Marta Maj

Institute of Psychology,
Jagiellonian University of Kraków
marta.maj@uj.edu.pl

Małgorzata Kossowska

Institute of Psychology,
Jagiellonian University of Kraków
malgorzata.kossowska@uj.edu.pl

Prejudice toward outgroups as a Strategy to Deal with Mortality Threat: Simple Reaction with a Complex Foundation

Abstract. Prejudice and stereotypes are two negative phenomena influencing our everyday lives. Current theory proposes that they are the effects of death cues acting mainly subconsciously, causing a potential for anxiety and provoking to defend our beliefs and maintain self-esteem. Although numerous studies have confirmed the relation between mortality salience and negative attitudes toward outgroups, moderators of this relation drew less attention so far. The following paper proposes three factors to consider: need for closure, religiosity and death attitude of an individual. Previous research as well as predictions based on the Terror Management Theory let us presume that each of them acting differently may play a significant role in shaping stereotyped and prejudiced cognition. An in-depth study shall add to further exploration of the mechanisms of stereotyping and prejudice toward outgroups.

Keywords: prejudice; stereotypes; Terror Management Theory (TMT); mortality salience; need for closure (NFC); religiosity; death attitude.

1. Introduction

"In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes!" – the popular quote by Benjamin Franklin expresses the common knowledge of every human being. We are well aware of death since our consciousness begins and we do not forget about it – no matter how hard we try – till the very end. Because survival is a basic human desire, reminding about life's finitude causes potential for overwhelming anxiety. This aversive state is managed by people through universal mechanisms but in many different and remote ways (Cox and Arndt 2006). One of them observed in a social context is a boost in negative attitudes toward outgroups – prejudice and stereotyping.

Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon 1986) proposes an explanation of how mortality cues influence attitudes toward outgroups. The relations have been tested in the light of TMT and found firm and universal although the strength of effects varied between individuals (Burke, Martens and Faucher 2010). Therefore, the question that requires an answer is how the reaction to mortality reminders is shaped according to individual characteristic of a person. This paper is aimed to propose an answer, pointing out factors that – among others – are suspected to play a role in shaping intergroup cognition: need for closure, religiosity and death attitude of an individual. Literature suggests that all three of them may be responsible for the level to which prejudice and stereotypes are enhanced by mortality, but the last two (framed as below) have not received much attention so far and the links between them are rather vague.

2. Dynamics and Effects of Terror

Terror Management Theory comes from an anthropological reflection on a dramatic but typical human condition – death awareness. According to the theory, this awareness combined with a desire to live forever results in a highly aversive state comparable to fear and known as 'terror'. Not to be *terrorized* in everyday live, human beings developed two buffering systems: cultural worldview and self-esteem. The first one equips people with a stable and reasonable vision of reality as well as values, by keeping which they hope to stay literally or symbolically immortal. The second one allows them to rate their worldview highly and think about themselves as meeting its standards (Schimel *et al.* 1999).

Those systems work mainly beyond our consciousness, protecting us from anxiety derived from mortality reminders in daily situations. Whatever increases mortality salience – increases death thought accessibility, too. But the whole process is quick as thoughts of death are soon suppressed. That makes mortality salience a stimulus unique among other threats (Piwowarski, Christoper and Walter 2011). Even though we can overlook the mortality cues, we often see a reaction which can be varied, depending on situational and individual characteristics. To name just a few, people can turn to close relations (Mikulincer and Florian 2000), act *pro bono* (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg and Pyszczynski 2002) or – more in the subject – become hostile toward those of a different worldview (Burke *et al.* 2010), harshly judge those who act against their values (Rosenblatt *et al.* 1989), or undervalue others because of their ethnic background (Bassett and Connelly 2011). The important part is the mutual goal of these activities: worldview and self-esteem protection.

Special attention is given to prejudice and stereotypes in response to mortality salience. By prejudice we mean a negative affection toward people from another group – outgroup members. Stereotype is a generalization about those people, a perception aimed at traits that classify them as outgroup members and omit individual differences (Fiske 1993; 1998). Undervaluation of outgroups occurs often in both reactions, and is thought to be a popular mechanism soothing terror. It may work by comparison: negative evaluation of an outgroup member results in a better image of one's own group, raising their self-esteem (Burke *et al.* 2010). Same outgroup members can be seen as a threat endangering stability of an individual's worldview, especially when they represent contrary values. Acting against outgroup members in such situations is seen as acting in defence of one's own beliefs (Schimel *et al.* 1999). What is worth noticing, in- and outgroups are not predefined. They are determined by perceived differences – mostly in worldviews – of a particular person and those around.

