

# Working in the Shadow of Mortality: Terror Management in an Organizational Context

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## Abstract

*The current study examines the interaction between Terror Management Theory, organizational identity, and various measures of organizational outcome. Terror Management Theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) perceives humanity as being fundamentally driven by the motivation to transcend mortality concerns, whereas industrial-organizational psychology investigates such topics as social identity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment/motivation. In the current study, participants were randomly assigned to mortality salience or control conditions, and were assessed on levels of organizational identity, job satisfactions, motivation, and commitment toward their academic institution. Results indicated that mortality salience increase participants' satisfaction and motivation levels regarding their university, but only if participants already possessed a strong self-identification with their university. The current research suggests that organizational identity can serve as a crucial component of one's worldview. Specifically, the findings suggest that if one's identification with their institution is robust, that person may support the institution more strongly when reminded of mortality.*

*Keywords: terror management, mortality salience, organizational identity, organizational commitment*

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Employment sites are much more than locations where people work. For many, the job site is where most of the day is spent (Jonas, 2011). From early Monday morning meetings to late Friday evaluations, the job site becomes an environment where people are constantly interacting. The current study will examine some of the driving forces within organizations. For example, are extrinsic motivational factors such as money, prestige, or status primarily responsible for job motivation and performance? Or, do performance and motivation derive from an intrinsic force that we hold deep within ourselves?

Given the importance of work in our lives, it seems possible that the organization or institution in which one works may become a significant part of one's identity. Furthermore, the workplace holds the potential to become part of one's worldview, particularly if an employee shares the same values and beliefs as his or her organization. Terror Management Theory happens to be primarily interested in individual worldviews, and believes that people support their individual worldviews in order to keep death anxiety at bay. So, if organizational behaviors and/or perceptions may be a part of individual worldviews, what happens to those organizational behaviors and perceptions once we are reminded of our mortality? In general, reminders of death cause existential anxiety, and may influence our behaviors as we attempt to cope with this anxiety. There is a possibility that our workplace behaviors may also change in response to death primes, where reminders of mortality affect workplace levels of motivation, commitment, and satisfaction.

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The question of how workplace behaviors/attitudes may change in response to death anxiety is primarily a theoretical inquiry rather than an applied endeavor. For example, intentionally reminding employees of the inevitability of their mortality may be particularly unethical within the workplace; however, examining the relationship between mortality salience and organizational identification possesses implications within the workplace, particularly for those individuals who are exposed to high degrees of mortality salience in their non-professional lives. In attempt to further explore these connections, the current study examines the relationship between death anxiety and various forms of organizational satisfaction.

## **Terror Management Theory**

Terror Management Theory (TMT) insists that humans are unlike any other animal due to their intellectual capacity to comprehend the inevitability of their mortality (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). When an instinct for survival coincides with the awareness of an unavoidable death, a potential for paralyzing terror arises, which may then fundamentally affect human functioning (Fritsche, Frankel, & Jonas, 2008). Individuals attempt to avoid experiencing paralyzing fear in daily life via a dual-component cultural anxiety buffer. This hypothesis states that if a psychological structure functions to provide protection against anxiety, then strengthening that structure should make one less prone to exhibit anxiety and anxiety-related behavior in response to threats (Pyszczynski et al., 1997). Cultural worldviews and the awareness that one is living up to those cultural standards (i.e., self-esteem) have been shown to buffer anxiety by providing a sense of order, meaning, and permanence after death (Fritsche et al., 2008).

Cultural worldviews are symbolic constructions that ultimately give order and meaning to the world, provide standards of values and behaviors, and the promise of transcendence (Simon, Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998). According to TMT, when individuals are reminded of their own mortality they become motivated to protect their cultural worldviews, to have their worldviews positively validated, and to reject those who hold opposing viewpoints (Florian & Mikilciner, 1994; McGregor et al., 1998). These effects only appear when one is primed with reminders of death (i.e., mortality salience); mortality salience leads to particularly positive reactions to anything that supports one's worldview, and negative reactions to anyone or anything that threatens that worldview.

