Media Preference and Risk Assessment: 
Mortality Salience and Mediating Effects of Worldview 

Thesis 

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of mortality salience on the opinions and preferences of people with different religious or philosophical worldviews. Specifically, participants completed a religious fundamentalist scale, a post-materialist index, and a cultural creativity index. Each participant was then randomly asked to think about the concept of death or a control topic. Finally, participants were asked to provide their opinions on a number of topics regarding prayer efficacy, media preference, and risk assessment.

This study found supporting evidence that reminders of one’s mortality tend to exaggerate any distrust of modern medicine held by religious fundamentalists, even if those reminders are not related to the medical issue at hand. It also provided some evidence that similar concerns held by post-materialists may be generally exaggerated under similar conditions.

In addition, it was hypothesized that participants would consider potentially risky driving behaviors to be less dangerous when mortality was salient. This study found supporting evidence that religious fundamentalists were less concerned about the risks of driving with multiple passengers when mortality was salient. If assessments of other, riskier behaviors (such as texting while driving) mirror these results, mortality salience
and religious perspective must be considered when attempting to discourage such behavior.

It was also hypothesized that participants in the mortality salient group would prefer to get their news from sources that shared their point of view. However, no evidence was found to support this hypothesis. In fact, politically liberal participants were less likely to prefer liberal news sources when mortality was made salient. Since so many news stories and television shows deal with issues of mortality, media selection may depend in part on a combination of philosophical perspectives and the content of the news.

Keywords: Mortality Salience, Terror Management Theory, Worldview Defense, Religious Fundamentalism, Post-Materialism, Cultural Creatives, Political Ideology, Media Selection, Prayer Efficacy, Risk Assessment, Dangerous Driving, Texting
To Holli,
who gives my life meaning.

And in the memory of Zoey,
who was always happy to see me.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Medical decisions can have profound effects on the quality and length of our lives. According to terror management theory (TMT), opinions on such matters as important as life and death can be greatly influenced based on subtle cues, intentionally or not. Such cues could be delivered by interpersonal communication or mass media, and have wide-ranging impacts. Fear of death can be a powerful motivator that can change behavior when mortality is made salient, and cultural worldviews influence how we respond to these cues.

This thesis examines the mediating role of religious and philosophical worldviews in response to mortality salience (MS). First, it attempts to replicate a portion of the Vess et al (2009) study on prayer efficacy, which found evidence that religious fundamentalists were more likely to rely on prayer instead of medical treatment when mortality was salient. Their finding that religious perspective influences medical decisions has profound implications for the treatment and well-being of a large segment of society.

To explore whether other religious or philosophical perspectives might have similar responses when matters of faith are involved, Ray & Anderson’s (2000) description of American subcultures was considered. They essentially argue that there are two religious or spiritual subcultures in the United States, the religious right and the
religious left. Their description of the religious right (traditionals) seems to align with the findings in Altemeyer & Hunsberger’s (1992) religious fundamentalism (RF) scale, and their description of the religious left (cultural creatives), seems to share some parallels with Inglehart’s (1977) description of the post-materialist worldview. In attempting to measure MS responses from those on the religious left, this study used Ray & Anderson’s (2000) cultural creative (CC) scale and Inglehart’s (1977) expanded post-materialist (PM) value priorities index. Similar findings from these indices would expand our understanding of the moderating impact of religious or philosophical worldviews when mortality is salient on such important behaviors as whether or not to seek medical care when treatment would be effective.

Additionally, to clarify the findings of Vess et al (2009), this study seeks to address the issues of risk and denial involved in medical care when mortality is salient, separately from the issues of prayer efficacy and faith. To do so, this study refers to the work of Taubman Ben-Air et al (1999 & 2000), who found that participants were more likely to make risky behaviors in certain situations when mortality was salient. More evidence could provide additional explanation for the findings of Vess et al (2009), and assistance to doctors hoping to encourage medical treatment.

In this study, driving behaviors were used as a measure of risk assessment and denial of risks when mortality is salient. Denial of the risks involved in certain dangerous driving behaviors is assumed to be a proxy for more dangerous behaviors, such as texting while driving. As states and municipalities wrestle with the idea of restricting such
behavior, understanding the contributing factors to dangerous driving could be useful if we hope to reduce the number of fatalities caused by reckless driving.

Finally, as traditional news outlets compete for dwindling audiences (Pew Research Center, 2008), a broader understanding of the development of news preferences could be useful. This study draws from TMT (e.g. Pyszczynski, 2003) to test how cultural worldviews impact media preferences when mortality is salient. Such reminders of our mortality are powerful and pervasive, inescapable in our mundane lives, and prevalent on television programs and in the news. This study seeks to add to the growing body of knowledge relating to terror management.
Chapter 2: Concepts and Literature Review

Concepts

This chapter will discuss the concepts central to this thesis and relevant scientific literature. First, this paper argues that reactions to thoughts about death and one’s own mortality is different from a typical fear response and more closely mirrors a disgust response, in that the negative response involves psychologically pushing away terrorizing thoughts, rather than pulling away from the threat. Relevant affect literature is discussed.

Thoughts of mortality, however fleeting, are powerful, pervasive, yet situational primes that influence our opinions and behaviors on a wide range of topics. Such primes are described as MS, and their effects are explained in terms of TMT.

In addition, recent research (Vess et al, 2009) has found that beliefs can become exaggerated when mortality is salient for those with a particular religious point of view (religious fundamentalists). This research is examined and other works are considered in constructing a study to find other religious or philosophical perspectives that might produce similarly exaggerated opinions or beliefs in response to MS.

Emotions

Ekman (1992) understood emotions as having “evolved for their adaptive value in
dealing with fundamental life-tasks.” He perceived emotions to be unique sets of characteristics with “separate, discrete… states” designed to help us meet our needs, not existing merely as degrees of pleasantness or unpleasantness. According to Frijda (1988), these emotions are not voluntary, or at least are only partially so.

