Psicothema

Mortality salience, political orientation and minimization of terrorists' secondary emotions

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Abstract

Background: From the framework of Terror Management Theory, the objective of the present research is to analyze the effect of mortality salience (MS) on the minimization of Muslim terrorists' secondary emotions (MSE, which can be understood as a particular kind of dehumanization), as a function of political orientation. **Method:** An experimental design was used, in which the participants (university students, N= 293) were randomly assigned to a control or experimental group, their political orientation was taken note of, and they were asked to attribute emotions to Muslim terrorists. **Results:** In accordance with the hypotheses, the results indicate that, among those supporting tenets of the political left, MS originates less minimization of secondary emotions of the terrorists (MSE). However, among people who stand on the right, MS inspires greater MSE (that is, a lower attribution of these emotions). **Conclusions:** These results support the thesis that the effects of MS are not to be found exclusively in conservative people, and that they do not necessarily imply a conservative shift, but constitute a polarization in previous ideological tendencies or cultural worldview.

Keywords: dehumanization, terror management, mortality salience, political orientation, minimization of secondary emotions.

Resumen

***Recuerdo de la mortalidad, orientación política y minimización de las emociones secundarias de los terroristas.* Antecedentes:** desde el marco de la Teoría del Manejo del Terror (TMT), la presente investigación se centra en analizar los efectos del recuerdo de la propia mortalidad (mortality salience, MS) sobre la minimización sentimental (MSE, una forma particular de deshumanización) de los terroristas islamistas, en función de la orientación política. **Método:** se utilizó un diseño experimental en el cual los participantes (293 estudiantes universitarios) fueron asignados aleatoriamente a un grupo control o un grupo experimental, tomando nota sobre su orientación política, pidiéndoles que atribuyeran emociones a terroristas musulmanes. **Resultados:** en coherencia con las hipótesis planteadas, los resultados indican que, entre personas de izquierdas, la MS da lugar a una menor MSE emocional de los terroristas. Entre personas de derechas, sin embargo, la MS promueve mayor MSE de dicho grupo. **Conclusiones:** estos resultados apoyan la tesis de que los efectos de la MS no se dan exclusivamente en personas conservadoras, y que suponen más bien una polarización en las tendencias ideológicas previas que una deriva hacia el conservadurismo.

Palabras clave: deshumanización, manejo del terror, recuerdo de la mortalidad, orientación política, minimización de las emociones secundarias.

Dehumanization can be considered an extreme form of prejudice that somehow implies the association of outgroups with animals or beasts, or their description as barbarians with scarce sophistication, impulsive savages, or infantile creatures full of irrationality (Haslam, 2006). The complete denial of the enemy's humanity is frequent in contexts of collective violence (in-group aggressions, genocide, wars, tortures, terrorist attacks, etc.) as it facilitates the hurting, mistreating and even the killing of others without any feeling of guilt (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006). Many other authors point out the importance of dehumanization in these types of contexts as one of the fundamental mechanisms for the support, justification, legitimization, and development of barbarity (Bar-Tal, 1990).

In a review on this topic, Haslam and colleagues (Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Loughnan, Reynolds, & Wilson, 2007) integrate the different existing accounts of dehumanization into two basic forms (each of them corresponds to the denial of one of two alternative ways to understand human nature):

1. *Animalistic dehumanization:* it implies the denial of exclusively humane characteristics, which distinguish humans from other animals.
2. *Mechanistic dehumanization:* it implies the denial of characteristics which are essential for humans, although not exclusive to our species (they distinguish humans from machines).

For more than ten years, scientists have worked on a particular form of animalistic dehumanization: *infrahumanization*. This theoretical and methodological paradigm assumes that one of the most essential elements of humanity is the ability to experiment secondary emotions –which people consider to be exclusively humane–. Therefore, infrahumanization consists of

the attribution of a higher number of secondary emotions –but not primary emotions, shared with other animals–, to members of the ingroup compared to members of the outgroup (Leyends et al., 2001).