High self-esteem (or a positive sense of personal value) is achieved by accepting society's standards, expectations, and behaviors, and meeting or exceeding those standards. Meeting or exceeding cultural standards allows individuals to feel that they are exemplars of their culture (Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2002). As a result, such individuals achieve a sense of symbolic immortality (Hirschberger et al., 2002). Recent studies suggest that certain interpersonal processes (e.g., mating and close relationships) may also serve as buffers that protect people from the anxiety that mortality salience (MS) produces (Hirschberger et al., 2002). The MS hypothesis states that if a psychological structure provides protection against anxiety, reminding people of the source of this anxiety (i.e., death) should increase the tendency to use that structure (Pyszczynski et al., 1997).

In support of this hypothesis, previous research suggests that reminders of death have shown to lead to more favorable evaluations of those who exemplify in-group cultural values, and to heightened praise for those members of the cultural in-group (Solomon et al., 1998). In other words, mortality salience facilitates worldview defense, thereby solidifying one's connectedness with the subjectively perceived in-group. This connection with a larger-than-life cultural construct allows humans to become part of something that will live on beyond themselves, thereby providing the individual with a sense of symbolic immortality.

## **Organizational Behavior**

The workplace is not just an environment where one spends a significant part of the day. Rather, the culture of the work environment gives daily life meaning, order, and a sense of permanence (Jonas, 2011). As TMT suggests, one's cultural worldview acts as a buffer against the anxiety that one may experience when reminded of mortality. Consequently, the culture of work may similarly serve as a buffer against death anxiety, to the extent that one's work is embedded within his or her worldview.

## **Social Identity Theory**

A main component of TMT is individual cultural worldview, or the manner in which individuals' culture gives order and meaning to their worlds. Social Identity Theory (SIT) focuses on the self-concept in group

membership, group processes, and intergroup relations (Burke, 2006). According to SIT, people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organization membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Research has shown that the social identification process occurs within organizational contexts as well (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Individuals who identify with a certain group evaluate themselves in group terms and hold similar conceptions of their self-identities, their attributes, and the manner in which they are similar and different from other groups. Social classification serves two main functions: to give order to the environment (which provides the individual with a systematic means of defining others) and to enable the individual to define the self within the social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identification is the perception of belongingness to some human group, which can be a manifestation of one's cultural worldview.

Social ingroups play a crucial role in TMT because they are the source of cultural worldviews (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1994). Having a sense of identity within one's organization can serve as an anxiety buffer against the inevitability of death. Group memberships have been shown to provide sources of self-esteem (Dechesne, Pyszczynski, & Arndt, 2000), offer protection and security (Wisman & Koole, 2003), and offer the potential for death transcendence when the individual's identity is merged with a group's identity (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002). The values received from an organization's culture give the individual a sense of identity within their workplace (Jonas, 2011). Organizations, and an individual's behavior in them, might be of special importance in helping individuals cope with the inevitability of their mortality (Jonas, 2011).

### **Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction is one of the most heavily researched areas in Industrial-Organizational psychology because it is perceived as relevant for organizational effectiveness. According to Locke (1976), job satisfaction can be defined as a pleasurable, positive emotional state that an employee derives from his or her job. Job satisfaction stems from the perception that one's job is fulfilling, suggesting high job satisfaction given the belief that a job's outcome is valued.

According to Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988), people have stable characteristics that predispose them to respond positively or negatively to job contexts. The term "affect" refers to a fundamental difference in how people view their lives, their general disposition, and attitude; affect itself is described on a positive-negative continuum (Watson et al., 1988). Those high in positive affect tend to be active, alert, enthusiastic, inspired, interested/optimistic about life, and prone to interpreting failures as temporary setbacks caused by external circumstances. Individuals high in negative affect are generally more pessimistic about life and may interpret failure as internally-based and/or enduring. Individuals with high positive affect tend to also have high self-esteem, which serves as a buffer against one's inevitable mortality.

Lord, Klimoski, and Kanfer (2002) introduced an emotional component to attitude. Moods and emotions play an important role in influencing an individual's feelings about life, including work experiences. An employee's affective reaction to a job is based on a comparison of the actual outcomes derived from the job with the job's expected outcomes (Hulin & Judge, 2003). Job-related expectations are subjective and vary from individual-to-individual. One's satisfaction with a job is also affected by the structure of the job and what it provides to the employee (Lord et al., 2002). Research has demonstrated a consistent relationship between employees' perceptions of the characteristics of their jobs and their levels of job satisfaction (Spector & Jex, 1991). The more employees perceive their jobs as providing autonomy, task identity, task variety, task significance, and job feedback, the more satisfied employees are with their places of work (Levy, 2013). Another indicator of job satisfaction is social context, or the employee's relationship with supervisors and coworkers.