Although so far we know enough to link mortality with prejudice and stereotypes, the question why people differ so much in using them remains (at least partially) unanswered. The meta-analysis of mortality salience effects by Burke and colleagues (Burke *et al.* 2010) points out some significant socio-demographic factors: age, gender and nationality. But even among people of the same parameters we will observe a variety of attitudes toward outgroup members (for instance, recall your classmates in high school and their attitudes toward a homosexual person – probably extremely diverse). Along those lines, we suggest that the way mortality salience results in prejudice and stereotypes may be influenced by three factors.

The first one is the person's tendency to avoid uncertainty: the more one feels uncomfortable facing death cues, the more they turn to simple, firm and not necessarily fair judgements. Need for closure is a cognitive characteristic describing how people deal with uncertainty. Another factor is death attitude, because reaction to mortality will depend on whether death is treated by a person as more or less threatening. According to the classification of Wong, Reker and Gesser (1994), there are several attitudes that people present toward death, different in emotional load. The more positive and calmer the attitude is, the weaker potential for anxiety is caused by mortality salience. The last source of differences discussed in this paper is religiosity – as it is a manifestation of worldviews (Dezutter *et al.* 2009), expressing values that one can potentially defend facing outgroups after mortality reminders. A person's view on death is related to religiosity – and so the reaction to death reminders should be related, too. Each of the factors is going to be discussed in detail below.

3. How do we Process Threats: Need for Closure

Researchers – including TMT opponents, casting doubts on the uniqueness of mortality over other threats – put its mechanism and effects into the broad category of dealing with uncertainty (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon and Maxfield 2006), which is inspiring. It is worth testing, however, whether cognitive characteristic involved in dealing with uncertainty – need for closure – stands for managing terror as well. Although not novel (e.g. Schimel *et al.* 1999), the role of need for closure in the context of terror has not been extensively explored.

Need for closure (NFC, Kruglanski 1989) is a cognitive characteristic that reflects an individual's reaction to uncertainty and ambiguity, defining how much one turns to firm, clear answers. The bigger the tendency to avoid uncertainty, the stronger the need. Dealing with uncertainty as a core motivation in knowledge formation results in people's behaviour: if they perceive the state of not-knowing as aversive, they prefer to decide quickly. They do not like to confront their knowledge with other possibilities and other people. They seek stability, not novelty. The Need For Closure Scale was designed by Webster and Kruglanski (1994) to evaluate the level of the need. Added up scores in five dimensions (preference for order, preference for predictability, discomfort with ambiguity, closed-mindedness and decisiveness) allow to state whether a person avoids uncertainty (high on the scale) or not (low on the scale). Because the level of NFC was

not changing across time and within various situations, it may be treated as a stable trait (Kruglanski 1990; Webster and Kruglanski 1994).

In view of the fact that mortality salience arouses uncertainty that needs closure, it is expected to cause different reactions among individuals. Facing unknown, i.e. death, will be highly aversive for people who avoid uncertainty but will not affect as much those who do not. So the reaction to death cues would depend on the level of NFC (Dechesne and Kruglaski 2004).

Besides, there has been a lot of work showing how NFC is connected with attitudes toward others, including prejudice and stereotyping. A classic study of Dijksterhuis and colleagues (Dijksterhuis, van Knippenberg, Kruglanski and Schaper 1996) was conducted to check the relation between NFC and stereotyping hooligans. The researchers found that a high level of the need was connected with lower perceived variability of the group, so the members seemed to be more similar one to another. Another effect was a worse recall of the information inconsistent (vs. consistent) with the stereotype of a hooligan – for individuals high on NFC. Such a tendency may promote judgements based on schematic information as they are more accessible. Roets and Hiel (2011) proved a positive relation between NFC and racial prejudice through essentialist thinking. The participants high on NFC, who stuck to the information they are sure about, treated outgroup members in terms of entitativity characterized by race and therefore presented a more racist attitude. Kosic and colleagues (Kosic, Phalet and Mannetti 2012) tested the effects of NFC on perception of immigrants. They found that faces of immigrants were overclassified to the outgroup considered the biggest by those of high NFC level, high prejudice and high perceived threat in the context of migration. Individuals high on NFC refer to existing knowledge instead of making a cognitive effort – and so they err in classification, especially when in threat. Such a tendency in simple processes may come out in more complex phenomena, like attitudes toward outgroup members.

