

Running head: LOVE KILLS THE DEMON

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Abstract

The current study adds another dimension and twist to previous TMT research that suggests love, as a symbolic adornment, ameliorates mortality anxiety when paired with sex. This study attempts to strip the symbolism of romantic love and use it to undercut the need for protection against awareness of death in general. It is hypothesized that love will lessen or eliminate the need for a mortality anxiety buffer compared to a control group. Future research should attempt to apply these findings to other areas of existential anxiety.

Love Kills the Demon

“You know, the only thing that kills the demon...love”

Woody Harrelson as Mickey Knox- Natural Born Killers

Love kills the demon. The demon is ignorance; the ignorance of reality, the ignorance of our true nature, and the ignorance of what drives behavior. The war is over. Someone please break the news. The human beings have won the fight for survival and have arrived. In fact, it may be that the so-called inherent need to survive and perpetuate the species at all costs is merely a psychological aftertaste of times and levels of awareness past. What happens when a species evolves too fast? You end up with a 2GB processor, but only DOS software to run on it, or you end up managing a terror that need not be.

For the past 25 years prominent existential psychologists, such as, Jamie Lynn Goldenberg, Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, have led hundreds of experiments showing that people create cultural worldviews to assuage the terror associated with their awareness of mortality. Terror Management Theory (TMT) theorists have found that to accomplish this feat one must believe that they, and the universe, possess meaning, and that

they are living up to the standards that they have created. Through identification with a larger, ongoing entity (culture), the individual is able to alleviate their own anxiety and find immortality through the persisting social structure (Greenberg, Koole, & Pyszczynski, 2004).

Inspired by the writings of Ernest Becker, TMT starts from the position that human beings are glorified animals trying to contrive a meaning in a world that doesn't have one, and are forever stuck in the paradox of wanting to survive and procreate, and the realization that it is impossible to do so for long (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003). Pyszczynski et al. (2003) suggest that terror management techniques are manifestations of lower-level animalistic motivations.

The bulk of TMT research, to this point, has focused on how mortality salience prompts cause people to more ardently defend their cultural worldviews, boost their self-esteem, and attempt to alleviate the inevitable distress associated with the awareness of their impending death (Pyszczynski et al., 2003). As the mental capacity of humans evolved to the point of having the ability to be aware of the temporal nature of life, so did the need to be protected from this terrifying realization.

In *Death, Sex, Love, and Neuroticism: Why Is Sex Such a Problem?*, Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenberg, and Solomon (1999) found that because of its association with animal physicality and reminders of reproduction and mortality, sex invariably will lead to death related thoughts and the cultural suppression and restrictions placed on it are efforts to avoid this reminder of our animal identities.

If culture is a reaction to mortality anxiety and creatureliness it seems reasonable that sex would be related as well. Sex and the reproductive process seem particularly identifiable with our animalistic qualities. You can dress up people in fancy clothes, put them in a modernized house, and teach them a fancy vocabulary, but they're still going to have sex the same way that the squirrels do on the branch outside their window, still have children, and feed them with a mother's milk. In this study it was found that by prompting participants with reminders of love, the threats associated with physical sex were decreased or eliminated, especially in neurotic individuals. Goldenberg et al. (1999), posit that love has this ameliorating effect because it drapes the physical act of sex with symbolic meaning and elevates it above the merely animalistic act of pro-creation.

In *The Terror of Death and the Quest for Love*, (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2004) it is stated that the evidence compels the researchers to conclude, as well, that even the need for romantic relationships is just another way to deny awareness of mortality, and avoid our innate existential threat. Not limiting their observations to close relationships, they also include "communion, belongingness, affiliation, attachment, togetherness, and intimacy" as mere additional coping mechanisms to deal with mortality anxiety.

Although Mikulincer et al. (2004) eventually states that it is believed that the inclination to have

close relationships starts in infancy and pre-dates the advent of a cultural worldview, it is still believed only to be a defense against mortality anxiety. This would mean, of course, that infants begin their mortality anxiety defense before they even conceptualize their individuality or consciously know they are going to someday die.

