

Still an American? Mortality Salience and Treatment of Suspected Terrorists

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In today's post-9/11 world, it is important to consider the psychological factors related to beliefs about the proper treatment of those suspected of terrorist involvement. We report 2 experiments on the impact of mortality salience on people's willingness to deny procedural protections to terror suspects. Reminders of mortality led participants to extend more procedural protections to an American terrorism suspect, but fewer toward a Saudi Arabian. In Study 2, we replicated and extended the results of Study 1 by showing that support of extreme interrogation measures was specific to members of enemy out-groups (e.g., Saudis), as opposed to non-enemy out-groups (e.g., Bulgarians). The results are discussed in terms of terror-management theory.

Over the last 9 years, there has been considerable debate about the rights and protections that should be afforded to individuals suspected of involvement with terrorism. This debate has ranged from questions of torture and extraordinary interrogation techniques for suspects apprehended abroad, to their access to counsel and right to view the evidence against them for suspects apprehended in the United States. Relevant to this ongoing discussion are the events of September 11, 2001, and the changes they brought both to the orientation of American foreign policy and the psychological states of ordinary Americans. The image of burning towers, as well as constant reminders of death in Iraq and Afghanistan have put the issue of our own mortality on the psychological front burner. The salience of mortality has a profound impact on people's political attitudes and sense of judgment (Cohen, Ogilvie, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2005; Landau, Solomon et al., 2004). In the studies reported here, we seek to investigate how reminders of their own mortality affect Americans' beliefs about how terrorism suspects should be treated.

Mortality Salience

Humans have highly developed self-reflective capacities, and these capacities lead to an awareness of human vulnerability and mortality. This aware-

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ness creates the potential for overwhelming terror (Becker, 1973). People are faced with the knowledge that one day they will cease to be. Since the late 1980s, psychologists have been investigating how people respond to the salience of this troubling realization. Following Becker's analysis, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986) hypothesized that people develop cultural worldviews in part to assuage the terror that death evokes and that people would, therefore, seek to affirm these protective worldviews when confronted with their own mortality.

Studies of this topic often evoke awareness of mortality by asking some participants to write a few sentences about what they think will happen when they die. Control participants are instead asked to write about one of a variety of topics, such as dental pain (van den Bos & Miedema, 2000) or the experience of being uncertain (Landau & Greenberg, 2006). The mortality salience prime prompts thoughts of death and the end of one's existence. The control questions are intended to cause aversive reactions, but not evoke the same existential angst as death-related thoughts. Some studies, however, have used more unusual manipulations, such as exposure to gruesome car accident footage or close proximity to a funeral home.

In perhaps the first study of mortality salience, judges were asked to assign bail to a woman suspected of prostitution (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Rosenblatt and colleagues hypothesized that the judges' cultural worldviews included opposition to prostitution and that, under heightened mortality salience, they would adhere more closely to their worldviews by exhibiting harshness toward this worldview violator. Their hypotheses were confirmed, with bail being set 9 times higher by those judges who had first completed a death-thoughts questionnaire.

Many subsequent studies have shown similar results. A recent review of the terror-management literature found nearly a dozen studies that showed increased punitiveness under conditions of mortality salience (Arndt, Lieberman, Cook, & Solomon, 2005). In each case, mortality salience led to worldview affirmation via denigration of dissident actors. Consistent with this interpretation, Rosenblatt et al. (1989) also found that only those participants who disapproved of prostitution showed increased punitiveness under mortality salience, and that participants who had been primed with death-related thoughts assigned a greater reward to a worldview "hero"; that is, someone who helped the police apprehend a criminal.

Recent work looking at the effect of mortality salience on views of American politics has found that mortality salience increased support for President Bush and his aggressive foreign policy (Landau, Solomon et al., 2004) and led to greater self-reported intention to vote for him in the 2004 election (Cohen et al., 2005). Under mortality salience, Iranian students were more likely to approve of martyrdom attacks, and American conservatives were

more likely to support extreme military action against rogue states, including the use of chemical weapons (Pyszczynski et al., 2006).

Presumably, a person suspected of terrorism would be viewed (from the perspective of the victim's culture) as a more extreme worldview dissident than the prostitute used in the study by Rosenblatt et al. (1989). It would seem reasonable to conclude that making mortality salient would increase acceptance of harsh treatment for detainees accused of terrorism. We argue, however, that people's worldviews are complex and that important situational variables can produce meaningful swings in people's endorsement of harsh treatment techniques.