Closely related to infrahumanization, Leidner, Castano, Zaiser and Giner-Sorolla (2010) have suggested that emotional minimization constitutes a mechanism of moral disengagement that implies an underestimation of the ability of certain social groups to show and develop emotional responses. In this case, no distinction between primary and secondary emotions is made, so it represents a kind of *mechanistic dehumanization*. It is s considered a more radical step than lack of empathy, because it implies an underestimation of the outgroup's ability to suffer, and, consequently, it promotes the consideration of these groups as being outside the scope of morality, humanity and justice.

Thus, previous literature on this topic has shown that dehumanization can be measured through attribution of emotions to certain outgroups.

Like other forms of prejudice and dehumanization, infrahumanization of external groups is positively associated with political conservatism (De Luca - Mc Lean & Castano, 2009); and emotional minimization has shown to correlate positively with certain measures quite similar to conservatism, such as Social Dominance Orientation or Authoritarian Submission (Leidner et al., 2010). In their recent review, Haslam and Loughan (2014) conclude that ideologically conservative people (conservative, right-winged, nationalistic and, especially, high social dominance orientated people) are more prone to dehumanize several outgroups.

Among the many factors that can help to explain prejudice and dehumanization, perceived threat, in its multiple faces –to the ingroup's wellbeing, to political and economical power and status, to self-esteem, to own worldview…– has been shown to be specially important: it has been considered as one of the most important precursors of outgroup rejection, intolerance and exclusion (Canetti, Halperin, Hobfoll, Shapira, & Hirsch-Hoefler, 2009) and it can promote authoritarianism and conservatism (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Feldman & Stenner, 1997).

In this sense, the tendency to dehumanize threatening groups might be affected, at least under certain circumstances, by a kind of epistemic-existential threat: the fear of death.

The terror management theory (TMT; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999) asserts that the awareness of the inevitability of our own death can potentially provoke an extraordinary existential anxiety that we try to deal with by making use of two main mechanisms (mechanisms which would prevent anxiety from appearing): 1) by participating in shared systems of belief or cultural visions of the world, as they offer safety, meaning to life, order, predictability, certainty and a literal or symbolic way to transcend death. 2) by enhancing our self-esteem, which derives from the belief that we are people of value according to the standards of our system of shared beliefs.

In line with the foregoing, the mortality salience paradigm (MS) establishes that, when thoughts related to our own death become accessible, we try to deal with this existential threat using the mechanisms described above (*worldview defense*), which predispose us to react against those who threaten our faith in those belief systems, even against those that merely think differently, criticize, offend or violate our norms and cultural symbols (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). Concretely, MS has

demonstrated its potential to generate a greater need for order, clarity and structure; an increase in ethnocentrism, identification with and esteem for the ingroup as well as greater rejection towards different and threatening outgroups –including the tendency to use stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, and violence and the support of political violence against them– (for further detail, consult the resume of those effects in Pyszczynski, Rothschild, & Abdollahi, 2008).

In line with the above, authors such as Pyszczynski et al. (2003), or Jost, Fitzsimons and Kay (2004) hold the view that MS generally promotes a shift to dogmatic, authoritarian, conservative and ethnocentric ideas about the world, as these types of ideologies provide better protection against existential fear. In support of this position, Echebarría-Echabe and Valencia (2008) find a greater general rejection or implicit prejudice against Arabian people under conditions of MS, independently of the ideology or prevailing vision of the world.

However, certain studies find that this type of reactions to MS are limited to situations or people previously predisposed to conservative responses (such as people high in conservatism or other measures of political right). We shall examine some examples in topics close to prejudice. For example, Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon and Chatel (1992) have found that, under MS conditions, only conservatives (but not liberals) showed more intolerance towards those who were different. Motyl et al. (2011) also found that when shared humanity became accessible, the anti-Arabian prejudice that appeared under MS conditions disappeared (Experiment 1). So, even when TMT does not explicitly advocate it, there is empirical support to expect a *limited conservative shift* –MS naturally promotes intergroup hostility, but this reaction is not inevitable.

