$). Thus, we are quite confident that as in past research, these findings are not the result of affective differences between the MS and exam salience conditions.