The Impact of Acculturation and Religiosity on Cultural Alignment: Terror Management Mechanisms among Muslim Americans

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Abstract: The current investigation examined terror management defenses employed by Muslim Americans and moderating effects of acculturation and religiosity. Associations between death salience and worldview defense were predicted to vary according to acculturation and religious commitment. Study 1 measured acculturation and reactions to traditional or modern Muslim targets. Study 2 assessed religiosity and acculturation effects on reactions to a worldview-threatening essay. Against expectations, heightened mortality salience did not result in the typical increase in worldview defense, nor was there a moderating effect of acculturation or religiosity. Furthermore, the relationship between mortality salience and worldview defense was not moderated by acculturation or religiosity. Thus, when confronted with existential threats, Muslim Americans may not separate their religious and secular worldviews to defend against mortality concerns. Although the pattern of results was unexpected, this study provides novel information suggesting that Muslim Americans may handle mortality salience in ways not yet revealed by previous TMT studies.

Keywords: Terror management theory, immigration, culture, acculturation, Muslims

Terror Management Theory (TMT) asserts that human awareness of death's inevitability is biologically rooted and universal (Greenberg et al., 1986). This awareness generates an overwhelming sense of terror (i.e., *death anxiety*), motivating individuals to seek meaning, belonging, and self-esteem (Solomon et al., 1991). TMT suggests that humans developed sophisticated psychological systems—most notably culture—to buffer against the existential fear

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of death. TMT posits that a strong attachment to cultural values explains defensive reactions toward differing worldviews when mortality is salient.

Despite extensive research, cross-cultural TMT studies remain limited. One critical question concerns how the immigrant experience—marked by dual cultural identities—affects terror management defenses. Immigrants balance heritage and host cultures, often coping with death anxiety by aligning with cultural worldviews that offer continuity and meaning. However, immigrants may face internal conflicts and prejudice from host communities, perceiving these new communities as threats. In response, immigrants may reinforce in-group identity or adopt bicultural frameworks, selectively integrating elements of both cultures in a way that aligns with their sense of self and provides a stable framework for managing existential fears.

Particularly relevant is the Muslim American immigrant community that navigates Muslim (religious) and American (secular Western) identities. Studying TMT within this group can illuminate their management of existential threats tied to mortality, discrimination, and minority status. Muslim Americans, frequently targets of post-9/11 prejudice, face social vulnerability. This may intensify adherence to Islamic practices as a way of maintaining self-esteem and identity (Liu et al., 2025), while balancing American and Muslim identities can increase acculturative stress. As a result, some Muslim Americans may turn to their faith and community as a defense against mortality reminders and social rejection, reinforcing their Muslim identity in the process. Through TMT, we may better understand how Muslim Americans respond to both internal and external existential threats, reinforcing their identity and beliefs as a means of psychological resilience.

Research on Muslims' fear of death reveals complex influences from cultural, religious, and individual factors (Brown & Strachan, 2022; Husain et al., 2024; Mohammadzadeh & Najafi, 2020). While Islamic teachings frame death as a transition to the afterlife, the degree of fear can vary widely among Muslims depending on the strength of their religious beliefs and cultural background. Some studies suggest that Muslims report higher death anxiety than other groups (Chan & Yap, 2009; Ellis et al., 2013), with women experiencing greater anxiety than men (e.g., Saleem & Saleem, 2020). Younger U.S.-raised Muslims may also experience cultural tensions, which can shape their attitudes toward death.

Well-established findings from TMT research suggest that existential terror is attenuated through alignment with cultural worldviews and in-group identification. Exploring death anxiety among Muslim Americans offers insight into how minority status and discrimination shape existential defenses. Given the centrality of religiosity and acculturation in the Muslim American immigrant experience (Berry, 2005; Ysseldyk et al., 2010), these variables may also drive variations in cultural worldview and defenses against death anxiety. This research can deepen our understanding of how Islamic beliefs, community support, and identity dynamics contribute to resilience and offer insights for culturally sensitive mental health care. Ultimately, this research not only benefits Muslim Americans, but also fosters greater empathy, inclusion, and understanding across cultural and religious lines.