Worldview Complexity and Its Impact on Terror Suspects

One aspect of people's worldview is attention to procedural justice. Occasionally at trial, one side in a case will begin to introduce evidence that the judge rules inadmissible. This creates a situation in which jurors have heard, or have at least begun to hear, evidence that they, legally speaking, must ignore. Researchers have generally found that asking jurors to disregard a piece of relevant evidence actually makes them more likely to attend to it; this phenomenon has been dubbed the *backfire effect* (Fein, McCloskey, & Tomlinson, 1997). Under mortality salience, however, participants who would otherwise have shown the backfire effect were more likely to follow instructions to disregard inadmissible evidence (Cook, Arndt, & Lieberman, 2004). This is a surprising finding in light of the increased harshness toward criminals that mortality salience normally evokes; participants are following procedure rules more under mortality salience, even though this results in a likely guilty suspect going free.

Perhaps related to this finding is a line of work showing that mortality salience increased attention to procedural fairness in cases involving the self (van den Bos, 2001; van den Bos & Miedema, 2000). Taken together, these findings would suggest that mortality salience can cause people to pay more attention to procedural guidelines. This would imply that the procedural issue of how detainees are to be treated might tap more complex responses than simple harshness. Perhaps a terrorism suspect will receive more procedural justice under mortality salience.

Group Membership

Another finding that might be relevant to the treatment of terrorism suspects is the effect of mortality salience on group affiliation. Mortality salience has been shown to increase the importance of group membership

(Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002; Halloran & Kashima, 2004), including greater in-group favoritism and out-group denigration. Under mortality salience, Christian participants were more likely to denigrate Jews (Greenberg et al., 1990). More in-group bias is shown in a zero-sum distributive task, even in a minimal groups paradigm (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1996). Moreover, mortality salience was found to make White participants more forgiving toward racist in-group members (Greenberg, Schimel, Martens, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 2001).

Additionally, mortality salience was shown to increase giving to American charities, but had no effect on giving to foreign causes (Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Similarly, when participants apportioned blame for a car accident between the driver and the manufacturer, mortality salience (as manipulated via gruesome accident footage) increased the proportion of blame assigned to the carmaker when it was a foreign car, but decreased the blame assigned if it was a domestic manufacturer (Nelson, Moore, Olivetti, & Scott, 1997).

Under mortality salience, there is added value to helping an in-group member and added value to blaming a member of a hostile out-group. A terrorism suspect from a dissimilar and historically oppositional country would, under this logic, be especially prone to mistreatment. An American terrorism suspect, however, is still an American and, thus, a member of the in-group. This could lead to more attention to procedural concerns.

Putting it all together, we predict that the effect of mortality salience on the degree of procedural protections afforded a terrorism suspect will depend on the group membership of the terror suspect. That is, the degree to which people endorse a worldview of punitive and harsh treatment for offenders versus a worldview that highlights the procedural protections afforded by law will be moderated by whether the suspect is a member of a hostile out-group. If the suspect is from such a group, then mortality salience should lead to fewer procedural protections. If the suspect is from an in-group, then the suspect may actually receive increased protection. For the in-group, this prediction runs counter to what one might expect, based on the findings of increased punitiveness under mortality salience (e.g., Arndt et al., 2005) and other work showing that critics of the dominant culture—which a terrorist certainly is—are viewed more negatively under mortality salience (Greenberg et al., 1990).

Study 1

We tested our prediction using a 2 (Prime: mortality salience or uncertainty) \times 2 (Suspect: in-group or enemy out-group) between-subjects design.

For our in-group condition, we told participants that the suspect was an American citizen and gave him an Americanized name. Our enemy out-group condition instead identified the suspect as a Saudi Arabian—the nationality was chosen because that country is popularly associated with terrorism—and gave him a Sunni Arab name. Our prediction is that the suspect from the enemy out-group will be granted fewer protections under mortality salience and that our suspect from the in-group will show the opposite pattern.

Method

Participants

A total of 52 participants (12 male, 40 female) were recruited from the university's paid online experiment site ($N = 22$; Mdn age = 19.0 years) or from craigslist New York ($N = 30$; Mdn age = 27.0 years).² Participants were entered into a raffle and were given a 1 in 8 chance of winning \$10.