Ekman (1992) identified six basic emotions: enjoyment, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust and anger (acknowledging the possibility of a few others). These emotions are distinct from each other because they are associated with specific, universal facial expressions and other physiological responses in humans, as well as other primates. And there are specific events that universally trigger specific emotional responses, such as being surprised.

According to Plutchik (1980, see also Bower, 1981), there are eight primary emotions that can be arranged in a wheel: joy, acceptance, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation. Emotions opposite each other on the wheel, such as anger and fear, would be opposite emotions. Specifically, anger represents a combination of aggressiveness and contempt, while fear represents a combination of submissiveness and awe. Emotions near each other, such as anger and disgust, would be more similar than other emotions on the wheel. Disgust shares the element of contempt with anger, but has an element of remorse instead of aggressiveness.

Newhagen (1998) considered anger, fear, and disgust in terms of approach and avoidance. Negative emotional responses to environmental threats would generally produce two types of actions, according to the approach-avoidance metaphor. The first possible response is to approach something in order to disable the threat. The other
response would be to flee toward safety. These automatic responses are also known as fight or flight responses, and were evolutionary adaptations to ensure survival of the individual and species.

Regarding Plutchik’s (1980) wheel of emotions, it would be reasonable to view anger and fear as polar opposites in terms of this metaphor. However, with disgust next to anger on the wheel and by the contempt label, one might think that disgust might be closer to an approach than avoidance response. However Plutchik describes it more of “a pushing away, or sensory shutdown” (Newhagen, 1998).

The difference, according to Newhagen (1998) is that anger and fear are more urgent responses to danger. Anger is an approach response, to fight threats such as “territorial violations.” Fear is an avoidance response, leading to the preparation to flee from danger. Disgust, like fear, is an avoidance response, but it suggests less urgency, resulting from “passive or latent danger.” This is more of a rejection than flight. The “pushing away” aspect suggests a combination of approach (pushing) and avoidance (away), while the “sensory shutdown” aspect is certainly avoidance. This unique response distinguishes disgust from both fear and anger.

Newhagen (1998) presented news stories to participants (Ps) with images intended to elicit responses of anger, fear, disgust, or none at all. Using a joystick paddle to represent degree of approach or avoidance, he found evidence that images of anger produced the highest levels of approach, and that images of fear were less approachable. However, disgusting images produced the highest level of avoidance. Furthermore, images of disgust had the slowest response times in the memory test, suggesting that
disgusting images were hardest to remember. This evidence suggests that the “sensory shutdown” experienced in response to disgusting images manifests not only in terms of facial expressions and other physiological responses as described by Ekman (1992), but also in terms of mental blocks that interfere with memory, possibly by removing such unpleasant thoughts from one’s consciousness.

Lazarus (1982) notes that seemingly innate fears that serve an evolutionary purpose are automatic responses, and that many of these fears “seem to disappear or go underground,” to be suppressed as we mature. TMT argues that fears of death are similarly suppressed as situations arise that remind us of our own mortality (see Pyszczynski et al, 2003). In response to these reminders, people suppress the thoughts that our lives as we know it will end one day. They do this by pushing these scary thoughts away, out of their consciousness.

**Terror Management**

According to TMT, people use a variety of techniques to manage the anxiety that comes from the awareness that our lives are finite. Such management is possible through a belief in a just world or a cultural worldview that promises symbolic or spiritual immortality (Rosenblatt et al, 1989). Many people find comfort in the belief that they will live forever, in heaven or through reincarnation, or perhaps symbolically through their works or their children (Pyszczynski et al, 2003). And we find ways to bolster our self-esteem and find meaning in life in order to distract ourselves from this persistence.
potential for terror. Fear of death then becomes a primary motivating factor in our lives that serves to maintain our beliefs and our connection to culture.

Even as we try to push the knowledge of our limited lifespan out of our consciousness, any number of everyday experiences can remind people of this painful fact, and some reminders are more powerful than others. The local news is often filled with stories of car accidents and shootings. World news may highlight natural disasters, wars, and disease. Television shows like Doctor Oz show human organs and talk about life threatening illnesses, while shows like CSI present realistic depictions of dead bodies. Movies can be even more gruesome, and frequently feature dangerous car chases or weapons fire. More mundane activities such as seeing dead animals on the road, viewing photos of deceased loved ones, or having one’s blood drawn at the doctor’s office can serve as effective reminders of our own mortality, and patients making potentially life or death decisions about their own medical care are certainly confronted with their own mortality.

Evolving literature suggests that terror management touches many aspects of our lives, even without realizing the impact of this deep-seated fear, from the broader decisions we make, to our attitudes about animals, to our relationships with other people and our own bodies. It explains the development of culture and the complexity of human reaction to terror, and it also predicts changes in human behavior when mortality is salient.

People also use different techniques to enhance their self-esteem (Arndt et al, 2004; Arndt & Greenberg, 1999), connect with others (Arndt et al, 2004), enhance their
appearance (Goldenberg, 2005), disconnect with their body (Goldenberg, 2005), or feel separate from the animal kingdom (Goldenberg et al, 2001) in order to reduce the anxiety generated by the knowledge that their lives are finite. Consumer and voter behavior are affected (Arndt et al, 2004; Cohen et al, 2004), young men tend to drive more recklessly (Jessop et al, 2008) and engage in riskier sex (Lam et al, 2009), and patients may go into denial and avoid making good medical decisions when their mortality is made salient (Goldenberg & Arndt, 2008). Such behavioral changes can have wide-ranging and serious impacts.

