

Literature as Mortality Salience?

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“There is nothing more stimulating than a case where everything goes against you.” (A. Conan Doyle: *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, p. 696)

Terror Management Theorie (TMT)

- “Terror is (...) a uniquely human response to the threat of annihilation.”
- “TMT is about how humans cope, not with the imminent threat of extermination but with the awareness that such threats are ubiquitous and will all eventually succeed”

T. Pyszczynski, S. Solomon & J. Greenberg: *In the Wake of 9/11. The Psychology of Terror.*
Washington, DC: APA 2002, p. 8

‘mortality salience’

- Such reminders of one’s finality are described as *mortality salience* (Henceforth MS).
- They call for reassurance of prevailing world views.
- And strengthen behavior related to those world views.
- While repudiating anyone calling these in doubt.
- One consequence is an increase in prejudice and animosity against outsiders (who do not share our values.)

Studies so far

- The Mortality Salience (MS) hypothesis has been confirmed in > 120 studies in 9 different countries, both in laboratory and in field studies.
- So why do we think we can add something to this?
- Because we believe that MS calls forward different reactions when it occurs in literature.
- Our hypothesis: MS in literature does *not* boost prejudices against outsiders.
- To test this, we ran an experiment, in which 1 group of readers read a text with MS, another without MS.

In Torino last year

- We presented two studies, using as
- Materials: (as MS text) part of the chapter “Ilyusha” from Dostojevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (Book X, chapter 7) in which a young boy is dying.
- Control text: “History of the tooth brush”.
- Students (N = 57, all female) from the M.A. in English at Boris Grinchenko University in Kiev participated in the experiment.
- The Dostojevsky text was presented in its original, Russian version.

- The control text (history of the tooth brush) equally in Russian,
- As were the 10 questions they had to answer on a 4-point scale (in order to force participants to make an unambiguous choice).
- E.g.:
- *A family from the Caucasus moves into the apartment next door. I feel threatened by it.*
- *I am of the opinion that one should pay more attention to heroism in our society.*
- *The police found a young man red-handed while stealing an iPod. He deserves to be punished severely.*

- An ANOVA revealed only one significant difference: for the 'heroism' question: a score of 3.7 for the MS condition, and of 3.4 for the control condition ($p < .049$).
- Note, however, the very small effect size!
- Out of ten questions, that is not very convincing for TMT:
- if TMT is right in its predictions generally, they seem NOT to hold for mortality salience (MS) when produced through the reading of literature.
- It remains unclear why MS works differently with literary texts.

A replication

- 74 students from Munich university, 57 German native speakers, 64 female, 12 male.
- All texts and the questionnaire were presented in German.
- The same texts (Dostojevsky + Toothbrush) + a passage from Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*.
- This is a literary text, like Dostojevsky's, but without MS.
- The same 10 questions about social prejudice as in Study 1.

- No significant differences between responses to the text-condition.
- A reliability analysis was carried out for all items: Cronbach's alpha = .358.
- Hence no data reduction can be carried out, meaning that the test items are independent of each other.
- A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test revealed that the data (not surprisingly) were not normally distributed.
- Hence non-parametric tests of comparison of means had to be used: Kruskal-Wallis and Median test.

Results

- They revealed no significant differences by text-response, to none of the 10 items, so the null-hypothesis has to be retained.
- Hence inter-cultural agreement between Ukrainian and German participants.
- No significant differences between native and non-native speakers (of German).
- No significant differences for gender.
- Conclusion: mortality salience, as evoked by text content, does not operate in the way described by TMT so far.
- Why???

In Art theory

- This phenomenon has been dealt with from the very beginning.
- E.g. in Aristotle's *Poetics*, under the label of catharsis (κάθαρσις):
- Through Fear (*phóbos*) and Pity (*éleos*) the spectator (reader) experiences an (emotional) purification.
- From our perspective: MS in literature has as its effect not a defense mechanism, as in TMT,
- but a psychological valve, that makes us accept our biological vulnerability.

This, however,

- Is only a conjecture.
- While the Aristotelian notion of catharsis has been almost repudiated in the social sciences.
- Our conjecture is the best we can think of so far in order to clarify the blatant differences between our findings and all the other experiments on TMT.
- How to test this conjecture?
- In any case our findings do throw a light upon the very special status that literature occupies in the minds of readers when it comes to MS.

- The latest issue of *Scientific Study of Literature*
- Contains contributions which seem to underpin our hypothesis.
- Emy Koopman demonstrated how in part catharsis-like feelings played a role in the decision to read about a child's death (or the fear thereof).
- But beyond that also the feeling of support in suffering, and of seeking clarification.
- "for those who are grieving, reading about grief can help to put such personal experiences into perspective." (*SSOL* 3:2, 2013, p. 202)
- Clearer still: "'terror' does not appear crucial to gaining this type of insight." (p. 203).