Testing role of NFC in the context of mortality, Schimel and colleagues (1999) checked attitude toward a homosexual man consistent with the stereotype: artistic, feminine and emotional and a homosexual man inconsistent with the stereotype – a 'masculine' one. People usually prefer stereotype-inconsistent gay men. However, the researchers found that after death reminders individuals high on NFC evaluated less positively such a man (comparing to control condition, without threat). This effect accentuates the tendency of individuals high on NFC to use stereotypes as stable and worldview-consistent knowledge structures in mortality salience. Threatened, those people turn to existing knowledge, even if new information is evaluated higher in general.

All the reasoning put together suggests that high NFC will affect people's reaction to mortality threat expressed in heightened prejudice and stereotype use. It is probably because of the high on NFC individuals' tendency to avoid uncertainty – so to react vividly to death cues, too. Mortality salience is not only a fear-provoking state, it also brings along a perspective of new and unfamiliar experience of death, aversive especially for those high on NFC. Turning to simplified knowledge consistent with their worldview may serve their needs and successfully reduce uncertainty. We may expect that a regular favour toward well-known and predictable reality of individuals high on NFC will be enhanced when facing death cues.

4. Is Death Threatening for Everybody? Death Attitudes

Individuals differ in the ways they perceive death, because the vision of symbolic or literal immortality – provided mainly by culture and religion – may itself soothe their anxiety when reminded of the final perspective (Heflick and Goldenberg 2011). Regardless of the story behind it, death may be something that people accept – and as such does not provoke an intense aversive state – but it may also be something disturbing and worrisome, causing a potential for great anxiety and uncertainty.

An indirect proof of the relation between death attitude and reaction to mortality cues may be found in the study by Wojtkowiak and Rutjens (2011). They asked participants to imagine in a very concrete way how they would like to be remembered after they die. Doing so, they brought up the conception of *postself* – symbolic immortality of an individual that occurred to decrease death thought accessibility and the possible effects of terror. Also, afterlife affirmation: reading a 'scientific' article elaborating about near-death experience as supporting conception of life after death (literal immortality) mitigated worldview defence after mortality prime (Heflick and Goldenberg 2011). What is important, those results were obtained for both believers and atheists. This suggests that faith in any kind of an afterlife existence (symbolic or literal immortality) serves as a mechanism buffering mortality concerns independently from religiosity.

The view on death and life after death is a part of a stable individual's worldview (Feifel and Strack 2001). One can describe this part in terms of death attitudes. Although logically connected, death attitudes, as those described by Wong, Reker and Gesser (1994), were hardly noticed as a factor in studies of reactions to mortality salience. The researchers distinguished five types of death attitudes: approach acceptance (*eagerly waiting for life*

after death), neutral acceptance (*accepting death as a natural part of life*), escape acceptance (*waiting for the relief that death offers*), fear of death (*negative affect in response to terror*) and death avoidance (*active denial of death*).

As might be easily noticed, approach acceptance expresses the faith in literal immortality – and as such may ease the terror, according to elaboration above. It is worth considering that although all death attitudes stem from different concepts of life and cause opposing emotions, the first three are framed as death acceptance while the other two treat death as a dreadful necessity. Because of that, we expect various responses to mortality salience – the more an individual turns toward acceptance (vs. fear and denial) in overall death attitude, the less aversive arousal is left to take over in the final course of effects.

According to researchers integrating various theories into the Process Model of Threat and Defense (Jonas *et al.* 2012), such a course starts with anxiety, heightened vigilance, avoidance motivation and inhibition of ongoing activities. That state corresponds to suppression of death thoughts to the subconsciousness after mortality salience induction. After a short time, approach motivation takes over and one engages in the activities that directly reduce the aversive arousal. If an arousal is not noticed or not directly manageable – like most of those caused by mortality reminders – one moves to other reactions that mute anxiety. The reasons why people turn to a certain reaction vary and may depend, for example, on the character of cue provoking arousal or values currently affirmed. In general, those reactions may be described in two dimensions: concrete-abstract and personal-social. Stereotypes and prejudice would belong to the abstract social reactions. Hostility and anger that they contain may be seen as an initiating approach – motivation that leads to reduction of anxiety. Combined with strong ingroup identification, they may be an efficient and simple way to reduce aversive arousal derived from mortality salience.