**Mortality Salience**

Central to the concept of TMT, MS is the activation of the awareness of one’s own mortality, a form of priming effect. Rosenblatt et al (1989) demonstrated that MS increases the expression of cultural values. Self-esteem that arises from our culture serves to buffer the anxiety caused by the awareness of mortality by providing the security of symbolic immortality and belief in a just world. MS also influences the expression of other values, e.g. by measuring the degree of punishment that Ps are likely to recommend for prostitutes (Rosenblatt et al, 1989).

According to Pyszczynski et al (2003), answering an open-ended question to make you think about your own mortality has been shown to have similar effects to being reminded of your own mortality by other methods, such as reading a newspaper or hearing a news story on the radio. These MS primes are more effective if Ps are given a task to distract them, in between the prime and the dependent variables measured. A task
lasting as little as three minutes allows Ps to drop an active suppression of conscious thoughts about mortality (proximal defenses) in exchange for unconscious, distal defenses that lead to these types of MS effects.

Consequences of Mortality Salience

Pyszczynski (2004) recognized that the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 were a real source of psychological distress, because they were “a dramatic reminder of our vulnerability and mortality.” Furthermore, repeatedly televised images and other reminders of the planes crashing into the towers of the World Trade Center continue to make mortality salient, creating anxiety in people, and a desire to quell that anxiety through increased self-esteem or belief in one’s cultural worldview. The patriotic nationalism that followed the September 11th attacks was predicted, and served to reduce social anxiety caused by mortality salience. During that time, “Americans went to great lengths to show their appreciation and respect for police officers, firefighters, military personnel, and others who serve and protect us” (Pyszczynski, 2004). They were honored as heroes, which served to bolster our cultural worldviews.

Pyszczynski (2004) identified effects of MS on political preferences, including the hardening of ideology, the preference for charismatic candidates, and an increase in support for a military response. Furthermore, anxieties that arise from MS inhibit complex thinking, and lead people to seek simple solutions that they hope will create order out of chaos.
Cohen et al (2004) also found that MS has an effect on the evaluations of political candidates. They noted that other authors (e.g. Weber, 1925; Fromm, 1941; Becker, 1973) have long held that charismatic leaders benefit from “psychological distress” by serving as “a source of self-worth and meaning in life.” However, charismatic leaders with extreme views do not always rise to power, unless society as a whole suffers from distress. At such times, citizens are more open to charismatic leaders who offer comfort by building confidence, self-esteem, and national pride. Cohen et al (2004) found that by priming MS, they could get more Ps to favor charismatic leaders compared to a control group without the prime, indicating that the public would demand strong leadership during times of crisis.

According to Pyszczynski et al (2003), cultures even create worldviews that teach that the soul can be immortal, either literally in an afterlife, or figuratively through art, or through offspring, or through contributions to society. Such worldviews encourage individuals to seek a meaningful life. Our cultures, then, serve as a shield to inoculate us from the terrifying constant reminders that the human lifespan is limited. If we were to constantly grapple with the fear these reminders would generate, it would be a stressful, unpleasant existence indeed. Reactions that push away these thoughts are an effective way of regulating our moods. Just as a person would look away from a disgusting image to avoid unpleasant feelings, so too do we suppress terrorizing thoughts of death and seek comfort in our already established cultural worldviews.
**The Role of Religion and Philosophical Worldview**

Vess et al (2009) note that little research has been done on the effects of religion or MS on health-related decisions. In their recent study (2009), Ps scoring high on Altemeyer & Hunsberger’s (1992) RF scale were more likely to refuse medical care, or to advocate the use of prayer instead of medical care, when their morality was made salient. Conversely, those scoring low in RF were less likely to support the refusal of medical care when morality was salient, indicating that one’s religious worldview is a key factor in determining how one makes decisions in situations where mortality has been made salient. In addition, they found that any distrust of modern medicine held by religious fundamentalists tends to become exaggerated once they are reminded of their own mortality, even if those reminders (primes) are not related to the medical issue at hand, essentially operating under the radar.

This study seeks to first replicate these findings, and then build on them by exploring other potential worldviews. The first hypothesis (H$_1$) to be tested, then, is that Ps scoring high in RF would indicate stronger support for prayer as a substitute for medical treatment following an MS prime, compared to a control group.

Vess et al (2009) only considered two religious perspectives: high and low fundamentalism. According to Ray & Anderson (2000), there are three types of people in the United States: the moderns, the traditionals, and the cultural creatives. The moderns represent mainstream thought and most closely reflect modernist philosophy. They would support science and technology, big business, media as entertainment, and more choices
as a consumer, while rejecting spiritual growth, mysticism, and holistic health, as well as traditional, rural, native, or new age values.

The traditionals are a subculture of people who reject the current secular system and modern worldview, preferring instead to go back to what they believe was a better time, per Ray & Anderson (2000). They favor a patriarchal system centered on the family and community, with the church as central to their lives. Customs are maintained, immoral behavior is discouraged, and those who provide security are honored. High fundamentalists would probably fit into this category.

Cultural creatives are another subculture of people, distinct from the traditionals, who reject the modern worldview. Ray & Anderson (2000) describe this group as seeking to go beyond the current materialist system. Cultural creatives are defined as seeking authenticity and engagement. They value a global perspective, altruism, self-actualization, and spirituality; and they reject materialism, hedonism, superficiality, and social inequalities.

This newer subculture can probably be most closely compared to post-modernist philosophy. In order to identify people that might fit into this post-modernist category, two different measures were used. Ps completed a version of the Cultural Creative (CC) checklist by Ray and Anderson (2000), as well as the expanded post-materialist (PM) value priorities index by Inglehart (1977).

Those rejecting medical treatment after MS in the Vess et al (2009) study appeared to do so because of fundamentalist religious beliefs. However, those with a post-modern perspective may also be suspicious of medical treatment and other modern
technologies. This study hypothesizes (H₂) that Ps scoring high in CC will indicate stronger support for prayer as a substitute for medical treatment following an MS prime, compared to the control group, and (H₃) that Ps scoring high in PM will also indicate stronger support for prayer as a substitute for medical treatment following an MS prime, compared to the control group.