Procedure and Materials

Participants entered the study via a link in the advertisement that directed them randomly to one of four possible surveys (1 per condition). After they completed the consent form, participants were asked about their political leanings on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*).

On the following page, participants were asked to answer two free-response questions in two to three sentences each. In the mortality salience condition, those questions were “Please briefly describe the thoughts and emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you,” and “Please write down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.”

In research investigating the consequences of mortality salience, participants in control conditions are often asked to imagine an unpleasant experience (e.g., dental pain). Some research has suggested, however, that mortality salience works by evoking feelings of uncertainty or through similar mechanisms as uncertainty salience (e.g., McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001; van den Bos, 2004). In response to that line of work, some researchers have used “being uncertain” as their control condi-

²The combined age distribution in Study 1 was not normal because of the large number of 18-to-21-year-olds in the university sample. In Study 2, the larger proportion of craigslist participants allows for normality, and overall age statistics are reported.

tion, and their results have suggested that mortality salience effects are specific to fear of death (e.g., Goldenberg et al., 2001; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Landau & Greenberg, 2006; Landau, Johns et al., 2004). Given that one might posit a link between uncertainty concerns and fear of terrorism, we thought it was important to use uncertainty as a control. Therefore, participants in the control condition were asked to answer two alternative questions, per the instructions of Landau and Greenberg (2006): “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of being uncertain arouses in you,” and “Please write down, as specifically as you can, what you think physically will happen to you as you feel uncertain.”

Following the mortality salience manipulation was one of two versions of the main vignette. The American version read as follows (the Saudi Arabian version differences appear in brackets):

Last week, Jason Lockhart [Abd al-Karim Arif] was detained by U.S. government authorities in suburban New York. Authorities targeted Lockhart, a U.S. citizen [Arif, a Saudi citizen], because he was suspected of involvement with a recently discovered terrorist group. The government believes he may have provided them with bomb-making materials. Other members of the group are still at large and considered dangerous.

Participants were then asked to answer a series of questions about the target terrorism suspect. Two items assessed perceived similarity: how similar they were to the suspect as a person, and whether they thought they had any similar experiences growing up. One item assessed how likely they believed it was that the suspect was guilty. Intermixed with those questions were items asking about how the suspect should be treated: whether he could be detained without charges; whether or not he should be allowed to talk with family and friends privately; and whether he should be allowed to see all of the evidence against him (i.e., “Do you think Mr. Arif should be allowed to talk to associates and family members privately?”). For each of these questions, participants rated their responses on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*).

After the more general items were three questions that specifically addressed his interrogation:

There is a movement in some states to limit the length of an interrogation of a suspect to 6 hours to better protect the rights of the accused. What kind of time limit do you think would be most appropriate for Mr. Lockhart [Arif]? (*6 hours or less to 18 hours or more*)

There is some discussion about how much physical discomfort the police should be allowed to inflict on a suspect in the course of their interrogation (bright lights, cold rooms). How much discomfort should they be allowed to inflict on Mr. Lockhart [Arif]? (*very little/none to severe*)

Some have argued that the police should be allowed to use force in the interrogation of certain suspects. How much force do you believe should be permitted in the interrogation of Mr. Lockhart [Arif]? (*very little/none to severe*)

These items were also rated on 7-point scales. All of these questions were presented on a single page, along with the vignette. On the following page, various demographic questions were asked (e.g., sex, age, occupation).

After all of the questions had been completed, participants entered their e-mail address—for later use in compensation and debriefing—and were thanked and dismissed. Upon completion of the study, all participants were e-mailed a description of the study purpose and were invited to ask questions.

Results

The various items asking about the treatment of the target suspect were combined into a single procedural protection composite, with higher numbers indicating support for greater restriction of procedural protections ($\alpha = .76$). The same was true of the two similarity items ($\alpha = .72$). Neither perceived similarity nor guilt varied across condition. There was a strong correlation between political orientation, as measured by the liberal-conservative scale ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.48$) and the procedural protection composite ($r = .50$, $p < .001$), such that more conservative individuals were more likely to restrict procedural protections. This relationship did not vary across condition, allowing political orientation to be used as a covariate.