On other occasions, the same situational, ideological or personality aspects have managed not only to protect against the effects of MS that derive towards authoritarianism, but to overturn them. For example, it has been found that the activation of the norm "not to be prejudiced" originated a lower level of racial prejudice under MS conditions –compared to not-threat conditions– (Gailliot, Stillman, Schmeichel, Maner, & Plant, 2008); or that under MS conditions, less authoritarian people showed more positive attitudes towards immigrants, whereas very authoritarian people showed a more negative attitude (Weise, Arciszewski, Verlhiac, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2012).

These results match the position (*polarization*) maintained by Greenberg and Jonas (2003), who believe that all world views are equally effective in protecting us from existential anxiety. Thus, everybody responds to MS, but not necessaily through a shift towards conservatism but through a polarization or reinforcement of the most accessible and relevant ideologies. A liberal or leftist worldview might imply tolerance and be less prone to prejudice (Greenberg et al., 1992; Weise et al., 2012).

Although many studies have focused on the effects of MS on stereotype, prejudice and intergroup rejection, few investigations have related TMT with dehumanization, in spite of the reasons to hypothesize this relation: Similar to prejudice or outgroup rejection, it seems probable that MS might promote dehumanization of those outgroups which threaten society's worldview or main values, as Goldenberg, Heflick, Vaes, Motyl and Greenberg (2009), or Pyszczynski et al. (2008) suggest.

Moreover, outgroup dehumanization is part of a simple and structured life ideology which facilitates the perception of the

ingroup as superior –and simplifies the enemy's image–, aspects that are very attractive under mortality salience conditions (Hirschberger & Pyszczynski, 2011; Pyszczynski et al., 2003).

In addition, an animalistic dehumanization of outgroups could imply–through social comparison with an animalized outgroup– a way to humanize one's ingroup (enhancing our distance to our animal nature). Our distancing from animals fulfils an important existential function (Goldenberg et al., 2001) as it estranges us from the biological, the carnal, associated with the mortal and the temporal, and brings us closer to the divine and the permanent. Supporting this premise, the tendency to reinforce ingroup humanization in response to mortality has been found in different cultures (Vaes, Heflick, & Goldenberg, 2010). In that sense, infrahumanization of violence –its association with animals– has been shown to cause a decrease in the support of a preventive military attack against Iran among North-American students with a high level of authoritarianism under MS conditions (Motyl, Hart, & Pyszczynski , 2010).

Although till now, the available evidence shows that MS can generate a greater tendency towards humanization of the ingroups, it does not seem to affect outgroup infrahumanization (Vaes et al., 2010). The absence of relevant results regarding outgroup dehumanization might be due to the fact that the outgroups that have been used are not especially relevant –there are neither reasons for their being held in contempt, nor do they threaten others' worldview–, as Goldenberg et al. (2009) suggest.

The main objective of the present work consists of analyzing the effects of MS on one kind of animalistic dehumanization –which we call minimization of secondary emotions, MSE– of Islamic terrorists –an outgroup that violates most citizens' fundamental norms and moral values– depending on the political orientation of the participants. MSE is similar to emotional minimization, but exclusively referred to secondary emotions (which are supposedly exclusively human).

Taking into account the positions already described about the effects of MS, three alternative hypotheses might be established: 1) MS will generate greater MSE as a general tendency; and 2) MS effects will depend on the political orientation of participants: 2.1) MS will generate greater MSE, but only in the most conservative individuals; 2.2) MS will generate greater MSE in the most conservative, but a lower MSE in the most liberal individuals (according to the position of polarization).

Method

We used a 2 (Mortality salience: mortality reminds vs. watching TV reminds) × Political orientation (continuous variable) experimental design. The dependent variable was MSE (minimization of terrorists' secondary emotions).