Risk Assessment

Making life or death decisions on health care involves a certain amount of risk in potentially making the wrong choice. Taubman Ben-Air et al (1999 & 2000) found that people take more risks in situations where mortality is salient. For example, reminders of death actually made Ps more willing to drive recklessly, in an effort to bolster self-esteem and deny any personal threats to immortality. In order to distinguish the element of risk from the question of prayer efficacy, this study asked Ps to consider risky behavior as it relates to driving, and hypothesized (H₄) that Ps would consider potentially risky driving behaviors to be less dangerous following an MS prime, compared to the control group.

Media Selection

In defending cultural worldviews in response to MS primes, people have been shown to become more rigid in their ideology (Pyszczynski, 2004) and condemn those with different viewpoints (Pyszczynski et al, 2003). By the same token, it seems reasonable that people would prefer media news sources that reinforce their own cultural worldviews, particularly when mortality is salient. Therefore, this study tests the
hypothesis (H₃) that Ps will indicate stronger preferences for getting their news from sources that share their own points of view following an MS prime, compared to the control group. A number of media preference questions from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2008 & 2009) were posed to Ps.

Hypotheses

This study replicates a portion of the Vess et al. (2009) study on the existential role of religion, and includes Altemeyer and Hunsberger’s (1992) RF scale, as well as a CC (Ray & Anderson, 2000) and PM (Inglehart, 1977) index to measure religious and philosophical worldviews. It was hypothesized (H₁, H₂, H₃) that Ps in each group (RF, CC, PM) would indicate stronger support for prayer as a substitute for medical treatment following an MS prime, compared to the control group. Media preference questions from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2008 & 2009), as well as additional questions thought to be relevant to specific risk assessment and decision-making behaviors were also posed. It was hypothesized (H₄) that Ps would indicate less concern about dangerous driving behaviors, and (H₅) stronger preferences for getting their news from sources that share their own points of view following an MS prime, compared to the control group.
Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter will discuss the participants and methods of data collection, including content of the questionnaires, reasoning for procedures used, and methods of data analysis.

98 (50 female) sociology and psychology students at The Ohio State University, Newark branch participated in a classroom setting, in exchange for extra course credit. Eight other students were removed from the study for various reasons. Two students were removed for talking while filling out the survey. One was 17 years old. Five others were removed for incomplete or incorrect completion of the questionnaire.

Ps took about 25 minutes to complete questionnaires covering a range of topics. Paper questionnaires were distributed in class and completed with pen or pencil. To start, Ps rank ordered three sets of four questions from Inglehart’s (1977) expanded post-materialism (PM) index by importance. Each set of questions contained two questions considered by Inglehart (1977) to be a post-materialist goal, and two questions considered to be a materialist. Two points were assigned for each post-materialist goal ranked first priority, one point was assigned for each post-materialist goal ranked as second priority, and another point was assigned for each materialist goal ranked as last priority. Points were totaled for each set of questions. A factor analysis indicated that
the three sets of questions scaled together (\( \alpha = .61 \)), so the points from each set of questions were added together to form a combined PM scale (see Appendix A).

Ps then completed 10 questions from Altemeyer and Hunsberger’s (1992) Religious Fundamentalism (RF) scale, per Vess et al (2009). Three items were reverse scored. Item 4 did not scale with the other questions, according to a factor analysis with Varimax rotation, so it was excluded from the scale (see Appendix A). Mean scores were computed for the remaining nine questions (\( M = 2.54, SD = 1.02, \alpha = .90 \)).

As an additional measure, Ps completed a checklist by Ray and Anderson (2000), indicating if they agree or disagree to a series of statements. One point was awarded for each item Ps agreed with, and no points were awarded when there was no agreement. According to a factor analysis with Varimax rotation, these 18 items did not scale well together (\( \alpha = .60 \)). Seven different components were identified with Eigenvalues greater than 1. There was no identifiable logic for the component groupings, so the component with the highest Eigenvalue was used as an index (see Appendix A).

After completing these scales, Ps were asked demographic questions (specifically gender, age, religious affiliation, ethnicity, party identification, political ideology, likelihood of voting in the next election, and place of childhood). Next, Ps completed one of two sets of questions, per random assignment, in a post-test only control group design. Ps in the experimental group were asked open-ended questions designed to make mortality salient, per previous TMT research (as in Study 1 of Vess, et al, 2009; see also Rosenblatt et al, 1989). Ps in the control group were asked questions designed to make...
them think of potentially anxiety-producing scenarios unrelated to mortality (as in Study 4 of Vess, et al, 2009).

Due to the nature of the study, deception was employed. Ps were not informed beforehand that some of them would complete a different form than others, nor that some of them would be asked to think about the concept of death. This was necessary in order to prevent contamination of the control group by making them thinking about the concept of the death (the experimental condition), and to keep the experimental group from knowing what the intention of the questionnaire was. Ps were given debriefing sheets upon completion of the questionnaire, informing them of the true nature of the study, and allowing them to opt out, in case they wanted to remove their data from the study. To facilitate this option, Ps recorded unique identification numbers at the top of their questionnaires in order to assure anonymity, and were given multiple ways to contact the researchers in case they decided later to remove themselves from the study. No participant has requested to be removed from the study.