Terror Management Theory: Overview

Terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1986) was developed to understand the influence of existential fears on diverse aspects of human behavior. The dual-process theory of proximal and distal defenses argues that during heightened death awareness, internal processes alleviate mortality concerns and shift conscious awareness of death to the unconscious Pyszczynski et al., 1999). TMT asserts that when death-associated cognitions are successfully pushed outside

of attention by proximal defenses, distal defenses are needed to defend against the unconscious, yet still highly accessible, thoughts of death (Steinman & Updegraff, 2015).

Research shows that subliminal death-related exposure heightens death-thought accessibility and subsequently triggers distal defenses (Arndt et al., 1997). When death is out of focal attention, threat triggers a broad network of thoughts related to mortality, such as decay and fear of the unknown (Neimeyer et al., 2004). Accordingly, there is a need for a broader distal defense mechanism—one that can offer a sense of existence after the unavoidable event of biological death (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Cultural worldviews provide a route to avoid the problem of death by promising a literal or symbolic continuation that transcends corporeal death.

Over 80% of TMT studies have tested different aspects of the theory via *mortality salience* (MS; Burke et al., 2010). The MS hypothesis claims that when distal defenses are unconsciously activated in response to death-related thoughts, the accessibility of such thoughts should result in a concomitant motivation to safeguard the psychological structures underlying these defenses— namely, an individual's cultural worldview and self-esteem (Greenberg et al., 1994). Indeed, a large body of literature finds that anxiety from death awareness is assuaged by bolstering one's cultural worldviews (e.g., Arndt et al., 1997) and endorsing the dominant views of one's culture (Pyszczynski et al., 1999).

Cultural Worldview

Through the lens of TMT, cultural worldviews are fabrications of reality that cloak the truth of the human condition and rewrite the fate of man (Greenberg et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 1991). Through shared values, religious practices, and social identities, cultures provide a framework that makes life meaningful and gives people a sense of belonging and purpose. Cultural worldviews help individuals feel connected to something enduring, while cultural standards of achievement provide a sense of self-esteem that reduces existential fears. Arguably, the most powerful feature of a cultural worldview is its ability to minimize concerns that physical death is humans' ultimate destiny. Indeed, virtually every cultural worldview offers some means of immortality, either literally (e.g., an afterlife) or symbolically (e.g., one's legacy).

Belief systems can be secular or religious in nature. Western culture embodies secular features that can transcend parochial cultural and ethnic identities to unite diverse individuals (Kurth, 2003). Religion provides a system of shared meaning and social practices (Cohen et al., 2006). Given the centrality of death transcendence beliefs in most religions, a chief function of religion may be to buffer death-related terror (Becker, 1973).

Religious Identity

Religious group identification can represent a significant component of one's identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010) and offer "eternal" group membership that transcends physical existence. While there is a large body of research on the relationship between religious beliefs and death anxiety, the TMT literature on religiosity is relatively scant.

Findings suggest that religious believers may confront death's inevitability with less anxiety, and in some cases, religious adherence may obviate the need to bolster distal defenses altogether. In an investigation that compared religious and non-religious individuals, MS failed to result in the conventional cultural worldview defense among religious individuals (Norenzayan et al., 2009). Another investigation revealed that compelling evidence of an afterlife eliminated the effect of MS on self-esteem striving (Dechesne et al., 2003).

Religion has been characterized as a socially acceptable way for immigrants to express and reformulate their ethnic culture and identities. There is evidence that religious identification and commitment are strengthened when immigrants move to their new country (Ghaffari & Çiftçi, 2010). Religious identity may thus be of paramount importance in one's hierarchy of identities after migration.

Immigration

Immigration prompts individuals to revise their value systems and shift to new cultural conventions (Coutin, 2003; Deaux, 2000). Thus, the identity of individuals who immigrate often changes after exposure to a new cultural worldview. In the context of rapid U.S. globalization patterns, it is useful to investigate how the reorganization of identity affects TMT processes among immigrants who relocate to American society (Waters & Gerstein Pineau, 2016). A very limited body of research on immigrant experiences in relation to TMT exists, but it focuses exclusively on attitudes and reactions *toward* immigrants as out-group members of society (e.g., Castano & Dechesne, 2005). However, the ways in which immigrants negotiate *their own* cultural worldviews and identity to procure terror management benefits remain unknown.

