Effect of mortality salience on charitable donations: Evidence from a national sample

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Charitable giving

- Americans gave $427.71 billion to charities in 2018 (Giving USA, 2019)

- Charitable donations may partly reflect the desire for a warm glow
Terror Management Theory

• *Mortality salience* refers to being made aware of death and dying by
  – Being near to (vs. far from) graveyard
  – Being given questions about fear of death (vs. dental pain, or no questions)

• Mortality salience increases
  – Reported prosocial feelings
  – Intentions to donate
Limitations

1. Samples were mostly college students
   – Mortality may already be salient to older adults
     (Carstensen, 2006, though see Maxfield et al., 2014)

2. DVs have not included actual behaviors
   – In one set of studies, mortality salience increased
     students’ choices for national (vs. international) charity
     when given direct choice (Jonas et al., 2002, 2013)
Research questions

In a national sample we examined whether
1) donations across 4 charities were larger
   with mortality salience and older age
2) fear of death was lower after (vs. before)
   being given donation opportunity
Sample

- USC’s UAS (n=5423)
  - Mean age 51.13 (SD=15.66)
  - 42.6% male
  - 38.7% college degree
  - Median income $50-59k
Randomized conditions

- Mortality salience condition
  Fear of death questions → Donation opportunity

- No-treatment control condition
  Donation opportunity → Fear of death questions

- Example question:
  “Death scares me because of the severance of ties with loved ones” (Florian & Kravetz, 1983)

  (Following method by Florian & Mikulincer, 1997)
Donation opportunity

• Participants were told 100 would get $5 and were asked how much they would donate to charity vs. keep for themselves

• Participants were randomly assigned to one charity
  – American Red Cross (national)
  – International Red Cross (international)
  – Boys and Girls Club of America (national)
  – UNICEF (international)
Research questions

In a national sample we examined whether

1) donations across 4 charities were larger with mortality salience and older age

2) fear of death decreased after (vs. before) being given donation opportunity
Donations by mortality salience vs. control

In total, $433.50 more donated in mortality salience than control condition.
Donations by mortality salience and age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Charitable donation ($)</th>
<th>Mortality salience</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;30 (n=505)</td>
<td>2.9 ± 0.2</td>
<td>2.8 ± 0.2</td>
<td>2.8 ± 0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39 (n=975)</td>
<td>3.2 ± 0.3</td>
<td>3.1 ± 0.3</td>
<td>3.0 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49 (n=990)</td>
<td>3.4 ± 0.4</td>
<td>3.3 ± 0.4</td>
<td>3.2 ± 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59 (n=1136)</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.5 ± 0.5</td>
<td>3.4 ± 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69 (n=1115)</td>
<td>3.8 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.7 ± 0.6</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥70 (n=702)</td>
<td>3.9 ± 0.7</td>
<td>3.8 ± 0.7</td>
<td>3.7 ± 0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Linear regression: Donations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>DV: Donations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mortality salience vs. control</td>
<td>.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.02***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National charity vs. international</td>
<td>.09^</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity for next generation vs. not</td>
<td>.11*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Control variables: income, education, gender, ethnicity

No significant interactions of type of charity with age ($p > .10$)
Research questions

In a national sample we examined whether
1) donations across 4 charities were larger
with mortality salience and older age

2) fear of death decreased after (vs. before)
being given donation opportunity
Fear of death before vs. after donation opportunity

Fear of death

All (n=5423)

Before
After
Fear of death by age x before vs. after donation opportunity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Before (n)</th>
<th>After (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
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## Linear regression: Fear of death

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<th>Predictor</th>
<th>DV: Fear of death</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After donation opportunity (vs. before)</td>
<td>-.07* (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.02*** (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National charity vs. international</td>
<td>-.01 (.03)</td>
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<td>Charity for next generation vs. not</td>
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Control variables: income, education, gender, ethnicity

No significant interactions of type of charity with age ($p>.10$)
Conclusions

• In a nationally representative age-diverse sample, we replicated increasing effect of mortality salience on donations
  – Consistent across adult age (though older people gave more)
  – Consistent across charities

• Fear of death was lower after donation opportunity
  – Consistent across adult age
  – Consistent across types of charities
Implications

• To increase donations
  – Make mortality salient in advertisements?
  – Advertise when mortality is salient?
  – Highlight one victim (eg Small, 2015)
  – Emphasize social norms (eg Croson et al., 2009)
  – Keep benefits low so as not to undermine ‘warm glow’ (eg Imas, 2003)
  – ...
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