After the independent variable, it is typically protocol to administer a series of filler exercises designed as a distraction technique to remove conscious thoughts of mortality and encourage “distal terror management defenses” of cultural worldviews (Pyszczynski et al, 2003), such as the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) by Watson et al (1988), and a non-relevant word search (e.g. Vess et al, 2009). In this study, Ps responded to a list of 66 emotions from the PANAS list, plus two additional emotions added to balance out the page, by indicated the degree to which they generally
feel that way. Then, Ps answered four questions from the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

Following the distraction part of the questionnaire were a number of questions representing dependent variables (see Appendix B). To start, Ps read a scenario by Vess et al (2009) that described a fictional newspaper article about patients who refused medical care in lieu of prayer. Ps were then asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale the extent to which they thought that “prayer alone will help [a patient] suffering from lung disease get well” and “is more effective than medical treatment.” Next, Ps were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements from the Pew Research Center (2008, 2009) reflecting interest in various forms of news consumption. Finally, Ps were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements intended to relate to issues of safety, well-being, and risk assessment.
Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, results will be presented and explained. Support, or lack of support, will be indicated for each hypothesis, and additional interesting findings will be described as well.

Religious Fundamentalism & Prayer Efficacy

Responses for the two “prayer efficacy” questions were combined, as in the Vess et al. (2009) study. As expected, a univariate analysis of variance (UNIANOVA) did not indicate a significant effect for MS \[ F(1,97) = 0.55, p = .46 \], but it did indicate a significant main effect for RF, in a between-subjects comparison of Ps scoring high and low in RF by median split \[ F(1,97) = 54.99, p < .0001 \], with religious fundamentalists more willing to prefer prayer over medical treatment. It also indicated a significant MS x RF interaction \[ F(1,97) = 3.70, p < .10 \], providing support for H1 and indicating that MS exaggerated these preferences (see Figure 1). Achieving a higher level of significance may have been difficult due to a few factors. While mortality salient Ps were randomly selected, they were significantly more liberal \[ r(96) = -.27, p < .01 \] than those in the control group. In addition, a larger sample size might have produced more significant results.
In order to isolate the potential impact of political ideology on prayer efficacy, liberal Ps were analyzed separately. Interestingly, liberal Ps (who scored less than 4 on the 7-point Likert political ideology scale) indicated a significant MS x RF interaction \[F(1,97) = 6.83, p = .01\], meaning that politically liberal, yet religiously fundamentalist Ps were particularly influenced by the MS prime to exaggerate their tendencies to prefer prayer over medical treatment (see Figure 2). While these findings are not as strong as in
the Vess et al (2009) study, it does build support for their findings.

Figure 2: MS x RF Interaction on Combined Prayer Efficacy for Liberals

Cultural Creativity & Prayer Efficacy

A regression analysis did not indicate a significant main effect for CC ($\beta = .14$), $t(95) = 1.43, p = .16$, nor a significant MS x CC interaction ($\beta = -.16$), $t(94) = -.36, p = .72$. Cultural creatives were not significantly different from the rest of the Ps in terms of prayer efficacy. Only four specific questions factored together (see Appendix A).
A UNIANOVA of this new index (called CC4), found no significant effects. Political ideology seemed to play a role in how Ps responded to these questions as well. However, even the most promising group in this study (liberals) did not produce significant results. A UNIANOVA on liberal-only Ps indicated no significant main effect for CC4 \[F(1, 96) = .25, \ p = .62\] or MS x CC4 interaction \[F(1, 96) = 1.44, \ p = .23\]. This study failed to find support for H2. The Cultural Creative index, as implemented in this study, was not a useful factor in understanding prayer efficacy in conditions of mortality salience.

Post-Materialism & Prayer Efficacy

A UNIANOVA indicated a significant effect for PM, in a between-subjects comparison of Ps scoring high and low in PM by median split \[F(1,97) = 2.99, \ p < .10\], but it did not find a significant MS x PM interaction \[F(1,97) = 1.22, \ p = .27\]. However, a UNIANOVA indicated a significant MS x PM interaction \[F(1,97) = 3.86, \ p < .10\] (see Figure 3), when considering the first prayer question only, “To what extent do you think prayer alone will help the man suffering from lung disease get well?” This suggests mild support for H3, worthy of further research. Given a larger sample size, and a more even distribution of the experimental condition across the political ideology spectrum, it would be reasonable to expect a stronger significance level if this study were to be replicated.
In addition, a UNIANOVA of conservative Ps only (scoring 4 or more on the political ideology scale), indicated a mildly significant MS x PM interaction \( F(1, 60) = 2.93, p < .10 \), for the combined prayer efficacy questions (see Figure 4). Conservative Ps in the MS group who scored high on the PM scale were slightly more likely to view prayer as beneficial in the given situation, than those in the control group. However, conservatives who scored low on the PM scale were much more supportive of the prayer option in the control group, but much less supportive of the prayer option in the MS
group. Mortality salience, then, appears to reduce prayer efficacy in conservative post-materialists.

Figure 4: MS x PM Interaction on Combined Prayer Efficacy for Conservatives

When controlling for political ideology in an analysis of participant responses to the first question only, a significant interaction is more evident. A UNIANOVA of conservative Ps answering this question indicated a significant MS x PM interaction \[F(1, 60) = 5.85, p < .05\] (see Figure 5). That is, conservative materialists were more
supportive of prayer as medical treatment when mortality was made salient, but conservative post-materialists were less supportive of prayer when mortality was salient. While post-materialist tendencies to support prayer were generally exaggerated under MS conditions, it did not apply to conservative post-materialists. In fact, conservative post-materialist support for prayer was reduced when mortality was made salient. The reasons for this are not clear.