Participants

The sample was composed by a total of 293 university students (60 male, 229 female and 4 non-specified) from the Complutense University of Madrid, Spain. They were selected from 11 different groups from the Psychology degree (second and fourth course) and 1 group from the Economics degree. We aimed to select a sample as varied and broad as possible to cover the most varied range of ideologies. Their ages ranged from 19 to 46 years (M = 21.6, SD = 3.54).

Instruments

MSE. Following a procedure similar to the one used by Leidner et al.(2010), we asked the participants to what extent they considered that Islamic terrorists tend to experiment in their daily lives one of the following 11 emotions (participants were not informed that, five of them were primary –fear, surprise, rage, happiness and pain– and six were secondary emotions –affection, shame, guilt, love, melancholy and compassion). A Likert-type scale was used, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The emotional terms were selected due to their validity as representatives of the categories of primary and secondary emotions, according to diverse national and international previous studies (Leyends et al., 2001, study 1; Rodríguez-Pérez, Coello, Betancor, Rodríguez-Torres, & Delgado, 2006).

Complimentary, in a later study, with a similar sample of 44 subjects, we confirmed that the selected secondary emotions terms were perceived as more specifically humane (M = 4.69, SD= 1.21) compared to the terms under the heading primary emotions (M = 2.11, SD = 1.04), $t(43)$= -13.389, p<.001. A seven-point Likert scale was used in this case (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *completely*). The procedure was similar to the one used by various authors in order to check the validity of the measure (Rodríguez et al., 2006).

The level of MSE is computed on the basis of the mean score obtained taking into consideration exclusively the emotional terms that refer to secondary emotions, and once the scores have been reversed –because, if they are not reversed, high scores would imply high level of emotion attribution, that is, low MSE– (M = 4.0, SD = 0.67). Thus, a higher level of MSE implies higher dehumanization –note that this measure is independent of actual level of emotions in terrorists, which are irrelevant to this study (Cronbach α = .697).

Political orientation

We asked the participants to describe their political orientation by situating themselves on a seven-point scale ranging from *very left-winged* to *very right-winged* as an answer to the question "What is your political orientation?".

Procedure

The participants took part in the study voluntarily and for free, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. We presented the study as an opinion poll on different personal and social aspects, where there were no correct or incorrect answers.

After completing the socio-demographic information, age and sex, subjects were randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control group conditions. Following the most typical form of manipulation of this variable in the majority of previous studies (for example, Weise et al., 2012), the participants in the mortality salience condition answered two open-ended questions "Please, concentrate and describe briefly the emotions that come to mind when you think about your own death", and "Please, describe briefly, as specifically as possible, what you think will occur to you physically when you die, and once you are physically dead. Try to experience that as vividly as possible". The participants in the control group answered the same questions, but this time referred to "watching TV" instead of "thinking about your own death".

In order to achieve a time lag before the collection of the dependent variables –necessary to obtain MS effects (see Pyszczynski et al., 1999)–, all the subjects were asked to complete a version of the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) translated into Spanish, typically used with the same objective in research under the TMT framework (e.g., Motyl et al., 2010). Subsequently, the participants answered the questions constituting the basis for the MSE and political orientation measures.

Data analyses

In order to test the main hypotheses of our study, we performed a hierarchical linear regression analysis on the basis of the score obtained in the MSE index as a dependent variable or criterion and the dummy-coded MS condition, political orientation (previously centred in the mean) and the interaction of the two factors as predictor variables. In a first step, we introduced gender in order to control this variable, due to the fact that our sample was composed mainly of women, and this could contaminate our results. The second step included all the main effects, and the third step included interactions between political ideology and MS condition.

The statistical analyses were performed with the SPSS 21.0 program.