### **Organizational Commitment**

Levy (2013) defines organizational commitment as the relative strength of an individual's identification with, attachment to, and involvement in a particular organization. The concept of organizational commitment has been repeatedly identified as an important variable in understanding the behavior of employees in the workplace (Klein, Malloy, & Cooper, 2009). Levy specifies that organizational commitment is focused on the organization instead of individual job tasks, therefore encompassing a broader scope of the workplace. Commitment is also thought to be a more stable variable over time than job satisfaction or motivation. However, commitment takes longer to develop since it requires the necessary time to establish a relationship and attachment with an organization (Klein et al., 2009).

Mathieu and Zajac (1990) suggest that organizational commitment can be best understood through three fundamental components: affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. Affective commitment is characterized by a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, a willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization, and a strong desire to remain a part of the organization (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). This component is regarded as an employee's emotional attachment to an organization. Continuance commitment constitutes an employee's investment in an organization (i.e., whether or not it is beneficial to remain in an organization). Normative commitment pertains to an employee's sense of loyalty and obligation to an organization (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Mathieu and Zajac believe that organizations value commitment because one's level of commitment influences other behaviors, like innovativeness and creativeness, which aid in keeping organizations intact and competitive.

Jonas et al. (2011) discovered that even those with low levels of commitment became defensive of their organization when it was criticized. Both high- and low-commitment individuals demonstrated increased positive worldviews toward their organization when reminded of their own mortality, suggesting that simply belonging to an organization is enough to help cope with mortality salience.

## **Job Motivation**

Motivation contributes considerably to perceptions, desires, drives, environmental interactions, and employee performance. A motivated person is creative, innovative, and drives him- or herself and others (Khorshidi, Mirzamani, & Esfahani, 2011). Intrinsically-motivated individuals engage in behaviors for the satisfaction of performing an activity, are generally more optimistic, expend greater effort, and exhibit greater perseverance when faced with adversity, whereas extrinsically motivated individuals undertake an activity as a means to an end and often experience greater conflict and anxiety (Brummelhuis, Hoeven, Bakker, & Peper, 2011). Brummelhuis et al. (2011) demonstrated that intrinsically- and extrinsically-motivated employees differ in terms of personal resources (e.g., positive affect, self-esteem, and resilience) and coping strategies. Extrinsically-motivated employees were less engaged at work, experienced greater negative emotions, had reduced concentration, displayed negative attitudes toward work tasks, and expressed less competence, whereas intrinsically motivated employees were more likely to put effort into their tasks, were more positive about potential outcomes, and were more effective and persistent in performing their work.

## **Current Research**

Jonas et al. (2011) suggested that the mere fact that one is part of an organization is enough to help them cope with mortality salience as the organization becomes a part of their worldview, indicating that despite one's level of commitment to their organization, they would defend their organization when criticized. This finding is consistent with TMT which suggests that people will cling to their cultural worldviews and defend against those with dissimilar worldviews when primed with death-related stimuli. The current study is the first to examine the interaction between TMT (i.e., mortality salience), Organizational Identity, and various measures of positive Institutional Outcome (e.g., institutional satisfaction, motivation, and institutional commitment).

The goal of the present study was to investigate the impact mortality salience has on organizational behavior such as organizational identity, job satisfaction, and commitment. It was hypothesized that when reminded of death (mortality salience), individuals with high levels of organizational identity will exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction, motivation, and commitment than individuals who are low in organizational identity. These variables were assessed through the manipulation of mortality salience, the measurement of organizational identity, and the assessment of job satisfaction, motivation, and commitment.

Although the current research is generally focused on the concepts of organizational behavior and identity, job satisfaction, motivation, and commitment, it should be noted that the current research sampled undergraduate college students in a university setting. It was presumed that many of the participants lacked significant experience in a traditional workplace setting. Consequently, participants were queried regarding their identity, satisfaction, motivation, and commitment within their academic experiences at their university. In other words, in the current research the organization in question is the university and the members of the organization are students (i.e., participants).

These participants were chosen because of research that has exhibited that one's identity alignment to a university is very similar to identity alignment to one's workplace (Becker & Carper, 1956). More specifically, Becker and Carper (1956) interviewed graduate students in physiology, and found that they had become aligned

with the identity of the physiologist, and had adopted beliefs, values, and skills that are consistent with that milieu. In other words, the social identification process had occurred in a university setting just as it occurs within organizational settings (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Consequently, the manner in which mortality salience affects satisfaction, motivation, and commitment should be similar between workplace and university contexts, presuming that the workplace/university is a part of one's identity.