Figure 5: MS x PM Interaction on Prayer Efficacy for Conservatives
Using Ray & Anderson’s (2000) language, those who score low in PM could be either modernists or traditionalists. Traditionalists would presumably be more invested in prayer than modernists. It could be that these two types of non-PM participants are not evenly distributed between the experimental and control conditions. It could also be that Ps that indicate that they are politically conservative and also post-materialist could be supportive of both prayer and medical care, but their belief in modern medical care is more central to their worldview than their commitment to prayer. So when mortality is made salient, they exhibit a distal terror management defense of medical technology over prayer. However, since post-materialists tend to be liberal \( r(96) = -.428, p < .0001 \), and this was a young sample \( (M = 20.74, SD = 3.99) \) of college students who may not necessarily have well-formed opinions yet, a more representative sample of the general population may not provide the same results.

*Mortality Salience & Risk Assessment*

A desire to rely on prayer in the face of illness, may signal a reinforcement of one’s religious worldview, or it might signal a denial of the seriousness of the medical condition. In order to focus on the risk component, several statements about potentially dangerous driving behaviors were included to exclude religious expression as an alternative choice, and as proxies for more controversial types of behavior, such as texting or drinking while driving. It was assumed that Ps might not feel comfortable answering honestly about such direct questions, given the potential legal implications of such behavior. Less controversial, but still somewhat risky behaviors, such as driving
with loud music or with multiple passengers, were used instead. Risk assessments of these behaviors were expected to approximate assessments of other potentially riskier behaviors, like texting, and Ps were expected to be less concerned about such behaviors following the MS prime, due to an anxiety buffer created to manage the terror generated by creeping thoughts of mortality.

A UNIANOVA did not indicate a significant main effect for RF on responses to the statement, “It is dangerous to drive with 2 or more passengers” \( F(1,97) = 0.08, p = .78 \), in a between-subjects comparison of Ps scoring high and low in RF by median split. However, it did indicate a significant MS x RF interaction \( F(1,97) = 4.44, p < .05 \) (see Figure 6), meaning that religious fundamentalists were less likely to perceive that situation as dangerous following an MS prime, while other Ps were more likely to perceive that situation as dangerous. This finding yields support for \( H_4 \), but only among religious fundamentalists. A UNIANOVA did not find a significant MS x PM interaction on responses to the same statement \( F(1,94) = 0.00, p = .96 \), nor did it find a significant MS x CC4 interaction \( F(1,97) = 0.26, p = .61 \).
Other studies (e.g. Taubman Ben-Air et al, 1999; Taubman Ben-Air et al, 2000) have indicated that people take more risks in situations where mortality is salient, so scare tactics intended to make people drive more safely can actually backfire. This study provides additional evidence that such scare tactics may backfire on religious fundamentalists in particular. Evidence for similar effects among people with different worldviews (PM or CC, as tested in this study) was not found.
Finally, factor analysis indicated that some of the media preference variables factored together. Responses to the statements, “I enjoy keeping up with the news a lot” and “I prefer to get my news from a variety of sources with different points of view” factored together (α = .59). Responses to the statement, “I enjoy getting my news from CNN” factored closely with responses to the statement, “I enjoy getting my news from MSNBC” (α = .73). Additionally, responses to the statement, “I enjoy getting my news from cable TV” factored together with responses to the statement, “I enjoy getting my news from network TV” (α = .68).

An independent samples t-test was run on a number of media variables to determine if MS had an effect on reported media preferences. The only significant effect found was in response to the statement, “I prefer to get my news from sources that share my point of view” [t(96) = -.59, p < .10]. Not wanting sources that shared their points of view would seem contrary to expectations, as MS is thought to motivate individuals to seek means of defending their cultural worldviews (Pyszczynski et al, 2003). In this case, for example, one would expect mortality salient Ps to prefer news from sources that share their own point of view, in order to reinforce their worldview, but the findings seem to indicate that the opposite was true. Therefore, H5 was not supported and findings ran contrary to expectations.

However, because liberal Ps were disproportionately represented in the MS group [r(96) = -.27, p < .01], an independent samples t-test was run again on liberals (who scored less than 5 on the 7-point Likert political ideology scale) and conservatives (who
scored more than 3 on the 7-point Likert political ideology scale) separately. With conservatives, this effect disappears \([t(59) = .20, p = .74]\), however for liberals, the effect is significant \([t(69) = -1.79, p < .05]\). Surprisingly, liberals appear less interested in reinforcing their own cultural worldview by viewing news from sources that reinforce their own points of view, after exposure to an MS prime.

The other interesting finding relating to MS effects on media preferences regards the variable representing the combined factors of preferring cable TV and network TV news, which may be referred to as a preference for TV news. An independent samples t-test was run to determine if MS had an effect on preference for TV news. Among all Ps, there was no effect \([t(96) = .04, p = .49]\), nor was there an effect among liberal Ps \([t(69) = -.29, p = .85]\) (see Appendix C). However, among conservative Ps, there was a significant effect \([t(59) = .12, p = .005]\), indicating that conservatives are more motivated to get their news from TV sources after exposure to an MS prime.

**Religious Fundamentalism & Media Preference**

A UNIANOVA indicated a significant main effect for RF, in a between-subjects comparison of Ps scoring high and low in RF by median split \([F(1,97) = 5.37, p < .05]\), on the statement, “I prefer to get my news from sources that have no particular point of view.” However, it did not indicate a significant MS x RF interaction. This indicates that religious fundamentalist Ps were less likely to want unbiased news, but this was not due to an MS effect. Neither did a UNIANOVA indicate a significant effect for RF for the statement, “I prefer to get my news from sources that share my point of view”
and only slightly indicated a significant effect for the statement, “I prefer to get my news from sources with different points of view” \([F(1,97) = 2.96, p < .10]\). No interactions with MS were found here either. Again, this study is unable to show that Ps would prefer to reinforce their own points of view following an MS prime.

Perhaps because the Ps in this study are young \((M = 20.74, SD = 3.99)\), they have a less established point of view, and an older sample would be more likely to prefer news sources that match their own points of view, following an MS prime. Another possibility is that a stated opinion on news preference might not actually reflect an MS effect the way actual behavior might.