We predicted that mortality salience would lead participants evaluating the Saudi Arabian target to restrict the protections afforded him, whereas it might cause those evaluating the American target to be less restrictive. We ran an ANCOVA using the restrictions on procedural protection composite as the dependent measure, with mortality salience and target as independent variables and political orientation as a covariate. There were no significant main effects. However, an interaction between mortality salience and target was

Table 1

Mean Restriction of Procedural Protections as a Function of Suspect Nationality and Mortality Salience: Study 1

Suspect	Control		Mortality salience	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Saudi Arabian	2.05	0.79	3.08	1.38
American	2.94	1.22	2.04	0.63

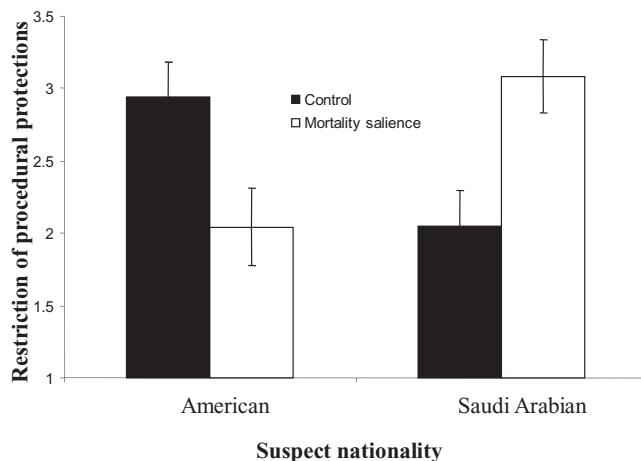


Figure 1. Mean restriction of procedural protections as a function of suspect nationality and mortality salience: Study 1 (bars represent standard error of the mean).

observed, $F(1, 47) = 14.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$.³ Simple-effects analyses looking at the effects of mortality salience for each target reveal that while mortality salience resulted in fewer restrictions on procedural protection for the American, $F(1, 22) = 6.54, p = .02, \eta^2 = .23$, it caused greater restriction on protections for the Saudi Arabian, $F(1, 27) = 7.74, p = .01, \eta^2 = .24$ (see Table 1 and Figure 1 for means).

³A significant Levene's test indicated a violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption. Therefore, simple-effects analyses do not use the pooled error term. All effects are still significant, even if one applies the conservative correction of halving the required alpha, making $p = .025$ the threshold (see Keppel & Wickens, 2004).

Discussion

Our main hypotheses were supported. Under mortality salience, fewer procedural protections were granted to the Saudi Arabian suspect than in the control group. Those judging American targets showed the opposite pattern, allowing the suspect more protection under mortality salience. Ratings of similarity to the target and of the likelihood of the suspect's guilt showed no effects, indicating that they were not driving the results.

Given previous research showing harsher treatment of criminals under mortality salience, there was considerable reason to predict that participants would recommend harsh treatment for all terrorist suspects. That this only occurred for the Saudi terrorist, but not for the American is interesting theoretically and pragmatically. Much of the work on mortality salience and political decision making has shown that mortality salience causes participants to behave in a more punitive manner, but we suggest that this is limited by two other effects associated with attention to mortality: heightened considerations of procedural justice and heightened salience of in-group membership. Participants dealing with an American terrorism suspect behaved in a manner encouraging to civil libertarians: They granted the suspect greater protection. This suggests that the balance between having fair procedures and denigrating deviants was tipped by making the suspect an in-group member, rather than a member of a hostile out-group. This is a non-obvious finding. The existing literature has shown that Americans view critics of the dominant culture more negatively under mortality salience (Greenberg et al., 1990) and are more reluctant to misuse items symbolic of that culture (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, & Pyszczynski, 1995). Terrorism suspects are extreme dissidents, ideal targets for hostility in these terms. Yet, there is still a contravening force that results in a net positive finding when the suspect is an in-group member.

It is also interesting to note that the Saudi Arabian suspect received better treatment than did the American in the absence of mortality salience. This unexpected finding may be related to what Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens (1988) described as a *black-sheep effect*. We are surprised and disappointed by an in-group member who acts in an unfavorable way. The very features that make the Saudi Arabian a member of an enemy out-group—that is, the association with Osama bin Laden and Sunni extremism—also make him less surprising.