## Method

### Participants

Ninety-one undergraduate students from a small, Midwestern university participated in the current study. Participants were solicited from various psychology courses and received some form of course credit for participation. All data were kept confidential, and the names of the participants were not associated with the data in any way.

### Procedures and Materials

Given the sensitive nature of the mortality salience manipulation, the researchers took utmost concern in protecting the welfare of the participants by following all standard and typical ethical procedures throughout the completion of the project. The project and procedures were approved by our home university's institutional review board. This research also used Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Lyon's (1989) mortality salience manipulation, to make certain that the mortality salience manipulation had already been utilized in the field and had not negatively affected participants in previous research. During the consent process, participants were told generally what the study was about and were given information about whom to contact if they felt disturbed about the study. Participants were also reminded that they could quit the study at any time without penalty.

In sum, participants were given a packet containing a consent form as well as various surveys. Participants were informed via the consent form that the study assessed the relationship between Organizational Behavior and Terror Management Theory. Following completion of the consent form, the participants received a packet containing various surveys and were randomly assigned to either a mortality salience (MS) condition or dental pain (control) condition.

A 10-item self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was completed first (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ). Participants in the MS condition were then asked to write down what they believe would happen to their body when they *physically die*, and the emotions that the thought of *dying* aroused in them (Rosenblatt et al., 1989). Alternatively, participants in the dental pain (control) condition were asked to write down what they believe would happen to their body when they *visit the dentist*, and the emotions that the thought of *dental pain* aroused in them. The dental pain control condition is commonly used in TMT research (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, & Cook, 2003), and is designed to show that the effects of the mortality salience manipulation are due to thoughts about death alone, rather than thoughts about physical pain in general.

Participants then completed a demographic questionnaire, which served as a buffer task after initiating MS (Jonas et al., 2008). Following the completion of the demographic questionnaire, participants completed a modified, 6-item version of the organizational identity questionnaire (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), which assessed the degree to which an individual feels they are attached to their university (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ), and a 20-item modified version of the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (Weiss, Gibson, Dawis, & Lofquist, 1977), to measure how satisfied participants were with their university (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ). Additionally, participants completed a 9-item motivation scale (Tremblay, Blanchard, Taylor, Pelletier, & Villeneuve, 2009), to assess their motivation in an academic setting (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ), and a 17-item modified organizational commitment scale (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979) to assess how strongly the participants were committed to the university (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ). These four measures were presented in counterbalanced order.

After all scales were completed, participants were funnel debriefed (e.g., Cheng & Chartrand, 2003) in order to assess awareness of the hypotheses and to make sure that none of the participants were disturbed by the mortality salience manipulation. Participants' responses during the funnel debriefing did not indicate awareness of hypotheses nor disturbance with the mortality salience induction.

The measures used to assess organizational behaviors/outcomes were modified in the present study because participants were primarily college freshmen, and did not have enough organizational work experience from which to draw. Measurement modifications involved the changing of questions relating to job environment to instead

reflect the college institutional environment. For example, an item on the original organizational identity scale (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) reads, “When someone criticizes my company, it feels like a personal insult.” The question was modified to read “When someone criticizes my university, it feels like a personal insult.” Likewise, the original Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (Weiss et al., 1977) instructs participants to answer the following items in terms of “How satisfied am I with this aspect of my job?” The instructions were modified to read “How satisfied am I with this aspect of my university?”

## Results

Three 2 (Mortality Salience: MS vs. Control) X 2 (Organizational Identification: Low vs. High) ANOVAs were conducted on each of the dependent variables of organizational commitment, satisfaction, and motivation. The first analysis revealed a main effect of organizational identification on participants’ levels of commitment to their organization/university,  $F(1, 87) = 5.64, p = .02$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$  (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Participants with high organizational identification indicated significantly greater levels of commitment to their organization/university ( $M = 92.25, SD = 9.08$ ) than those with low organizational identification ( $M = 86.87, SD = 11.22$ ), regardless of mortality salience condition. So, the results did not show the expected interaction effect of mortality salience on commitment, as a function of organizational identity. Rather, the results indicated that organizational identity alone significantly affected commitment level.