Results

The analyses used to test our alternative hypotheses revealed a main effect of the experimental manipulation, $b = .15$, $SE = .078$, $t(290) = 2.00$, $p = .046$, and political ideology, $b = .19$, $SE = .06$, $t(290) = 3.16$, $p = .002$. Those main effects were affected by the expected interaction between MS and political orientation, $b = -.10$, $SE = .03$, $t(289) = -2.74$, $p = .006$. There was no significant effect of gender, $b = .108$, $t(284) = 1.86$, $p = .064$, so it did not influence the effect of the rest of variables, or the interactions between them.
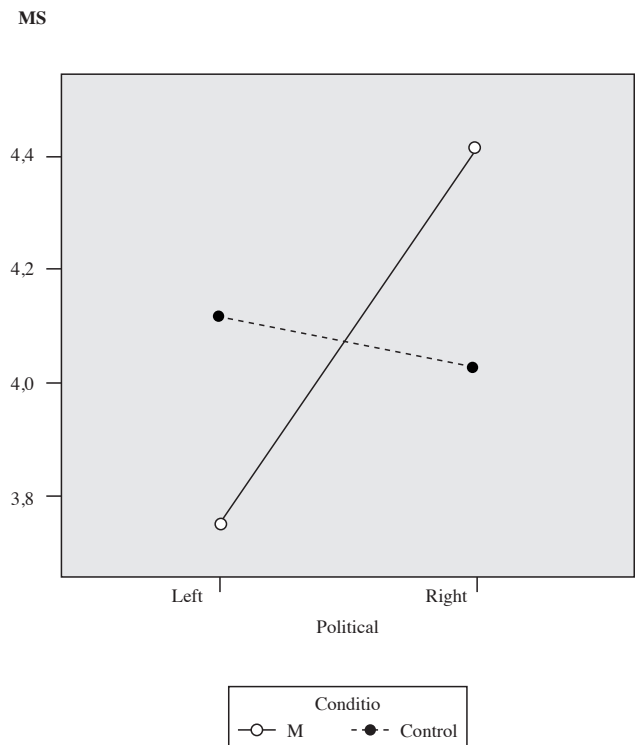
For a better understanding of this interaction, MS effects on infrahumanization were tested separately for right-winged and left-winged (0.5 standard deviations above and below the political orientation mean, respectively). We did this following Aiken and West (1991), but we selected 0.5 SD instead of 1 SD because, otherwise, we would have lost a great amount of the right wing sample.

As we can see in Figure 1, whereas among right-wing people, those who underwent the MS condition minimized terrorists' secondary emotions more, $b = -.39$, $SE = .18$, $t(289) = -2.15$, $p = .036$; whereas people with a left-wing orientation reacted to MS in a completely different way: those who underwent MS showed lower levels of MSE than those who did not undergo this condition, $b = .37$, $SE = .16$, $t(289) = 2.24$, $p = .028$.

From another point of view, analysis centred on each condition (experimental and control) separately indicated that political orientation predicted the variations in MSE only in the MS group, $b = .08$, $SE = .03$, $t(289) = 3.04$, $p = .003$, but not in the control group, $b = -.02$, $SE = .02$, $t(289) = -.80$, $p = .42$.

Discussion

Results of this investigation indicate that, whereas among liberal (left-wing) people, MS originates lower dehumanization (MSE), among conservative (right-wing) people, MS originates higher

Figure 1. *Islamic terrorist minimization of secondary emotions as a function of mortality salience and political orientation. Higher scores indicate higher MSE*

levels of MSE. This supports Hypothesis 2.2 (called *polarization*) to the detriment of Hypotheses 1 and 2.1. In this sense, these results help clarify the nature of the effects of existential threat.

Thus, on the account of our findings, it does not seem that MS produces socially negative effects similar to authoritarianism, which lead to the general tendency to prejudge other groups or even to dehumanize them (as Hypothesis 1 would imply), in accordance with the findings and positions of authors such as Jost et al. (2004) or Echebarría-Echabe and Valencia (2008). Also, effects of MS do not seem to be authoritarian reactions that appear only in those who are psychologically conservative (as Hypothesis 2.1. would imply). A liberal worldview does not seem to constitute merely a resource to mitigate or avoid worldview defense effects, as many researchers have found (Greenberg et al., 1992, among others).