The idea of having arrived as a species, or that life is an end in itself, relegates our lower level animalistic instincts to a secondary status. Perhaps surviving and procreating are *not* the most important things. When life is viewed as an end in itself the point then becomes simply *being and experiencing* life and the world as it is. After all, since life has no inherent purpose, as Becker and TMT psychologists contend, then what is the point of surviving just to survive, or procreating just to continue the species on and on, just to struggle to live and distract oneself from dealing with the truths of existence?

The truth is it *isn't* necessary to survive and procreate. It isn't *necessary* to do *anything*. If the universe is without purpose or meaning, than this is an undeniable conclusion. But, what is clear is that we have found ourselves in quite a miraculous situation. What *is* happening is simply this amazing organic organism-environment bubbling with life, vivid colors dancing, wonders abound, and we are all inextricably linked with it all; it is us, and we are it.

What we also see is that people everywhere are suffering. They are suffering because of not realizing the nature of reality. We can feel compassion for others because we see, from Becker for one, that society and culture are symbolic creations and the distinctions between self and other are illusory. Although the realization came second in the evolutionary process, the love and connectedness between "self" and "other" is more fundamental to our interconnected and interdependent reality than the fight for survival and perpetuation, and even of our antiquated biological, then social, elaborated fear of death. Thus, it is hypothesized that love will not only ameliorate the mortality anxiety of sex as in the Goldenberg et al. (1999) study, but will have the same effect on all cases of existential crises in general. Since the love we are speaking of here precedes social or cultural symbolism it is deemed unconditional.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study will consist of *n* college students enrolled in a large, urban, Southeastern university in the fall of 2008. Gender, age, and race will be collected to determine if any differences exist within these different groups.

Materials

The Eysenck Personality Inventory will be used to camouflage the purpose of the study and to ascertain possible differences in responses between divergent personality types. It will take

20-35 minutes to complete.

There will be two different groups of packets distributed randomly to the participants. Each will contain a personality assessment and a mortality salience prompt. In between the personality assessment and the mortality salience prompt, participants will receive one of two open-ended questions: One group will receive a page with the following definition of unconditional love from Webster's New Millennium Dictionary of English presented at the top- "affection with no limits or conditions, complete love." The definition will be followed by the prompt- "When most people think of unconditional love they think of their immediate family, while some may wish to include all people. Please describe an experience in which you gave, received, or witnessed unconditional love." The control group will receive, instead of the unconditional love prompt and to distinguish between a mere positive feeling, an open-ended prompt to write about the experience of eating a satisfying meal. This prompt will read as follows, "Many people report the positive feelings that can result from eating a delicious meal. Please describe how you would *feel* following eating such a meal."

Following this writing prompt, both groups will be presented with the same mortality salience prompt. It is the same one that has been used in numerous TMT studies of the past (Goldenberg et al., 2001) and includes the following two statements: "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you." And, "Please write, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead."

TMT has shown many times that when prompted with mortality salience, individuals defend their cultural worldview. After the MS prompt participants will then complete the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). This scale has been used successfully in past TMT research (Goldenberg et al., 2001) and will measure any effect caused by the MS manipulation, and will also provide a time buffer before the worldview defense test.

As in Goldenberg et al. (2001), to conclude the session participants will randomly receive one of two short essays. Both essays are titled, "The most important things that I have learned about human nature," but one describes how unique humans are compared to animals (e.g., "we are not simply selfish creatures driven by hunger and lust, but complex individuals with a will of our own, capable of making choices, and creating our own destinies"), while the other illustrates how humans and animals are the same (e.g., "what appears to be the result of complex thought and free will is really just the result of our biological programming and simple learning experiences"). The short essay is followed by an evaluation consisting of six questions about the essay and its author. The six questions are, "How much do you think you would like this person?" "How intelligent do you believe this person to be?" "How knowledgeable do you believe this person to be?" "Is this person's opinion well-informed?" "How much do you agree with this person's opinion?" And, "From your perspective, how true do you think this person's opinion is of the topic they discussed?" The questions are answered on a 9-point Likert scale with a response of 1 being the most negative, to a response of 9 being the most positive.