Study 2

An important question was left open by Study 1. In the American case, mortality salience led to more procedurally protective treatment, in line

with several previous findings. Yet, in the Saudi Arabian case, we observed the opposite pattern. Is this a simple out-group effect, or is there something more subtle at work? Specifically, we wondered if the status of Saudi Arabia as a hostile out-group made it uniquely troubling. To answer this question, we wished to introduce a third target: an out-group member whose group was not perceived to be hostile to the in-group. As an exemplar of such a group, we chose a Bulgarian citizen.

Pilot testing revealed that few Americans reported much knowledge about Bulgaria, its recent history, or its politics. Bulgaria is not a close and well known U.S. ally, but neither does it carry any particular negative connotations. Further pilot testing in an American sample confirmed that Americans had a neutral to positive view of Bulgaria, a negative to neutral view of Saudi Arabia, and that they believed that the typical citizen from each country had compatible views.⁴ As such, it was an ideal foreign, yet affect-neutral origin. If the effects observed in the Saudi Arabian conditions are a result of that nation's enemy out-group status, then the Bulgarian case should resemble the American.

Method

Participants

A total of 128 participants were recruited from the university's paid experiment site and from Boston craigslist. We excluded 16 participants from analyses because of implausibly quick completion times, leaving 112 usable participants (30 male, 82 female; M age = 35.1 years, SD = 13.0). The final sample included 15 participants from the university site and 97 participants from craigslist.

Materials and Procedure

The procedure was the same as in Study 1, with two exceptions. The vignette was constructed in the same form as in Study 1, but it now had

⁴We recruited 53 participants from an online sample via Amazon's Mechanical Turk service and asked them several questions about Bulgaria, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. They reported holding neutral to positive views of Bulgaria (4.56 on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *negative* to 4 = *neutral* to 7 = *positive*) and negative to neutral views of Saudi Arabia (3.19 on the same scale). They also reported that a typical person from Bulgaria would have neutral to friendly views of the U.S. (3.34 on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *hostile* to 4 = *neutral* to 7 = *friendly*), whereas the typical Saudi Arabian would be more hostile (2.25 on the same scale).

three variations: the American citizen Jason Lockhart, the Saudi Arabian Abd al-Karim Arif, and the Bulgarian Stanislav Stancheva.⁵

The second change concerned the dependent measures. The likelihood of guilt and the similarity items from Study 1 were excluded. We added three items to assess perceived dangerousness: “How dangerous do you think it would be to release Mr. Lockhart [Arif/Stancheva]?”; “Would it be safe to allow Mr. Lockhart [Arif/Stancheva] back on the streets?”; and “Could Mr. Lockhart [Arif/Stancheva] cause a lot of harm if he were released?” We also added three items to assess similarity from a different perspective: “Thinking about the range of people all over the world, how similar is Mr. Lockhart [Arif/Stancheva] to the average American?”; “Thinking about the range of families all over the world, how likely is it that Mr. Lockhart [Arif/Stancheva] has a family anything like yours?”; and “Thinking about the range of communities all over the world, how likely is it that Mr. Lockhart [Arif/Stancheva] grew up in a town like yours?” Participants responded to these questions on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*). Order of question was fixed in this study, with the similarity items coming first, the dangerousness items coming second, and the restriction of procedural protections items (repeated from Study 1) coming last.

Results

The three dangerousness items were formed into a perceived dangerousness composite ($\alpha = .82$), as were the six restriction of procedural protection items ($\alpha = .77$) and the three similarity items ($\alpha = .64$). Neither perceived dangerousness nor similarity varied across condition. There was again a strong correlation between political orientation ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.50$) and the procedural protection composite ($r = .44$, $p < .001$), such that more conservative individuals were more likely to restrict procedural protections. This relationship did not vary across condition, allowing political orientation to be used as a covariate. The sample in this study was slightly more conservative than in Study 1, perhaps explaining the baseline differences in ratings on the procedural protections composite.

As in Study 1, a univariate ANCOVA was run using the restriction on procedural protection composite as the dependent measure, with mortality

⁵Because of a miscommunication, the Bulgarian name failed to follow appropriate naming conventions. No participant commented on this error, and we have no reason to believe that it influenced the results. The pilot testing of attitudes about each country also had a section regarding the names used in the study. All of the participants except 1 (out of 53) correctly matched names to country and, despite a prompt specifically asking if there was anything unusual about the names, no one reported any suspicion about the Bulgarian name.