In line with our argumentation, the more composed and accepting the death attitude is, the weaker are both negative arousal that mortality salience provokes and the following defensive reactions.

5. Against Threat or against Outgroups: Religiosity

Last but not least, it seems reasonable to take into account the impact that religiosity has on attitudes toward outgroup members after death priming. Religion equips people with visions of literal immortality, reducing

the negative influence of mortality salience. It allows believers to accept the finitude of life without an intense aversive arousal and therefore reduces effects of threat – among them prejudice and stereotyping. On the other hand, in the light of TMT, prejudice and stereotypes are worldview defence mechanisms. The key question may be whether outgroups represent something that one needs to defend their worldview from. Because religiosity is a manifestation of a (part of) worldview, by knowing it we can infer how threatening the message that certain outgroups carry is, e.g. declaring values conflicting with those of our group.

Saying that people favour those similar to themselves seems trivial but finds confirmation in numerous studies, e.g. on racial or social status preferences. It is worth noticing that the issue of values outweighed other similarities and was suspected to play a key role in stereotypes and prejudice formation (Chambers, Schlenker and Collison 2012). The researchers found people are fond of those having the same political ideology. Similarities in liberal vs. conservative worldview were more important than racial background when people decided how much they like each other. An influential view on the matter of contrary values was presented by Tetlock (1984). He proposed the *value pluralism model* suggesting that variety of political sympathies may by termed in preference toward one of two values: equality and freedom. Many situations demand from individuals to decide which one is more important for them. As people usually rely on a less-effort strategy, the more they rate one value over another, the less they struggle making choices when values are conflicting.

The application of the model into attitudes toward outgroups in everyday situations can shed a new light on why individuals favour one value over another and defend their values in different ways. Christian religion provides people with a firm set of values that often overlap with traditional, conservative worldviews, tending to affirm equality. On the opposite side stands a secular worldview, connected with liberal opinions and judgements, affirming freedom. Strong affirmation of their values may lead individuals to simplified perception. The more one is unequivocal with their ideology, the less complex strategy they use when presented with a conflict of values (Tetlock 1984). We assume that when values are conflicted in intergroup situation ("my group thinks differently than your group") one may use prejudice and stereotypes as simple and efficient strategies to solve the inconsistency they experience. Researchers suggest that indeed, intergroup conflicts become highly probable between the religious and the secular worldview. It is so partially because there is no match between groups in the important purity/sanctity concerns connected with perceived

privileged place of human being among other animals and closeness to divinity (Kesebir and Pyszczynski 2011).

Religiosity is understood as a system of beliefs connected with some kind of divinity. Starting from Jung's idea (1965) that religion serves as death preparation useful especially for the elderly, through Frankl (1977), who treated religion as a way to face finitude of life and to find a meaning in it, to TMT that sees religiosity as a part of a worldview: brining sense and soothing their fear of death (Dezutter *et al.* 2009), most of the theories accentuated stability and control that religious beliefs provide.

Moreover, Duriez, Fontaine and Hutsebaut (2000) worked on the conception of Wulff (1991) that found religiosity not that simple and 'tool-ish'. The core of his idea is that there are two independent dimensions of religiosity: one focused on believing or not in the existence of God – called *Inclusion/Exclusion of Transcendence,* and another one concerning the way religious content is processed by an individual – *Literal/Symbolic* dimension. Two orthogonal dimensions analysed together allowed the researchers (Duriez *et al.* 2000) to turn *Post critical belief* frame into a scale classifying a person under one of four categories: *Orthodoxy* – for believers who read religious message literally as it is; *Second Naiveté* – for believers who try to find their own meaning beneath dogmas; *Relativism* – for non-believers who take something for themselves from religious symbols; or *External Critique* – for non-believers who definitely reject religion with its whole heritage. That kind of classification helps to show that people not only differ in terms of believing in the Supreme Being as such. They also differ in how they process the religious content that affects, i.e. social behaviours (Dezutter *et al.* 2009).