Acculturation

Acculturation refers to the process of adapting to and adopting aspects of a new or dominant culture. Identities of immigrants are partially shaped by homeland language, dress, religion, and group alignments (Warner, 2000). Reconstructed identities in the U.S. vary according to multiple factors, including generational status, length of residence, strength of ethnic and/or religious identity, and comfort with English. Acculturation often involves a two-way exchange, where both the original and new cultures influence each other, though the immigrant group typically experiences more pressure to adapt to the dominant culture's norms, values, language, and behaviors (Berry & Sam, 1997). It is through acculturation that immigrants negotiate social and cultural norms between cultures, typically the home and host cultures.

Muslim Americans

The Islamic Faith and Culture

Islam is the world's second largest religious group; as of 2015, there were 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide (Lipka & Hackett, 2017). Broad-stroke approaches conceptualize a singular culture, and diversity within Islamic culture is often overlooked. Differences between Western and Muslim societies exist, including stances on gender equality, homosexuality, abortion, and divorce (Norris & Inglehart, 2002). On a fundamental level, Muslims share a culture based on Islamic faith and tend to promote conservative faith-based values, a hierarchical family structure, and a collectivistic approach to relationships (Smith, 2010).

Muslim American Identity

Despite variations in religious commitment, race, ethnicity, and country of origin, a coherent but fragile collective cultural identity of Muslim Americans exists in the U.S. Around 10% of immigrants are Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2013) and a recent U.S. religion census estimates that about 1.34% (i.e., approximately 4.4 million) of the U.S. population identifies as Muslim (U.S. Religion Census, 2020).

When assessing Muslim Americans' religiosity, surveys reveal that 79% endorse religion as important and 42% report weekly religious service attendance (Younis, 2015). Nearly 50% of devout American Muslims consider themselves to be "Muslim first," while around 30% identify as "American first" (Pew Research Center, 2011). However, among Muslim Americans whose religious commitment is low, this pattern is reversed (Gallup, 2011).

Discrimination-Related Stress and Coping

Muslims are often associated with violence, fanaticism, and terrorism (Ciftci, 2012). Hostile attitudes toward Muslims existed well before the September 11, 2001, attacks and have since increased. Anti-Muslim rhetoric such as "the Muslim Ban" pervaded public discourse under the first Trump administration (Khan et al., 2019).

Perceptions of a hostile, dominant society undoubtedly influence Muslim Americans. Research shows that among Muslims in the West, the effects of stigma can have pernicious psychological consequences, including depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Asvat & Malcarne, 2008; Ghaffari & Çiftçi, 2010; Kunst et al., 2012). Anti-Muslim policies also have health implications; U.S.-born infants with mothers from travel ban countries were 6.8% more likely to be preterm in 2017 and 2018 (Samari et al., 2020). *Discrimination-related stress* is a particularly salient problem for Muslim Americans given the steady rise in anti-Muslim sentiment of Islamophobia (Rippy & Newman, 2006). As such, Muslim immigrants may cope by increasing their religious identification (Abu-Rayya & Abu-Rayya, 2009). Conversely, others may respond to discrimination-related stress by attempting to differentiate from their stigmatized group (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Within the context of an essentializing discourse, one dilemma for Muslim immigrants in the U.S. is how to establish a worldview defense system that effectively buffers against death anxiety and enhances self-esteem.

Current Study

For Muslim Americans who have prolonged contact with two different cultures, cultural alignment may affect TMT processes. Guided by well-established TMT findings, we expected that existential fear would be assuaged by aligning with dominant cultural views and identifying with in-group members. We thus predicted that highly acculturated Muslim Americans would identify more with Western culture in comparison to their less acculturated counterparts, who were expected to align with their heritage culture. The first study focused specifically on the impact of acculturation on cultural allegiance following increased death awareness. Study 2 assessed additional effects of self-esteem, religiosity, and discrimination-related stress on terror management strategies.