*Cultural Creatives & Media Preference*

Cultural creative Ps, as measured by the CC4 index created with the four CC statements that factored together, reacted differently from other Ps on the question of preferring news sources from different points of view. A UNIANOVA indicated a significant main effect for CC4, in a between-subjects comparison of Ps scoring high and low in CC4 by median split \([F(1,96) = 4.38, p < .05]\), on the statement, “I prefer to get my news from sources with different points of view.” This, however, only held true for conservative Ps, not liberals. Cultural creative conservatives (scoring more than 3 on the 7-point Likert political ideology scale) also expressed a significant preference to get their news from different points of view \([F(1,59) = 4.81, p < .05]\) compared to others, but liberal Ps (scoring less than 4 on the political ideology scale) showed no significant difference between CC4 participants and others \([F(1,36) = 0.03, p = .88]\). Cultural
creatives tend to be liberal \([r(95) = -.21, p < .05]\), however, so this result could reflect Ps who have not developed a clear worldview yet. Cultural creative Ps did not seem to be influenced in their responses to this statement by an MS prime.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This study had several goals. First, I wanted to replicate findings by Vess et al (2009) that religious fundamentalists would react to questions in predicable ways. Specifically, because of their religious beliefs, they would have more faith in prayer than medicine, and would therefore prefer prayer to medical treatment when given a choice. Secondly, according to Terror Management Theory, these preferences would be exaggerated in response to a Mortality Salience prime, due to a defense mechanism that bolsters one’s cultural worldviews in response to the inescapable psychological threat imposed by reminders that we are merely mortal. This study successfully replicated these findings.

I also sought to build evidence for other types of MS effects related to media selection and risk assessment. To my surprise, MS did not increase participants’ preferences for news sources that shared their particular points of view. In fact, liberal Ps were less likely to express an interest in news that reflected their own points of view. It was expected that Ps would seek news that reflected their own points of view, as a way of bolstering their cultural worldview. However, it is likely that these results reflect the bolstering of a specific value among liberals, i.e. an openness or appreciation for other points of view, or a respect for diversity of opinion and sources of knowledge as the
backbone of a democratic society. It seems that the cultural worldview defense as expressed here among liberals, was a rejection of the suggestion to limit media consumption to only liberal news outlets.

This could explain, in part, the success of conservative outlets such as Fox News, if my findings suggest an underlying tendency among liberals to be more open to alternative viewpoints, a tendency not as prevalent among conservatives. Among the seven news sources surveyed by The Pew Research Center in 2009, the lowest unfavorable ratings were given by Democrats. Five news sources (CNN, MSNBC, Network TV, New York Times, and NPR) received unfavorable ratings in the single digits (only Fox News and Wall Street Journal scored higher) among Democrats. Not a single unfavorable rating among Republicans was below a score of 12, and most were above 30 (Pew Research Center, 2009). Such unhappiness among conservatives with what they may perceive as a liberal media, may drive them to conservative outlets like Fox News and talk radio faster than liberals, who may be less unhappy with their options, less likely to avoid conservative outlets, and less compelled to seek out liberal news sources.

Interestingly, I also found that conservative Ps were more likely to prefer getting their news from television, following a reminder of their own mortality. Conservatives may view television as a traditional news source and may find comfort while tuning in, or they may be more likely to trust what they can see. Additional research on this topic is warranted.
It was no surprise that many Ps who enjoy getting their news from CNN also enjoy getting their news from MSNBC. Democrats and Independents give both networks high favorable ratings, according to the Pew Research Center (2009). Nor was it a surprise that many Ps who enjoy getting their news from network TV also enjoy getting it from cable TV, as that likely indicates that they simply enjoy getting their news watching television. The high correlation between enjoying news and preferring to get news from different points of views could likely be explained by an appreciation for knowledge, which is best gained from a variety of sources.

Next, I sought to find evidence that the religious left might respond in similar ways to the religious right in response to mortality salience. I used two different indices to represent what I hoped might reflect a liberal religious or philosophical perspective. One index was a modified version of the Cultural Creative scale by Ray & Anderson (2000). The other was an expanded post-materialist value priorities index by Inglehart (1977). Specifically, I expected that Ps scoring high on either scale would also score high in prayer efficacy, like religious fundamentalists, but perhaps for different reasons (such as a lack of faith in medical treatment or a belief in holistic health). I found no evidence for this among CC participants, but I did find supporting evidence among PM participants.

Secondly, I sought to find evidence that such views on prayer would be exaggerated in response to an MS prime, just like I found with RF participants. I was unable to get significant results in the PM group for the combined prayer efficacy questions; however, I did manage to get significant results when looking at just one of the
two questions alone. Surprisingly, post-materialist conservatives were significantly less likely to recommend prayer as a substitute for medical care, a reversal from other post-materialist responses, especially when confronted with their own morality. Given a larger and more representative sample size in terms of age, I believe the results would have more conclusively supported this hypothesis.

One weakness in using prayer efficacy as a dependent variable with these indices, particularly for Cultural Creatives, is that their connection to spirituality may not find expression in prayer. Those who might meditate instead, for example, may not relate to the word “prayer” as a way that they might seek spiritual guidance or comfort in response to health concerns or reminders of their mortality. A different variable that allowed for a broader expression of faith instead better test a defensive response from those on the religious left.