Our results are in agreement with the position of Greenberg and Jonas (2003), who argue that MS seems to affect everyone, and that this reaction does not imply a typically authoritarian response, but a polarization or a greater commitment to the previously predominant ideological, political and axiological tendencies. Thus, not only are conservative people prone to react under MS conditions by dehumanizing threatening external groups but, in agreement with the findings of Weise et al. (2012) or Gailliot et al. (2008) in the field of prejudice, liberal people can also decrease dehumanization of external groups in response to MS.

These results seem to suggest that responses to epistemic-existential needs do not constitute mere socially undesirable or dangerous reactions that we should try to prevent. These needs may promote socially constructive reactions, if accompanied by prosocial norms and values.

In other topics, we can find additional support for the stand of polarization (Castano et al., 2011). Nevertheless, recent research has provided empirical support to the conservative shift hypothesis –where MS has been shown to be able to promote general dogmatic and hostile intergroup responses (Vail, Arndt, Motyl, & Pyszczynski, 2012)–, or a conservative shift response limited to predisposed people (Juhl & Routledge, 2010). This suggests that no stance is necessarily the right one while the others are always wrong, and that the effects of MS could depend on the concrete features of participants and social context.

As far as we know, this is the first study to find a greater tendency towards dehumanization in response to MS, a fact that makes sense in the light of TMT, and which other investigations have suggested but have not managed to find proof for, maybe due to the lack of relevance of the selected outgroups (Vaes et al., 2010). Concretely, this reaction has appeared only in right-wing people, whose view of the world predispose them towards prejudice and greater dehumanization. However, although it has not been reflected in this article, we found that these differences did not appear in emotional minimization (using indistinctly primary and secondary emotions as criteria). It may suggest that, in comparison with mechanistic dehumanization, animalistic dehumanization might be an especially attractive response under conditions of existential anxiety, most of all among conservative people. Various previous studies show that people tend to distance themselves from their animal nature under MS conditions (see Goldenberg et al., 2009), and this is especially common among right-wing or authoritarian people (Motyl et al., 2010). As we hypothesized in the introduction, the animalistic dehumanization of other people might be an indirect way of self-humanization. Future investigation should aim to clarify those aspects.

In any case, certain aspects related to the sample and the social context can offer complementary and alternative explanations for the obtained results.

Precisely, the sample is open to criticism: it is captive and composed of students, which might limit the generalization of the results. This is common, mostly in experimental designs under the framework of TMT, as it is difficult to gather participants from different populations, at a certain place and time where all the conditions can be controlled. Even so, we tried to obtain a sample as varied and broad as possible. In future studies, more representative and relevant samples should be used.

The fact that left-wing people dehumanize less under MS conditions makes us pose the question: Is the tendency towards respect and tolerance a basic trait in liberal or left-wing people even when external groups are involved that threaten their values? The selected outgroup, Islamic terrorists, might have contributed to the obtained results, as they might not be threatening enough to the participants, due to the general social context. What is more, it is possible that, at least from a liberal or progressive point of view, they were perceived to a certain extent as victims towards whom we should feel some empathy in view of their typical precarious conditions and oppression. The "hunting" of Bin Laden by the US army a few weeks before the recollection of the data might have contributed to this.

In this sense, one of the challenges for future investigations consists of approaching the question of whether MS may produce unequivocal signs of zeal and conviction in outgroup rejection, prejudice or dehumanization even among liberal or left-wing people, when it is the case of really threatening outgroups that violate prototypically liberal values. Nowadays, these groups might be represented by managers of financial entities that take advantage of the present situation, corrupt politicians or entrepreneurs who defraud the state or society. Their acts might not constitute a criminal offense but are perceived as openly immoral and illegitimate by important sectors of society. This is a response pattern that research has not found to date but which matches the most basic premises of TMT.

Finally, all the conclusions presented in this paper are based on MSE, a new measure of animalistic dehumanization that contains features of infrahumanization and emotional minimization, and that could be a valid and efficient alternative to infrahumanization. Future studies should confirm its convergent and predictive validity, and its usefulness.

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