Study 1

Methods

Participants

      Participants were recruited from introductory psychology courses and via flyers posted on the campus of a large Northeastern university. Eighty-eight individuals born outside of the U.S. and who identified as Muslim (93.2% of the sample) and/or individuals whose parents identified as Muslim participated. Most were South Asian (69.2%) and Middle Eastern (11.4%). Mean age was 21 ($SD = 3.74$) and 73.9% were female. Participants received either course credit or $12 USD.

Measures

      Acculturation. Two measures assessed preference for and immersion in the U.S. and heritage cultures. The 8-item Acculturation, Habits, and Interests Multicultural Scale for Adolescents (AHIMSA; Unger et al., 2002) measures a range of behavioral (e.g., The food I eat at home is from…), cognitive (e.g., The way I do things and the way I think about things are from…), and affective (e.g., The people I fit in with best are from…) indices of acculturation. The response options for all items were: (a) the U.S., (b) the country my family is from, (c) both, and (d) neither. The sub-scores ranged from 0 to 8, with higher scores indicating greater social and cultural preference for the (a) U.S. or (b) heritage culture.

      The 32-item Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS; Stephenson, 2000) assesses immersion in the U.S. and heritage societies and yields scores on two scales: Ethnic Society Immersion (ESI) and Dominant Society Immersion (DSI). Items were rated from 1 (*false*) to 4 (*true*). An item from the ESI subscale is, "I eat traditional foods from my native culture," and a DSI subscale item is "I feel at home in the United States."

      Personality Alignment Measure. A 40-item inventory was designed by the researchers to capture participants' ratings of their own and the targets' personalities. The measure was adapted from Andersen and Baum (1994) and contained moderately positive trait adjectives (e.g., daring, sentimental, curious). Participants rated the descriptiveness of each trait from 1 (*not at all*) to 50 (*very much*).

      Liking Measure. A measure was created by the researchers to assess the degree to which participants liked the targets. The measure included ten statements, such as "I would enjoy spending time with this person," which were rated from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*).

      Mortality Salience Induction. We used the Mortality Attitudes Personality Survey (Rosenblatt et al., 1989) to induce MS. Participants in the experimental MS condition were asked to: "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you" and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you physically as you die and once you are physically dead." Those in the control condition were asked to: "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of having a cavity filled at the dentist office arouses in you" and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you physically as you have a cavity filled and what happens once your cavity has been filled."

Procedures

After consenting, participants were told that the aim of the study was to determine how people perceive others. All participants first completed demographic questions followed by the AHIMSA, SMAS, and Personality Alignment measure regarding their own personality. Next, they completed a reaction time task of "verbal ability and motor skills"—this served as a distraction from the study's true goals. Participants were then given five minutes to respond in writing to an open-ended question (the experimental MS induction or control). Because evidence suggests that defensive responses to death reminders occur primarily after one suppresses death's salience (e.g., Arndt et al., 1997), our delay period after the writing task was another neutral reaction time task.

Next, in a random order, participants saw photographs of two targets that matched their own sex: one of a traditional-looking Muslim (i.e., traditional target) and the other of a Westernized-looking Muslim (i.e., modern target). The traditional female target wore a hijab (i.e., headscarf), and the traditional male target wore a taqiyah (i.e., short, rounded skullcap). The modern female target was unveiled and wore t-shirt with a logo that read *100% Halal*; the modern male target did not wear anything on his head.

Following target exposure, participants provided their impressions of the targets by completing the liking measure and the personality alignment measure regarding the traits they believed the targets possessed. With a cover story that the experimenters ran out of paper copies, participants re-used the same paper personality measure that they previously used to rate their *own* personalities. This procedure helped gauge distancing versus perceived commonalities with each target. Mean absolute difference scores between self and target ratings served as the dependent variable of participants' perceived alignment between themselves and each target. Following study completion, participants were thoroughly debriefed.