The impact of religion on the attitudes toward outgroup members is not clear at all. For example, Canadian believers evaluated an essay written by a Syrian, attacking the Western civilization better than non-believers (Norenzayan, Dar-Nimrod, Hansen and Proulx 2009), which implies the terror-soothing nature of religiosity. Golec de Zalava and colleagues (2012), relying on Allport's model of religiosity (Allport and Ross 1967), demonstrated that *intrinsic* religiosity described as motivated by one's own internal reasons occurred to predict attenuation of aggressive anti-terrorism and negative attitudes toward outgroup members after mortality prime. It is not true for motivated by social benefits *extrinsi*c religiosity that was found to be linked to ethnic prejudice (Allport and Ross 1967). We could infer that religious people demonstrate different attitudes toward outgroups depending on the *intrinsic/extrinsic* religious motivation. Nevertheless, a review of Batson (Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis 1993)

proved the correlation between general religiosity and intolerance in 37 of 47 analysed studies.

One way to understand this inconsistency is to look at religiosity as a complex phenomenon, as introduced in *Post critical belief* frame which covers more dimensions and thus may explain a more divergent influence of it. In the fine series of experiments Shen and colleagues (2013) tested the relation between religiosity and attitudes toward different groups: atheists, homosexuals, Arabs and Afro-Americans. They found that *Literal/Symbolic* dimension was related to racial prejudice (the more *literal* processing – the more prejudice in a person) but *Inclusion/Exclusion of Transcendence* – to prejudice toward value-violating groups (the more *inclusive* worldview – the more prejudice, again). The first link may work due to general attitudes of a person processing *literally* toward simplification and contrasting judgements that comes out as racism, sexism etc. The second link roots in key values of a religious person, connected with a divinity they worship – that directs them toward defence of such values when facing other, conflicting values. Duriez himself stated (2004) that racism is negatively linked with *symbolical* processing, and *Inclusion/Exclusion* would play a role in different kind of reactions, e.g. homophobia, which is related to a perceived conflict in values of people from two groups. People who claim to believe in God often rate conservative values highly, whilst homosexual people tend to prefer a rather secular worldview and values like openness and freedom. Moreover, for some believers a matter of sexual orientation and related behaviour – in contrast to e.g., nationality – is something they perceive as a choice and therefore condemn as immoral.

To conclude, the impact of religiosity on negative attitudes toward outgroups after mortality reminders should be explained by anxiety – buffering role of religion in one's view on death. For religious people, death is a gate to immortality and as such should not be threatening but rather promising. Another thing is that a part of values one declares is based on religion – especially *Inclusion of* (certain) *Transcendence*. Because of that, others who adhere to conflicting values may be treated as potentially endangering for believers, causing defensive stereotyping and prejudice. *Literal* style of processing religious content leads to negative attitudes toward people of visibly distinctive characteristics, such as skin colour or gender.

6. Conclusion

Mortality salience – a powerful threat – works mainly beyond our consciousness and therefore affects our daily reactions, i.e., attitudes toward others, probably more than we acknowledge. Aversive arousal it brings is soothed by universal mechanism of anxiety and uncertainty reduction. Stereotypes and prejudice often serve as effective ways of it, however using them in response to death cues depends on individual characteristics of a person. We suggest that need for closure (NFC), death attitude and religiosity may be the factors that significantly shape intergroup cognition under mortality threat – attenuating or enhancing reaction to anxiety and uncertainty. Those three factors were present in previous research but they have not been studied extensively in this specific context so far. Unless we describe the relation including them all, we will not be able to state, i.e. whether need for closure, death attitude and religiosity after death reminders buffer anxiety and uncertainty in general or modify the strategy to reduce them based on attitudes toward outgroups. It may occur that facing terror, people experience an aversive arousal to a different extent, depending on the level of need for closure, certain death attitude or religiosity. But probably the difference lies also in strategies individuals use when facing death – as they may vary according to those three factors, too. Future research shall answer those concerns. What seems important, clarifying roles of need for closure, death attitude and religiosity in the overall reaction to mortality threat, we hope to understand 'dark side' of modern, multicultural societies – stereotypes and prejudice toward outgroups, and deal with them better.

Acknowledgments

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