Table 2

Mean Restriction of Procedural Protections as a Function of Suspect Nationality and Mortality Salience: Study 2

Suspect	Control		Mortality salience	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Saudi Arabian	2.68	1.05	3.45	0.93
American	3.38	1.48	2.83	1.08
Bulgarian	3.42	1.24	2.96	1.45

salience and target as independent variables and political orientation as a covariate. There were no main effects, but we again saw the Target \times Mortality Salience interaction, $F(2, 105) = 3.66, p < .05, \eta^2 = .065$. Simple-effects analyses looking at the effects of mortality salience for each target reveal that while mortality salience resulted in marginally greater procedural protection for the American, $F(1, 105) = 2.71, p = .10, \eta^2 = .051$, and nonsignificantly greater protection for the Bulgarian, $F(1, 105) = 1.36, p = .25, \eta^2 = .04$, it diminished the protection granted the Saudi Arabian, $F(1, 105) = 4.40, p = .02, \eta^2 = .17$ (for means, see Table 2 and Figure 2).

Because we were interested in whether enemy out-group status was necessary to achieve our effect, we also ran a contrast between the Bulgarian and Saudi Arabian targets to observe whether mortality salience had significantly different effects across those two groups. There was an interaction between target and mortality salience, even without including the American target, $F(1, 105) = 4.85, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$. This effect shows that participants under mortality salience are responding differently to the Saudi Arabian and Bulgarian targets. There was not, however, an interaction between mortality salience and target when the Saudi Arabian conditions were excluded ($F < 1$). We expected no differences between the effect of mortality salience on participants in the American and Bulgarian conditions—an expectation confirmed by the preceding analysis—therefore, we tested the effect of mortality salience in those groups combined. As predicted, mortality salience increased support for procedural protections for those groups, $F(1, 105) = 3.97, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$.

Additionally, there was a relationship between self-reported conservatism and perceived dangerousness ($\beta = .29, p < .01$) by which more conservative individuals perceived the suspect to be more dangerous. Greater perceived

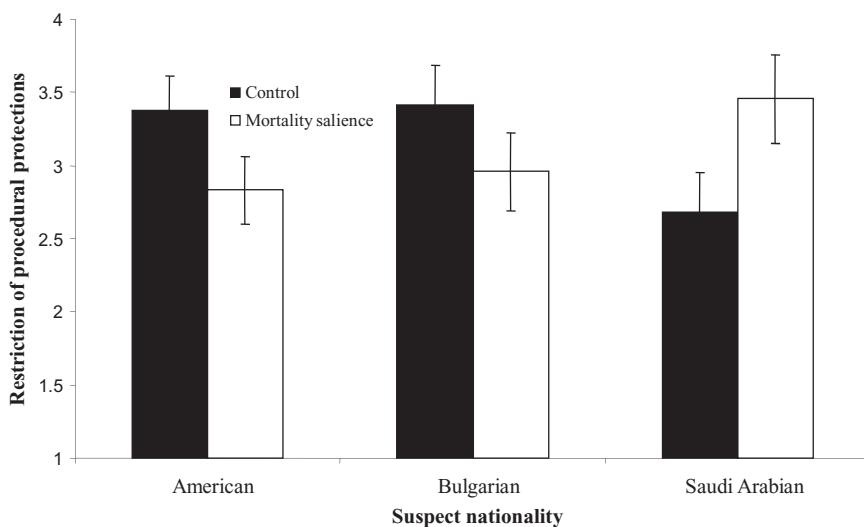


Figure 2. Mean restriction of procedural protections as a function of suspect nationality and mortality salience: Study 2 (bars represent standard error of the mean).

dangerousness was also associated with greater restriction of procedural protection ($\beta = .46, p < .001$). Perceived dangerousness partially mediated the effect of conservatism on restriction of procedural protection ($z = 2.52, p = .01$; β reduced from .44 to .34).

Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicate those of Study 1. Mortality salience led to harsher treatment of the Saudi Arabian suspect and more protective treatment of the American. The novel conditions—presenting the Bulgarian—resemble those of the American.