Results

Descriptive statistics for all key variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Study 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	*M (SD)*	Cronbach's Alpha
SMAS - DSI	3.51 (0.46)	.85
SMAS - ESI	3.04 (0.51)	.83
AHIMSA - US	1.94 (1.69)	.69
AHIMSA - Other	1.69 (1.54)	.54
Personality Difference – Modern Target	12.01 (4.88)	
Personality Difference – Traditional Target	11.32 (4.19)	
Liking – Modern Target	4.86 (1.10)	.87
Liking – Traditional Target	5.11 (1.04)	.86

Descriptive and Bivariate Data

First, correlations were examined (Table 2). Those who endorsed a social and cultural preference for the U.S. reported less personality alignment between themselves and both targets (modern $r = .29$; traditional $r = .34$; both $ps < .01$), and those who preferred their heritage culture tended to like the modern target less ($r = -.26$, $p < .05$). Individuals who reported lower personality alignment between themselves and the modern target did so for the traditional target as well ($r = .68$, $p < .01$). Finally, participants that reported liking the modern target also reported liking the traditional target ($r = .50$, $p < .01$).

Table 2
Study 1: Correlations between Primary Variables of Interest

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. SMAS-DSI	--	-.210*	.418**	-.500**	.011	.027	.131	.027
2. SMAS-ESI	--	--	-.477**	.203	-.172	-.185	.082	-.029
3. AHIMSA-U.S.	--	--	--	-.461**	.293**	.340**	-0.24	.016
4. AHIMSA-Other	--	--	--	--	-.011	-.108	-.261*	-.102
5. Personality Difference - Modern target	--	--	--	--	--	.684**	-.194	.033
6. Personality Difference - Traditional target	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.075	-.122
7. Liking- Modern target	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.497**
8. Liking- Traditional target	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

Effects of Group Condition

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were main effects of group condition (MS vs. control) on alignment with and liking of each target. There were no effects of MS on any of the dependent variables.

Personality Alignment with Targets

A multiple regression was run to predict perceived personality alignment between oneself and the modern target based on condition, preference for U.S./ heritage culture, dominant/ethnic society immersion, and interactions between condition and the acculturation variables. The model predicted personality distance between participants and the modern target, $F(5, 82) = 2.57$, $p < .05$, adj. $R^2 = .08$. However, only preference for the U.S. added significantly to the prediction, $\beta = .37$,

$p < .01$. Thus, preference for the U.S. partially accounted for detachment from the modern target (i.e., greater reported personality differences between oneself and the modern target).

Another multiple regression similarly assessed perceived personality alignment between oneself and the traditional target. The model predicted personality differences between the participant and the traditional target, $F(5, 82) = 2.36$, $p < .05$, adj. $R^2 = .07$. Again, only preference for the U.S. added to the prediction, $\beta = .39$, $p < .01$. As such, preference for the U.S. partially accounted for detachment from the traditional target.

Liking toward the Targets

Multiple regressions examined liking of the targets as a function of condition, preference for the U.S., preference for the heritage culture, dominant society immersion, and ethnic society immersion. The models did not predict liking of the modern or traditional target.

Discussion

The results of the first study indicated that, contrary to predictions, MS did not increase the accessibility of worldview-relevant constructs for our sample of Muslim Americans. Given the robust effects of MS reported across hundreds of studies (Burke et al., 2010), the lack of MS effects in our study was unexpected. Results also revealed that only a high preference for the U.S. predicted perceived personality differences between oneself and each of the two targets (i.e., modern and traditional). In contrast to our prediction that highly acculturated individuals would identify more with the modern target following MS, we found that irrespective of condition, Muslim Americans who reported higher levels of U.S. acculturation distanced themselves from *both* targets. This de-identification with both targets could reflect the individualistic culture of the United States. Additionally, the distance from the traditional targets in Study 1 could reflect a deidentification with Islam. To further examine the process, we included measures of immigration status, discrimination-related stress, and level of commitment to and practice of the Islamic faith in Study 2.

Study 2

The second study addressed how Muslim Americans of varying levels of religious commitment and acculturation to Western society alleviate death-related cognitions. This study was the first of its kind to explore the impact of both religiosity and acculturation on worldview defense systems following mortality salience among Muslim American women. Prior research shows that the reconciliation of religious and national identities is handled differently in women and men (Jamal, 2017). There is evidence to suggest that, compared to their male counterparts, women possess more fluid or integrated Muslim and American identities. Although their experience and identity cannot be reduced to singular narratives and descriptions, there is nevertheless a unique intersectionality of gender and race/ethnicity of Muslim American women.