Finally, I hypothesized that Ps would indicate less concern about potentially risky driving behavior following an MS prime, and tested to see if this would hold true for each worldview measured. I did not find evidence that Ps in the PM or CC groups were less concerned about risky driving behaviors in the MS group compared to the control group. However, I did find that RF participants were less concerned about the safety of driving with multiple passengers following the MS prime. While this result was not matched in the other risk measures, it does indicate that religious fundamentalists may be resistant to certain kinds of driver safety training / scare tactics. This resistance likely stems from a denial of risk in light of MS, a denial that may also be taking place among religious fundamentalists when confronted with health threats.
The post-materialist values priority index by Inglehart (1977) seemed to produce real measurements of a growing subculture in the world. They may not exactly represent the religious left, but they do seem to indicate a subculture worthy of further study. The cultural creative index, on the other-hand, appears to represent too many universally held values to be effective. It was useful in shaping my approach to this study, but not as an index. Perhaps a ranking system like Inglehart’s (1977) would produce more useful results.

Future studies should avoid using the cultural creative checklist as an index, and might want to find or create a better index first, before using it to measure other variables. Another option might be to select Ps in particular who might represent the religious right and religious left. For example, churches known to be fundamentalist, or on the other hand, known to have universalist tendencies, might be selected to represent two different perspectives. In addition, an older and larger sample size is preferable, as the young students in this sample may not have had well-formed opinions yet. An uneven distribution of political ideology across conditions may have limited the findings in this study, and a larger sample size would reduce the odds for that to happen next time. To facilitate a larger pool of participants, future studies could utilize an online questionnaire.

In terms of constructing questionnaires for future studies, I recommend focusing more directly on fewer variables. My enthusiasm for the project led to many interesting questions. However, such a long list of variables can create a daunting task for data analysis. While I don’t believe it interfered with distal defense mechanisms among the MS group, I would recommend using the same delay techniques as other published
studies have done. My first delay exercise is commonly used, but I substituted another affect-related exercise for my second exercise, instead of using a word-search as other have (e.g. Vess et al, 2009).

This study provides additional evidence that reminders of death encourage the exaggeration of certain beliefs and opinions, and adds post-materialists as a subculture worth investigating. Conservatives are more likely to seek news from TV sources in response to mortality salience, and liberals are less likely than conservatives to seek news sources that share their points of view. Further research may be needed to clarify if this points to certain values, such as openness to new ideas, in a framework of worldviews that are reinforced when mortality is made salient. In addition, religious fundamentalists are shown to prefer prayer to medical treatment and deny personal risks from dangerous specific dangerous behavior in mortality salient conditions, and post-materialists share some of these tendencies to exaggerate their own viewpoints as well. Such tendencies, like a flashlight in the dark, seem to point to underlying values or fears.

In the movie Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi, Obi Wan Kenobi said, “You will find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view.” We cling to our own understandings of the truth, even at the risk of our lives, because they give us comfort and reassurance in the face of the certainty of our eventual death. Our already established opinions can be more important to us than the actual process of seeking truth. Knowing that we are all prone to worldview defense in the awareness of our mortality, allows us the opportunity to choose another path, one of greater insight, and hopefully, wisdom.
References


Appendix A: Descriptions of Indices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th># of Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
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<td><strong>Post-materialism</strong>&lt;br&gt;Maintaining high rate of economic growth&lt;br&gt;Ensuring strong defense forces&lt;br&gt;More say in how things get decided at work&lt;br&gt;Make cities and countryside more beautiful&lt;br&gt;Maintaining order in the nation&lt;br&gt;Giving people more say in important gov’t decisions&lt;br&gt;Fighting rising prices&lt;br&gt;Protecting freedom of speech&lt;br&gt;Maintain a stable economy&lt;br&gt;The fight against crime&lt;br&gt;A society where ideas are more important than money</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td><strong>Religious Fundamentalism</strong>&lt;br&gt;God gave an unfailing guide to salvation to be followed&lt;br&gt;Long established religions show best way to serve God&lt;br&gt;The Righteous will be rewarded, the rest will not&lt;br&gt;It is more important to be good than to believe in God&lt;br&gt;God will punish those who abandon His true religion&lt;br&gt;There is a religion that teaches God’s truth without error&lt;br&gt;Science is wrong when it conflicts with sacred scripture&lt;br&gt;There is no body of teachings that are without error&lt;br&gt;For meaningful life, one must belong to one true religion</td>
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<td>.90</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td>**Cultural Creative 4-Item Index *****&lt;br&gt;I love nature and am concerned about its destruction&lt;br&gt;I am aware of the problems of the planet and want action&lt;br&gt;I want more equality for women and women leaders&lt;br&gt;I am concerned about big corporations exploiting others</td>
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<td>1.21</td>
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* post-materialist items (the others are materialist)<br>** reverse-coded<br>*** agreement with each item is worth 1 pt each

Table 1. Primary Indices
## Appendix B: Descriptions of Dependent Variables

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<td>I prefer to get my news from network TV</td>
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* male = 1, female = 2  
** very liberal = 1, very conservative = 7  
*** not at all = 1, very = 7  
**** all others: strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 7

Table 2. Dependent Variables
### Appendix C: Correlation Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Prayer Efficacy</th>
<th>Combined Efficacy</th>
<th>Enjoy News</th>
<th>Prefer No POV</th>
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<td>-.021</td>
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* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations for Prayer Efficacy and Points of View
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<th>Cable TV</th>
<th>Network TV</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>MSNBC</th>
<th>Multi Passengers Dangerous</th>
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<td>Age</td>
<td>-.223*</td>
<td>-.284**</td>
<td>-.301**</td>
<td>-.260*</td>
<td>-.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>-.285**</td>
<td>-.174</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer Efficacy</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>-.013</td>
<td>-.054</td>
<td>-.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Prayer Efficacy</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>-.026</td>
<td>-.107</td>
<td>-.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy News</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.250*</td>
<td>.239*</td>
<td>-.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer No Point of View</td>
<td>.154</td>
<td>-.007</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>.102</td>
<td>.131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer My Point of View</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.208*</td>
<td>.094</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>-.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer Different Point of View</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.257*</td>
<td>.371**</td>
<td>.161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 4. Bivariate Correlations for News Sources and Risk Assessment