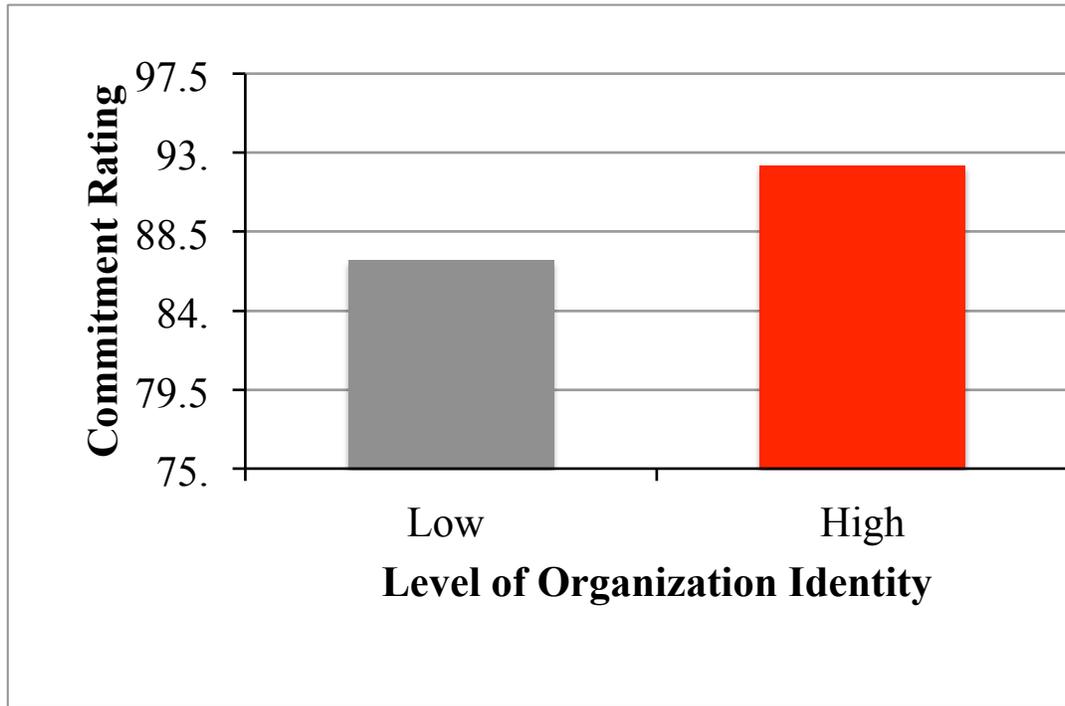
The next ANOVA revealed a main effect of organizational identification on participants’ levels of satisfaction with their organization/university,  $F(1, 87) = 6.70, p = .01$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ . This main effect was qualified by the predicted mortality salience X organizational identification interaction,  $F(1, 87) = 4.18, p = .04$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$  (see Table 2 and Figure 2). For participants in the mortality salience condition, those with high organizational identification indicated significantly greater levels of satisfaction with their organization/university ( $M = 81.39, SD = 7.68$ ) than those with low organizational identification ( $M = 72.86, SD = 8.99$ ),  $t(45) = -3.40, p = .001, d = -1.02$ . This significant difference did not exist in the control/dental pain condition.

The third ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of organizational identification on participants’ levels of motivation within their organization/university,  $F(1, 87) = 12.72, p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .13$ , and a marginal main effect of mortality salience on participants’ levels of motivation within their organization/university,  $F(1, 87) = 3.65, p = .06$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ . These effects were qualified by the predicted mortality salience X organizational identification interaction,  $F(1, 87) = 4.28, p = .04$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$  (see Table 3 and Figure 3). For participants in the mortality salience condition, those with high organizational identification indicated significantly greater levels of motivation within their organization/university ( $M = 51.23, SD = 7.83$ ) than those with low organizational identification ( $M = 41.31, SD = 9.97$ ),  $t(45) = -3.74, p = .001, d = -1.11$ . This significant difference did not exist in the control/dental pain condition.