Our worldview defense measure centered on the issue of hijab practice. There is a pervasive stereotype of Muslim American women as powerless or oppressed (Nacos et al., 2007). The practice of veiling—or donning a hijab/headscarf—is often a centerpiece in the conversation on their oppression (Ahmad, 2009). Although the experiences, reasons for, and practices of veiling are different for *muhajabbas* (i.e., women who wear the hijab), studies investigating hijab practice highlight incongruities between muhajabbas and how dominant groups define them (Eaton, 2015).

Thus, although it may be difficult for Westerners to reconcile hijab practice with gender equality and empowerment, the assumption that veiling is inherently anti-feminist is precarious.

In Study 2, additional key variables were assessed, including self-esteem, death-thought accessibility, and discrimination-related stress. Efforts were also made to target a diverse sample with regard to level of religiosity and immigration status. Moreover, given evidence that experiments with multiple delays between the MS induction and the worldview defense measure yield larger effects following MS than experiments with a single delay (Burke et al., 2010), this study included three filler tasks during the delay period.

Additionally, the worldview defense measure pitted Islamic faith against American values to directly examine reactions towards both religious (i.e., Islamic) and secular (i.e., American) messages. Specifically, we examined defensive attitudes toward worldview-supporting and worldview-threatening messages. We hypothesized that MS would lead to a positive evaluation of a worldview-supporting essay and a negative reaction toward a worldview-threatening essay. We also assessed the impact of acculturation and predicted that those who were more acculturated to U.S. society would judge the pro-American, anti-Islamic essay more favorably than the pro-Islamic, anti-American essay compared to less acculturated individuals, following MS. Finally, we examined the impact of religiosity and hypothesized that more religious participants would evaluate the pro-Islamic, anti-American essay more positively than the pro-American, anti-Islamic essay compared to less religious participants, following MS.

Methods

Participants

Fifty-seven female participants from a large Northeastern University who identified as Muslim were recruited from introductory psychology courses and via flyers. Four individuals were omitted from analyses due to missing data and/or non-compliance with study procedures, yielding a final sample size of 53 participants. Participants received either research credit or were compensated $10 USD. Data were collected from 2017-2019. All procedures were administered by one of two Muslim American female experimenters.

Participant ages ranged from 18 to 52, with a mean of 23 years ($\pm$ 5.54). There was a nearly even distribution of U.S.- and foreign-born participants in the sample (U.S.-born = 52.8%). Of foreign-born participants, the age upon immigration to the U.S. ranged from 1 to 42 years, with a mean age of 11 ($\pm$ 1.17). Nearly half of the sample reported English as a first/native language (43.4%), followed by Bengali (32.1%), Urdu (11.3%), Arabic (9.4%), and Uzbek (3.8%). The majority of the sample reported being an American citizen (81.1%), 13.2% were permanent residents, and 5.7% were temporary residents. 52.8% were first-generation (i.e., born outside of the U.S. and neither parent was a U.S. citizen), and 47.2% identified as second-generation (i.e., born in the U.S. and at least one parent was first-generation). Individuals of South Asian ancestry represented the largest group in the sample (71.7%) followed by Middle Eastern (11.3%). Most participants identified as Sunni (79.2%), followed by Shi'a (11.3%) and "other" (9.4%). 37.7% currently had hijab/headscarf practices.

Measures

Affect. Participants' mood was measured using the 20-item *Positive and Negative Affect Scales: State Version* (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). This measure was included to assess the effects of MS on affect and to provide a delay between the MS induction and measure of worldview defense (Burke et al., 2010; Greenberg et al., 1994). The PANAS is comprised of 10 positive items and 10 negative items that describe various feelings and emotions (e.g., excited; irritable). Participants indicated the extent to which they currently felt each emotion using a 5-point scale (1= *very slightly or not at all*, 5 = *extremely*).

Death-Thought Accessibility. Death-thought accessibility (DTA)[4] was measured via a word fragment completion task in which participants were presented with word fragments (e.g., COFF_ _) and asked to complete each fragment with the first word that came to mind. Six of the 20 words could be completed with either a death-related word (e.g., coffin) or a neutral word (e.g., coffee). The other fragments served as filler items. The more fragments completed with death-related words, the more death is inferred to be cognitively accessible.