- This view is also corroborated by the research of Guan Soon Khoo and Mary Beth Oliver (same issue, pp. 266-293.
- In the same issue, Paul Sopčak, on the basis of two studies in which readers confronted their own finitude, comes to the conclusion: “that for some readers engagement with these texts not only moves them to the understanding of their own finitude, but also affords them an embodied experience of this finitude.” (p. 234)
- All this then seems to clearly demonstrate that readers may actually *seek* MS in literature,
- and that its effect is not what TMT describes...

Study 3

- Instead of the Dostoyevsky text, we now used the final chapter of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*
- From which we removed all social elements that might have had a mitigating effect on MS.
- The story is a gripping account of someone dying in agony and excruciating pain.
- If anything in texts should be considered MS, this text by Tolstoy should!
- *The hypothesis*: reading about the suffering of this man should raise empathy for his plight, and subsequently remind one of one's own mortality.

Moreover,

- At the advice of the TMT people, we built in a control for 'tolerance' and 'open mindedness'
- Through 10 questions
- E.g.
 - Homosexual men and women should have the same rights as heterosexual people.
 - I am bothered by people who go about in traditional, non-European clothes, like headscarves or djellaba's.
 - Other cultures fascinate me.

According to TMT, such attitudes influence the way in which people react to MS

- We analysed participants' responses according to their general 'tolerance' level.
- But we may have to do here with ceiling / bottom effects
- E.g. for the item about traditional, non-European clothing had an average of 1 on a scale of 10.
- But we found no significant effects on any scale in the response to the 10 items.
- More importantly: no significant differences between the Tolstoy text and the control text.
- Absolutely NOTHING!
- BTW: we had also a delay between reading and responding, according to TMT to make reactions unconscious.

Study 4

- All previous texts used were fictional texts.
- Therefore, a new study was carried out, describing real life events about the civil war in Ukraine.
- Палата, где лежит девятилетний Дима, заставлена игрушками и посылками. На стене рядом с кроватью висят рисунки. «Выздоровливай скорее!» — написано детским почерком. А под нарисованными солнышком и сердечком надпись: «Я люблю тебя и научу ходить. Даже на одной ножке». Эти трогательные послания Диме пишет его семилетняя сестричка Лера. Девочка лежит в соседней палате, к братику ее пока не пускают

- *'And so I've heard my son crying,' Eduard is recollecting. 'I ran up to him to see that his... leg had been torn apart. It was there, next to him, hanging on tendons. 'Daddy, what is it?!' Dimka was crying, terrified. 'Are you sure she is breathing?' 'Who is 'she'?' I asked with just my lips. 'Lera!' my son shouted. 'She is here! I did not see her at first. Dimka was lying on Lera, covering her with his body. My daughter was conscious, but terribly frightened.*

- *'What was it? the daughter asked. Dima was trying to explain it to her, while bleeding himself. Every second counted.*
- *I hold the son in my arms and carefully took his torn little leg. 'Help! In the name of Christ, please save my son!' I was crying so loudly that I think everybody in the street could hear me. Luckily, my brother was nearby, so he quickly realized what should be done, took the washing line and applied a tourniquet to Dima. My son was screaming in pain, but still behaved as a real man.*

The new hypothesis

- Was that this realistic text about death in a civil war situation
- Would act as Mortality Salience to people living in that country.
- We employed the same pre- and post-questions and the same control text.
- BUT: absolutely not significant results were found for differences between experimental and control text, or with respect to the control questions.
- Again: NOTHING!
- Strange that TMT does not seem to work with real life texts.

Contact with the founders of TMT

- On January 20, 2015 I first contacted the three authors of the major TMT publications
- Expressing my great admiration for their work
- An asking for advice on our own experiments.
- With very quick and highly stimulating response.
- The social psychologists suggested control questions for tolerance and open-mindedness
- Of which they approved when we sent them.
- All in all, there were some 20 email exchanges with the TMT people

- All of which were positive and constructive, until
- April 20, 2015, where I reported to the group that experiments 3 and 4 (as experiments 1 and 2) could in no way replicate the typical TMT results
- Then radio silence!
- On May 12, Anna Chesnokova stepped in and asked for an elucidation to my report (on the negative results)
- No reply!
- Since then: absolute radio silence....
- What to do now???
- The difficulty of getting null results published, as Raymond Mar pointed out yesterday.

- The authors report on over 100 experiments in several different countries (albeit all Western ones)
- All confirming the predictions of TMT
- We ran 4 experiments to replicate their results
- 1 in Germany, 3 in Ukraine, with 2 different literary and 1 non-fictional real-life text.
- In none of these experiments was there ANY indication of TMT predictions being corroborated.
- In spite of the authors' agreeing to our methodology.
- And when they heard of this, all communication over the email suddenly stopped....
- And has not been resumed after efforts on our part.

- The more *outré* and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, and the very point which appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate it. (A. Conan Doyle: *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, p. 764)