

DEATH, PREJUDICE, AND ERPS:
UNDERSTANDING THE NEURAL CORRELATES OF BIAS

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ABSTRACT

Awareness of one's own mortality can increase prejudice-related attitudes, behavior, and aggression against members of outgroups (e.g., Arndt et al., 1997; McGregor et al., 1998; Lieberman et al., 1999). The current research investigates the neurocognitive processes underlying person perception following a mortality salience induction that might be associated with these forms of outgroup bias. Event-related brain potentials (ERPs) were used to observe attentional and evaluative processes on-line as White participants categorized ingroup (White) and outgroup (Black) faces according to expression (happy vs. angry) following either mortality salience (MS) induction or a control manipulation. In Study 1, MS led to an overall increase in the P300 for all stimuli, suggesting that MS may cause a state of heightened perceptual processing. In addition, the analyses of the N2 means showed that this component was larger in the MS condition than the control condition, specifically for White faces. This finding suggests that rather than intensifying outgroup bias MS may instead be enhancing an already present ingroup bias. Study 2 included additional outgroup targets (Asians). Results showed again that MS led to an overall increase in the P300 component. Taken together, these results begin to highlight the potential role played by the psychological state of death awareness on influencing the cognitive processing of outgroup members.