Table 1  
Main Effect of Identification on Commitment Level

Identification Level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low	86.87	11.22
High	92.25	9.08

Figure 1  
Participant Commitment

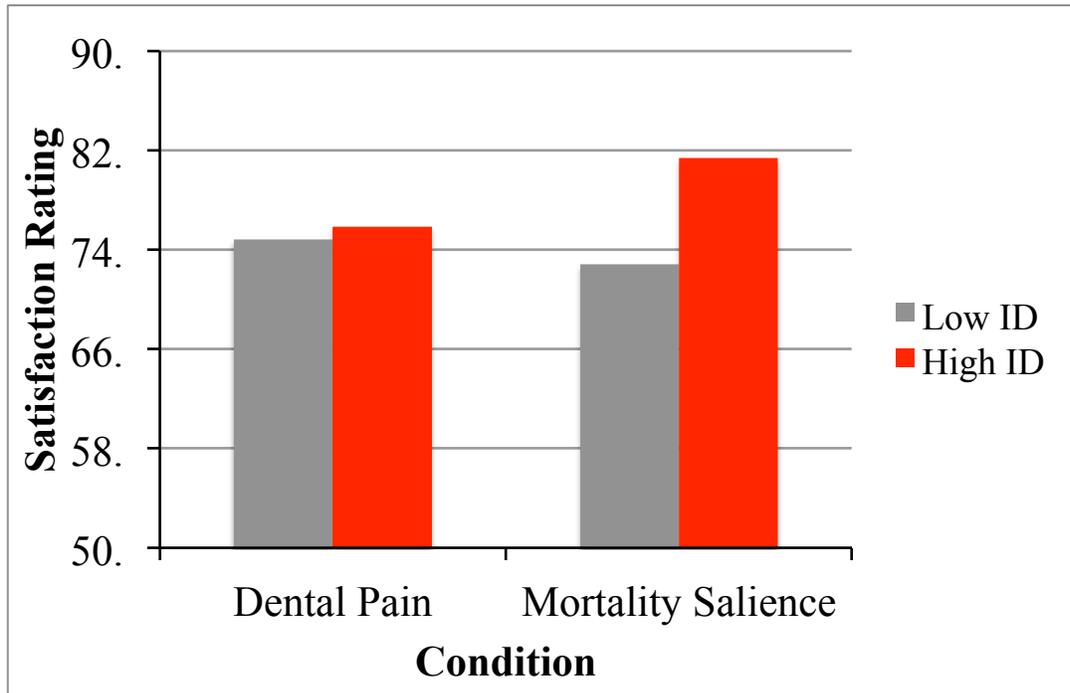


Note. Main effect of organizational identification on participants' levels of commitment to their organization/university.

Table 2  
Satisfaction Scores as a Function of Identification Level and Mortality Salience Condition

Identification Level	<u>Dental (Control)</u>	<u>Mortality Salience</u>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Low	74.86 (10.27)	72.86 (8.99)
High	75.86 (7.41)	81.39 (7.68)

