

# Understanding Increased Prosocial Behavior under Mortality Salience in the Perspective of Terror Management Theory

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## ABSTRACT

Prosocial behavior is significant for both individuals and society, bringing factors increasing social behavior into the limelight of researches. However, mortality salience, which triggers increased prosocial behavior as a defense to conquer death-related anxiety under the awareness of death, is neglected in prosocial activities. Aiming to discover the role of mortality salience in affecting prosocial behavior, this paper clarifies the correlation under the perspective of terror management theory, providing a complete and thorough review for future researches. This paper explores that individuals' prosocial behavior can be facilitated when mortality salience is triggered. Two mechanisms, worldview defense and self-esteem defense, proposed initially by the terror management theory, act in response to alleviate people's death-related anxiety, providing theoretical support for the role of mortality salience boosting prosocial behavior. In worldview defense mechanism, individuals conduct prosocial activities to build a just world, protecting their extant worldview; in self-esteem defense mechanism, individuals do prosocial behavior to transcend themselves as well as to maintain a positive public image.

**Keywords:** Prosocial behavior, Mortality salience, Terror management theory, Self-esteem defense, Worldview defense.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Prosocial behavior, defined as individuals' engagement of activities which lead to the benefits of other people [1]. While prosocial activities such as donating, volunteering, and cooperating are able to capitalize human capital into huge economic value, facilitating the functioning of human society, Zuffianò et al. [2] pointed out that prosocial activities also helped to increase individuals' level of subjective wellbeing.

As prosocial behavior is significant for both the smooth functioning of society, and the healthy development of individuals, extant researches have tried to find attributing variables of prosocial behavior, including friendship [3], family environment [4], media effects [5], etc. However, despite the significance of prosocial behavior, compared with multitudes of studies focus on anti-social behavior, few researches discover the factors leading to increased prosocial behavior. Even fewer researches delve into the variable of mortality salience in increasing social behavior.

Mortality salience, referring to individuals' awareness of fatality confronting the inescapable destiny of death, triggering defense mechanisms to conquer death-related anxiety, shaping people's attitude and behaviour [6], is neglected in influencing prosocial activities. Thereby, this paper tries to bridge the research gap by exploring how mortality salience leads to increased prosocial behavior and further illustrating the correlational mechanism with the support of Terror Management Theory: a model of defense mechanism illustrating how people shelter themselves from the angst of death while mortality salience is triggered.

Although there is an indispensable relationship between mortality salience and prosocial behavior, few researches clarify the correlation. This paper is based on the finding that mortality salience is able to increase prosocial behavior. In order to better understand the mechanism, this paper further introduces mortality salience and terror management theory with the support of past researches. Finally, this paper tries to explain how mortality salience can trigger increased prosocial

behavior under two defense mechanisms of TMT (self-esteem defense and worldview defense).

## **2. UNDERSTANDING PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

Prosocial behavior is multidimensional concept including “cooperation, donation, and volunteering”, enhancing individuals’ social roles in society and facilitating social development [7]. However, extant researches focus more on anti-social behavior rather than prosocial behavior, although prosocial behavior plays an indispensable and significant role in human society.

### ***2.1. Significance of Prosocial Behavior***

Prosocial behavior is beneficial both in the level of society and individuals. According to Statista, the number of volunteers in the United States ascended to 64.4 million, contributing nearly 90 billion voluntary hours to American society [8], creating tremendous economic value to the American society.

Apart from benefiting society, prosocial behavior contributes to individuals’ subjective well-being. It is supported by experiment data that daily prosocial action is a variable leading to individuals’ higher level of life satisfaction, enabling people to have access to positive social recognition to tackle their dissatisfaction about themselves, thereby giving rise to an enjoyable life [2].

### ***2.2. Increased Prosocial Behavior under Mortality Salience***

#### ***2.2.1. Mortality Salience***

Mortality salience refers to human awareness of their inevitable death which triggers an unbearable feeling of anxiety, in other words. Terror management theory is based on mortality salience’s role in shaping peoples’ attitude and behavior. When mortality is made salient, consciousness of death is brought back to individuals’ mental state, whose effect permeates in all human activities. Mortality salience motivates defense mechanisms (self-esteem defense and worldview defense) to take effect [9], diverting behaviors into consolidating individuals’ self-esteem and enhancing peoples’ existing worldview. Mortality salience can be triggered when people consciously or unconsciously thinking about death, very often been manipulated by researchers as a variable to study human behavior. Methods to elicit mortality salience are various, suggested by McCabe & Arndt, including reflecting about questions related to death, thinking about their proximity to funerals, seeing images related to fatality, relating themselves to disasters and so on [10]. For example, in an experiment done by Cai & Wyer, an

imagination task, asking participants to think about their own death, was adopted to evoke participants’ mortality salience [11].