Responses to the Bulgarian target suggest that the “default” effect of mortality salience is not to place more restrictions on procedural protections. Instead, it is only the enemy out-group target that receives harsher treatment. Other measures in this study show that this result is not driven by perceived dangerousness; it is not that the Saudi Arabian is seen as more dangerous than the American and the Bulgarian and is treated worse for that reason. This also speaks to a related concern: It is possible that participants viewed terrorists of different nationalities as belonging to different terrorist groups. The dangerousness data do not directly address this point, but they do

indicate that whatever differences participants may have seen, they viewed each terrorism suspect as equally capable of inflicting harm if released. That the dangerousness composite and new similarity measures did not vary across condition is further reason to suspect that it is not the target *per se*, but rather the target's group membership that is driving the effect.

Finally, it is interesting that even the more abstracted measures of similarity used in this study—that is, relating the target to the average American, rather than to oneself—showed no differences across condition. We suspect that this is a result of both unwillingness to express similarity to a terrorism suspect, who might be conceivably similar to one's social group (in the American case, a Ted Kaczynski or Timothy McVeigh), and a desire not to appear overly dismissive of an out-group member (the Saudi Arabian in this study) for self-presentational reasons.

General Discussion

Across two studies, we saw that the manner in which mortality salience influences judgments about the appropriate treatment of terrorism suspects depends on the target's group status. A citizen of either America or a neutral foreign country received better treatment when evaluated by participants for whom mortality is salient. A Saudi Arabian, from a traditionally more hostile country, received worse treatment under mortality salience.

Previous work (e.g., Nelson et al., 1997) has discussed the ways in which mortality salience prompts enhanced nationalistic bias, but that does not appear to be all that is at work here. Instead, we found that both the in-group and even a member of a technical out-group (the Bulgarian) received better treatment. This would suggest that extra protections are being granted not to favor the in-group, but instead as a direct expression of participants' cultural worldview. It is important to remember that the punitive/aggressive responses elicited in the criminal-justice studies (reviewed by Arndt et al., 2005) and the political attitudes studies (Cohen et al., 2005; Landau, Solomon et al., 2004) fell within socially accepted channels: law-and-order conservatism and hawkish foreign policy.

In this study, we considered attitudes toward, among other things, torturing prisoners and extending them basic protections. Perhaps participants assume that it is culturally normative to grant these protections (judging by the relatively protective baseline ratings, which is a fair assumption) and adhere more closely to this norm under mortality salience. This would suggest that the representative of an enemy out-group (i.e., the Saudi Arabian) being denigrated is either an extreme reaction based on the nature of the out-group, or an indication that participants hold different beliefs about the culturally normative treatment of Saudi Arabians.

These results present an interesting implication. While it is certainly true that the war on terror has changed the way we see the world, our data suggest that the effect is a two-edged sword. We know from a variety of studies in political science and psychology that issue frames are critical when considering controversial issues (Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Nelson & Kinder, 1996). Here, we find a similar effect. Given one hypothetical situation, participants are more supportive of civil liberties. Given another, they are more restrictive. This highlights the importance of not simply considering the most prototypical case when evaluating wide-ranging policies, else it is very possible to misread popular will. Our results suggest that, even in the current climate of heightened threat, people might be induced to come to different conclusions about the acceptability of certain practices if they think about them in slightly different terms. In fact, changing the terms of the debate might lead to the climate of threat working in favor of those promoting civil liberties, as in the case of the American and Bulgarian suspect who received more protection under mortality salience. This has broad implications and suggests new avenues for persuasion on this issue.

In the justice literature, researchers often consider the legitimizing force of public approval for legal and political decisions (e.g., Robinson & Darley, 1995), and commentators have reflected on the apparent indifference of Americans to the abuses carried out abroad in their name (e.g., Parry, 2005). This indifference could be seen as a sign of consent, and thus a partial justification. Previous work on mortality salience has painted a grim picture of increased fear of death resulting in greater acceptance of extreme aggressive policies (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Our results suggest that there is a limit to this effect; some broad, justice-related concerns can trump aggressive responses in certain cases.

Terrorism and the fear of death it evokes are not going away anytime soon. Recently, terrorists struck in Mumbai. In the recent past, there have been attacks in Great Britain, Spain, Israel, and many other countries. Though the attacks of September 11th changed much about how Americans see the world and though attacks in other countries have certainly had effects on the views of their citizens, there may be as yet untapped subtleties. Our results suggest caution is warranted as we consider the new interplay between law and society in the age of terrorism.

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