The varying effects of close relationships on self-esteem: A terror management theory perspective

Close relationships, such as those with parents or romantic partners, serve important functions in our lives, including resources for comfort and support during times of anxiety. One way to examine the importance of such relationships is through terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986). TMT suggests that humans’ knowledge of their own mortality leads to potential anxiety. One way that individuals combat this anxiety is through the use of self-esteem. Individuals with high levels of self-esteem tend to feel that they are following cultural expectations, which in turn, protect them from thoughts of death. Recently, it has been shown that close relationships may also buffer thoughts of death. These studies have found, for instance, that reminders of mortality (mortality salience; MS) increases peoples’ relational strivings for romantic partners and parents; and, priming such relationships reduces death-thought accessibility and defensiveness that is typical in terror management research (Cox et al., 2005; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Research has also been conducted on the role attachment styles play in reducing thoughts of death. Specifically, secure individuals rely on romantic partners as a source of security when dealing with MS; whereas, insecure individuals (highly anxious persons) respond to MS with increased preference for a parent (Cox et al., 2005; Mikulincer et al., 2003). This research, however, did not explore whether secure and insecure individuals respond differently to parental and romantic relationships following MS. The present study will therefore examine death-thought accessibility and self-esteem as a function of MS, attachment style, and relationship type. Participants will fill out questionnaires to measure their attachment style (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Next, they will be randomly assigned to write about their own death or failing a test. Then participants will be asked to recall positive interactions with either a parent, romantic partner, or a recent acquaintance (the control condition). The dependent variables include measures of death-thought accessibility and self-esteem. It is expected that secure individuals, after MS, will show lower death-thought accessibility and higher self-esteem scores when asked to recall romantic relationships; while insecure individuals, after MS, will show similar results when asked to recall a parental relationship. The present study is potentially important because it adds a new emphasis in the field of TMT. The implications expected from this research include a further understanding of the importance of different relationships in relation to individuals’ levels of security and self-esteem.

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