#### ***2.2.2. Increased Prosocial Behavior under Mortality Salience***

Prosocial behavior and mortality salience have a positive correlation, in other words, individuals’ prosocial behavior increases when mortality is made salient. Being reminded that death is inevitable elicits human’s anxiety, which either boosts human’s motivation to defend self-esteem, or facilitates individuals to consolidate their cultural worldview.

Extant research has verified that prosocial behavior would be increased under mortality salience with research in various aspects. Cai & Wyer Jr. conducted experiments to find the relationship between mortality salience and donation appeals. University students were asked to do an imagination task, imagining death and writing down their feelings and emotions – a method to arouse mortality salience, while the control group imagined about dental pain. Participants then were asked to report their willingness to donate either blood or money. With analysis, the result showed that when individuals were made conscious of their mortality, their willingness to donate increased because mortality salience affected the “bandwagon appeal” on their donation decisions. Considering donation as a social desirable behavior, individuals were motivated to jump on the bandwagon, meeting social expectation to satisfy their quest for self-esteem [11].

The shaping power of mortality salience can also be found in the work domain. Death reflection is able to facilitate individuals’ prosocial motivation while working, when individuals try to conduct self-transcendent behavior by helping others (“to give, contribute, help, benefit, make a difference, or protect and promote the welfare of other people”), to sacrifice more time in activities that correspond to their personal values, aiming to achieve immortality in the symbolic sense, so to buffer the angst of fatality [12].

Moreover, the effect of mortality salience is applicable to both genders, boosting prosocial behavior with little gender difference, since catering to social values is the cultural standard throws on both genders. Individuals, both men and women, who reflected on their death, a method to trigger mortality salience, exhibit more volunteered engagement in helping others, depending on the collective good as the extension of personal value to counter fatality [13].

Thus, the relationship between mortality salience and prosocial behavior is obvious. However, why death reflection will lead to increased altruism remains unclear, which will be further discussed in this paper grounded on the perspective of Terror Management Theory.

### **3. SOCIAL MOTIVATION FOR PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TMT**

#### ***3.1. Terror Management Theory (TMT)***

Terror management theory (TMT) is a well-constructed psychological model, functioning well in explaining human motivation and behavior.

The theory was originally proposed by Ernest Becker through multidisciplinary approach, positing that human behaviors are conducted to manage the uncomfortable anxiety when individuals realize their inescapable fate of death [14]. TMT is premised on the conflict between people's awareness of their fatality and their strong desire towards self-preservation. The awareness of peoples' vulnerability elicits anxiety, which is so tremendous that people must find ways to manage it because death cannot be eliminated, people tackle this anxiety by either remove the awareness of death, or continue their life in the symbolic sense.

Two defense mechanisms are included, demarcated by whether consciousness is involved in mortality salience: proximal defense and distal defense. When people are mentally conscious, proximal defense is triggered to suppress their thoughts of death. However, proximal defense only gives human temporary relief and satisfaction without any practical solutions. On the contrary, distal defense occurs when people are motivated to extend their life in order to conquer the paralyzing angst of death unconsciously, and they do so mainly by attaining self-esteem, or by enhancing cultural worldview [9]. While proximal defense offers no solution to alleviate people's death-related anxiety, distal defense is practical and helpful in tackling the thorny issue. In this way, as it is meaningful to explore how distal defense actually work, both self-esteem defense and cultural worldview defense discussed in this paper are categorized into distal defense, meaning that the behaviors elicited aims to alleviate death related anxiety in a long term with permanent effort.

Extant research has used TMT to understand various aspects of human life including: the politics of fear [15], consumer behaviour [16], self-esteem [17], and so on. In this paper, TMT is effective in explaining why reflection about death can boost individuals' prosocial behavior.

#### ***3.2. Defense mechanisms and prosocial behavior***

##### ***3.2.1. Mortality Salience***

It is posited by TMT that the inevitable fate of death elicits human's anxiety. Apart from tacking death-related angst by raising individuals' self-esteem, enhancing cultural worldview is the other measure. Instead of

isolating human as wholly independent individuals, having to conquer fatality with their own effort, intensified cultural worldview incorporates human as an indispensable element, whose influence, however minute, is able to transcend personal death.

Worldview defense mechanism is supported by the studies done by Victor Floridan and Mario Mikulincer, manifesting that when mortality is made salient, people tend to respond more negatively to social transgression that are offensive to their existed cultural worldview [18]. Correspondingly, they tend to respond more positively to prosocial behavior when death is reminded.

Just-world hypothesis further supports the cultural worldview mechanism motivated by mortality salience to buffer against anxiety. This hypothesis posits that human have the inclination to trust that the world is a fair place where virtues and misdeeds will be rewarded and punished [19]. Believing in a just-world is the prerequisite for people to increase prosocial behavior under mortality salience, because conducting prosocial activities in an unfair social atmosphere is not comforting at all, rewarding the valuable person with no practical benefits. Only when behaving well in a believed just-world can people's prosocial behavior be effective in alleviating death-related anxiety.