Figure 2  
Participant Satisfaction

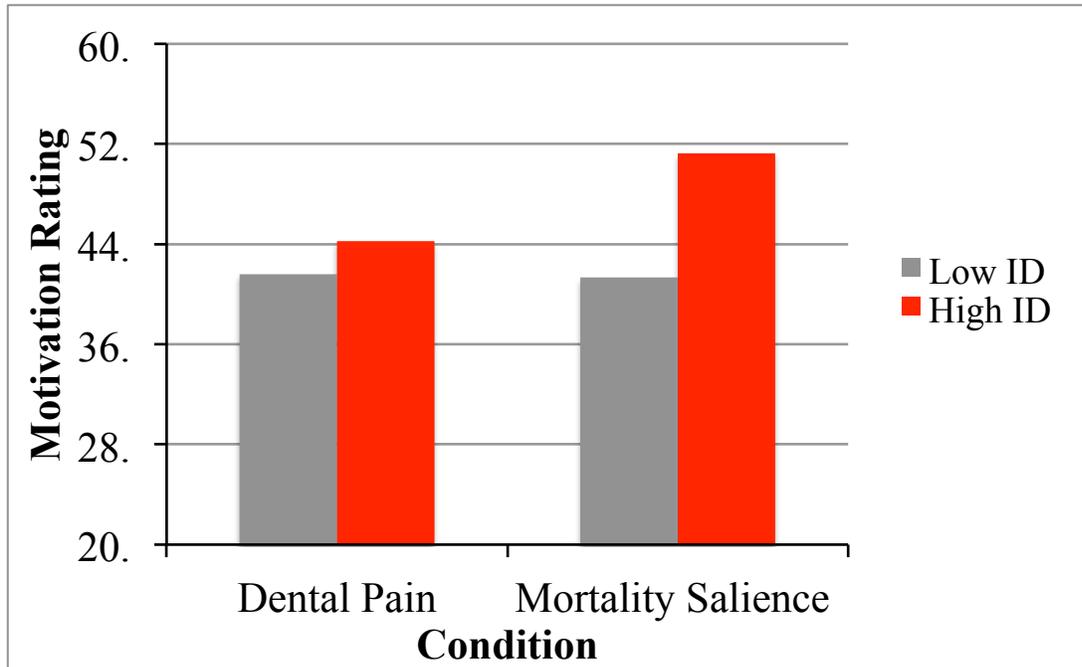


Note. Main effect of organizational identification on participants' levels of satisfaction with their organization/university.

Table 3  
Motivation Scores as a Function of Identification Level and Mortality Salience Condition

Identification Level	Dental (Control)	Mortality Salience
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Low	41.59 (9.31)	41.31 (9.97)
High	44.23 (5.57)	51.23 (7.83)

Figure 3  
*Participant Motivation*



*Note.* Significant main effect of organizational identification on participants' levels of motivation within their organization/university.

## Discussion

Overall, mortality salience facilitated the effects of organizational identification within this study. Mortality salience boosted participants' satisfaction and motivation levels with regard to their university, but only if the participants possessed a strong self-identification with their university. Our results indicated that mortality salience has the ability to increase people's satisfaction and motivation within their organization. Terror Management Theory posits that when individuals are reminded of their mortality, they will cling to their own cultural worldviews and beliefs. The results of the current research are consistent with this perspective. Strong organizational identification plays a crucial role in one's self-concept and cultural worldview, and is amplified under mortality salience conditions. When individuals are reminded of their mortality they become motivated to protect their cultural worldviews, to have their worldviews positively validated, and to reject those who hold opposing viewpoints (Florian & Mukilciner, 1994; McGregor et al., 1998). This study illustrates that reminding people of their mortality could trigger the strong identification that they already possess with their workplace or organization, which then heightens their satisfaction and motivation levels. That being said, these effects only existed when participants already strongly identified with their academic institution.

The authors believe that there were possible limitations to this study. The sample within this study consisted of students at a small liberal arts university, and could potentially be unrepresentative of employees within a workplace setting. Additionally, the sample contained a substantial number of students who were college freshmen. This poses a possible restriction, as many of the participants may not have yet had sufficient time to build an adequate connection to the university compared to upperclassmen. Another limitation was that the sample consisted of predominantly Caucasian participants, thereby restricting the diversity of the sample. Despite the limitations of the sample, the goal of the current study was to enhance theoretical understanding of Terror Management Theory. Given that goal, a lack of generalizability stemming from the limitations of our sample may not be a significant impairment (Mook, 1983).

Also, since participants were college students engaging in the study toward the end of the semester, it is difficult to know how motivated they were in completing the study. For instance, factors such as stress, change in environment, or burnout could have affected survey responses in imperceptible ways (Casa de Calvo & Reich,

2007). Given that the results did not demonstrate the hypothesized interaction between mortality salience and organizational identity on the measure of participant commitment, it would be prudent to conduct further research with a larger, more diverse sample in a professional work environment.

Organizational identity is a crucial part of one's self-concept and worldview. Our results indicate that organizational identification continues to affect participants' levels of satisfaction with their organization or university in response to existential concerns. Reminding employees of the inevitability of their mortality is unethical within the workplace; however, discovering the relationship between mortality salience and organizational identification possesses implications within the workplace. Employees are often implicitly reminded of their imminent death through various outlets. For example, some employees might have near death experiences or know of someone close who has died. An additional future research area might include the study of whether symbolic or social death (e.g., through the potential loss of one's job) has the same effects on satisfaction and/or motivation as mortality salience.

Through implicit reminders of death, employees who already have high organizational identity will more than likely have higher levels of satisfaction and motivation. These individuals will invest more into the organization, which in turn benefits all parties involved. The results of this study illustrate the importance of organizational identity, and the effects it has on employee motivation and satisfaction within the workplace. Ashforth and Mael (1989) discuss the significance of identifying with one's organization, as it encourages and satisfies individuals' engagement in activities consistent with the identity of the organization. These activities and components may include everyday job tasks and the organizational culture itself. Furthermore, identifying with one's organization allows employees as individuals to view themselves as a valued member of that group, which can become a reinforcing factor within a group setting (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

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