Procedure

The current study will employ the tested formulas of past TMT research. The study can be conducted in a classroom setting with numerous students completing the packet simultaneously. The study will begin with participants completing the Eysenck Personality Inventory. Although this is mainly a distracter task, data interpretation may include comparisons between individuals who score high or low in neuroticism, for example. Next, participants will be presented with one of two open-ended questions. One group of individuals will read a definition of unconditional love, and write a paragraph about their experiences with it. The control group will explain how they might expect to feel after eating a great meal. Then, both groups of participants will be reminded of their mortality. TMT has shown many times that when prompted with mortality salience, individuals defend their cultural worldview. After the MS prompt participants will then complete a PANAS scale to measure positive and negative affect and to serve as a time buffering task. Finally, participants will read one of two essays, one describing human uniqueness in comparison to animals, and the other describing the essential similarity and sameness between humans and animals. They will then answer six questions gauging their reactions to the essay and the author. It will take participants approximately one hour to complete the study. All participants will read and sign an informed consent before completing the study. Following the completion of the study participants will be debriefed and dismissed.

Results

It is predicted that the group of participants who is exposed to the unconditional love prompt will evaluate the essay depicting the similarities between humans and animals more favorably than the group who receives the prompt to describe their feelings after eating a good meal and the same human/animal similarity essay. This is because it is expected that the unconditional love prompt will lessen the experience of discomfort felt from the mortality salience prompt, and lessen the need to defend against mortality anxiety compared with the other group. There is not an anticipated effect expected between the two groups for those who receive the humans are unique essay, or between any of the other conditions.

Discussion

The current study is attempting to broaden the scope of the findings in *Death, Love, and Neuroticism: Why is Sex Such a Problem* (Goldenberg et al., 1999), by postulating that love is a more fundamental state than the need to ameliorate mortality anxiety. At the very least, it will be important to find a positive way to deal with this anxiety. Similar research in the past has tried to show that love is simply another form of symbolic overlay protecting us from our animalistic behaviors. The current research is trying to take the symbolism of Hallmark and candy hearts away and posit a love that is not conditioned by culture, but is as basic, if not more so, than the desire to survive and multiply.

Love may be capable of this because, whether we consciously realize it or not, science is able to show that people and everything else in the universe are connected by the smallest particles and waves, and that nothing exists independently of anything else. Additionally, mortality anxiety

is clearly irrational, as it would be to be deathly afraid of the inevitability of having to fall asleep. The mechanism at work here then, is that not only are socially contrived conceptualizations being undercut by fundamental principles of reality, but also low-level biological evolutionary drives!

By reminding participants of the principle of unconditional love a small spark of recognition is ignited in the individual that should lessen the effects of mortality anxiety simply by the subtle realization of its inherent absurdity.

There is a possibility that the results will not be significant. This would be due to the nature of the constraints of the study. The human race, for the most part, has long forgotten that the symbols it has created to inject meaning into this potentially purposeless paradise are not the reality which it distorts, so one small poke of sanity may not be enough to pierce this veil. However, it is still predicted that the manipulation will have its desired effect, just from touching this unconscious knowledge of the selfless love that exists at the level of self-existing sanity.

The potential implications of this line of research are staggering. Indeed, as Otto Rank said, "we... create out of our freedom, a prison." If love kills the demon of fear and ignorance, then mortality awareness is *not* something that needs to be buffered against at all. The key is simply to face reality head-on, to walk to the edge of the cliff, look down into the abyss, and laugh with joyous delight. True, we are going to die, but if life is never actually lived, then it has been a total waste.

This is the next step in evolution. We must rid ourselves of our irrational defense mechanisms, and subservience to low-level animalistic drives. It *is* true, "I am not an animal, I am a human being," and this affords me the luxury of an insight heretofore unknown, the means to achieve the end of suffering, and the ability to elevate the human consciousness out of the doldrums of a four thousand year old cosmology and into the realms of quantum physics and beyond.

Future research should strive to expand the scope of this study. If more intensive steps could be taken to connect the participant to a sense of unconditional love more intensely and if the results become more exponentially significant the case will be made stronger that love is the ultimate equalizer, and that the terror associated with the realization of mortality is a treatable pathology.

Future studies could include extended periods of contemplation or meditation on themes of unconditional love and acceptance, compassion for others, etc. Research could also be expanded to include more diverse populations, test the effects on members of different religious affiliations, and try to see if the manipulation affects certain groups more than others, and why. Further research could also expand far beyond unconditional love salience as techniques are discovered and tweaked that show what the true nature of reality really is, and how we as a people can best live in this world.

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