Extant researches support that individual is more willing to engage in prosocial activities when they believe that the current world is fair and just, that they can be payed recognition to through altruism, that their good deeds will finally receive reward. According to Begue and Bastonius, when people construct a just-world belief, they tend to provide more care for the elderly [20]. Moreover, belief in the just-world for self (BJWS) is positively related to altruistic behavior, manifested by donation motivation in this study, that participants who have BJWS conduct more donating charity when they pass beggars [21].

From the perspective of TMT, terror management mechanism is triggered confronting mortality threats, human in response, have the inclination to defend their cultural worldview, thereby their belief in the just-world facilitates them to treat the good and the bad with distinguished ways, boosting increased prosocial behavior. Moreover, worldview defense lays a solid foundation for individuals to seek self-esteem defense through prosocial actives, believing that conducting prosocial activities is reciprocal, benefiting both individuals and society.

##### ***3.2.2. Self-esteem Defense and Prosocial Behavior***

There is significant relationship between prosocial behavior and self-esteem. According to Zuffianò et al. [2], when engaging in prosocial activities, they tend to "ignore" dissatisfaction about their face and figure,

because people have higher evaluation about themselves, gaining recognition from others, meeting social expectation through their own effort, thereby resulting in higher level of self-esteem. The positive correlation between prosocial behavior and self-esteem can clearly exemplified by the benefits of volunteering, which can be a “self-validating” experience contributing to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and higher level of life satisfaction [22].

Anxiety buffer hypothesis is the key part of TMT, that self-esteem defense, manifested by increased prosocial behavior, can play an important role controlling the anxiety brought by mortality salience. According to Pyszczynski et al., two hypotheses around self-esteem defense have been verified by previous researches: firstly, high level of self-esteem is able to reduce death-related and vulnerability-relevant anxiety; secondly, the motivation to seek self-esteem increases when mortality is made salient [19].

Thereby, when mortality is made salient, conducting prosocial activities is one way to enhance self-esteem, tackling the anxiety about vulnerability: if prosocial behavior is able to shelter people from mortality-related concerns, then prosocial behavior will increase under mortality salience. In order to further explain the motivation to seek self-esteem by prosocial behavior, two concrete sections followed are impression management theory, constructing positive social identity, and self-awareness theory, seeking a sense of self-efficacy and pursuing self-improvement from one’s inside.

### 3.2.2.1. Impression Management Theory

Impression management theory posits that grounded on people are typical social animals, highly dependent on other individuals, people are activated to control others’ impression about themselves through self-presentation. Individuals, who wish to construct a positive public image, are motivated to follow the value supported by society, for example, conducting prosocial behavior. From the perspective of TMT, in order to achieve immortality and extend personal contribution in the symbolic sense, other people who hold the same cultural worldview become the final judges of individual’s behavior, and thereby individuals rely on others to maintain their symbolic meaning, in other words, individuals need other’s perception and evaluation about what they do. Although self-presentation’s role in influencing prosocial behavior is already been applied by researches, the factor of mortality salience is neglected in the correlation. Under the awareness of death, self-presentation is facilitated to construct one’s self-esteem, and the direct outcome of it: increased prosocial activities.

Individuals present themselves with a good image in front of the public to seek self-esteem to confront the anxiety of vulnerability. This is supported by a study done by Pyszczynski et al., illustrating that people are more willing to form a consensus with others, and are more influenced by the shaping power of consensus when death reminders are incorporated in the experiment [19]. Self-presentation is an underlying variable leading people to seek self-esteem though prosocial behavior under mortality salience.

### 3.2.2.2. Self-awareness Theory

Self-awareness theory states that when people have awareness about themselves, they try to narrow the gap between the current self, and the salient standard, judging and shaping their behavior through their own personal standards [23]. Self-awareness theory is compatible under the perspective of TMT: when people are aware of their vulnerability confronting the inevitable fate of death, they work hard to meet social standards to derive a symbolic sense of meaning for their living. In order to tackle the self-awareness of death, individuals cater to their social standard and through which engaging in prosocial activities is an effective method.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, this paper clarifies how mortality salience is able to facilitate people’s prosocial behavior under the perspective of terror management theory. Conducting prosocial behavior takes effect in both worldview defense mechanism and self-esteem mechanism of terror management theory, alleviating death-related anxiety under mortality salience. The mechanism of mortality salience boosting prosocial activities under terror management theory is further unraveled by just-world hypothesis, impression management theory, and self-awareness theory, providing a deep analytical review for future researches. Theoretically, as few researches delve into the facilitative role of mortality salience on prosocial behavior, this paper explains the mechanism to bridge the research gap; practically, this paper offers an innovative perspective which can inspire social workers to make good use of mortality salience to boost prosocial activities. Thereby, this paper possesses both theoretical value and practical value, and is able to draw the attention of researchers not only on the shaping role of mortality salience, but also on the significance of prosocial behavior, and how prosocial behavior can be further facilitated.

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