Worldview Defense Measure. Participants were shown a widely circulated and publicly available image by artist Shepard Fairey that depicts a Muslim woman wearing an American Flag hijab (see Appendix A). This particular image was chosen largely because the hijab often raises questions about nationality (Eaton, 2015), and the famous image has stirred controversy amongst Muslim American women (Jamal, 2017). Participants were then given two essays that were ostensibly written by Muslim American women in reaction to the image (Appendix B). One essay was a pro-Islamic, anti-American response to the image. The other pro-American, anti-Islamic essay challenges the conflation of the hijab and American flag. Each essay was equal in length, and the presentation of the essays was counterbalanced. Participants evaluated each essay with regard to these questions: (a) How much do you like the author?, (b) How intelligent do you think the author is?, (c) How knowledgeable do you think the author is?, (d) How much do you agree with the author's reaction to the image?, and (e) How true is what the author said? Each question was answered on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very much*). The dependent measure of worldview defense was a composite of the difference of the mean evaluations of the pro-Islamic, anti-American minus pro-American, anti-Islamic essays. Higher scores indicated preference for the pro-Islamic, anti-American essay whereas lower scores reflected favorability toward the pro-American, anti-Islamic essay.

Self-Esteem. The *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item measure of positive self-regard. Items were rated on a 4-point scale, with higher scores reflecting higher self-esteem.

Acculturation. The *Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale* (SMAS; Stephenson, 2000) measured acculturation. Only the Dominant Society Immersion (DSI) scale was used in the analyses.

Muslim/American Collective Identity. Perceptions of Muslim and American group membership were independently assessed using two "race-specific" versions of the *Collective Self-Esteem* measure (CSE; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Four components of identity rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) were assessed (4 items each), including: 1) group membership - judgment of self-worth as a member of one's cultural group, 2) private regard - personal evaluation of one's cultural group, 3) public regard - the perception of public judgment of one's cultural group and 4) identity importance - how one's social group membership influences one's own self-concept.

Religious Affiliation. A 4-item questionnaire created by the researchers was used to assess

participants' Muslim identification including whether they converted to Islam, the branch of Islam to which they belonged, and participation/frequency of religious dress.

Notably, only one person reported converting to Islam (1.9%). Most belonged to the Sunni sect (79.2%). In terms of dress, 62.3% did not wear a hijab/headscarf. Of those that covered their hair ($n = 20$), 75% reported daily hijab practice, and 25% reported occasional practice.

Religiosity. The 14-item *Muslim Attitude Towards Religion Scale* (MARS; Wilde & Joseph, 1997) measures personal commitment to Islam. Responses to the MARS ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a more positive religious attitude. The MARS assesses multiple dimensions of Islamic adherence, including personal help ("Islam helps me lead a better life"), Muslim worldview ("I think the Qur'an is relevant and applicable to modern day"), and Muslim practices ("I pray five times a day").

Discrimination-Related Stress. The 13-item *Societal, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental-Revised-Short Form* (SAFE-Short; Mena et al., 1987) evaluates Muslim American experiences and the stress associated with discrimination from the dominant society (e.g., "I am upset that most people consider the Muslim-American community to be more dangerous than other groups"). Responses were rated from 1 (*have not experienced)* to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Procedures

After consent, participants were randomly assigned to the MS ($n = 26$) or control ($n = 27$) condition. All participants completed questionnaires on Survey Monkey ostensibly for the purpose of investigating identity formation. Embedded within the questionnaires was the MS induction, in which participants wrote about their own death. Those in the control condition wrote about undergoing a dental procedure. Three filler tasks (an attention task, a working memory task, and a neutral word fragment completion task) were administered directly after the MS and control condition primes. After the delay, a measure of death-thought accessibility was administered to assess death-related cognitions outside of conscious awareness. The worldview defense measure was then administered to tap distal death defenses. Finally, measures examining mood, self-esteem, Muslim/American collective identity, religious affiliation, religiosity, acculturation, and discrimination-related stress were completed. Participants were thoroughly debriefed after the completion of the study and probed for suspicion. None of them expressed suspicion regarding the tasks or the authenticity of the essays.

Results

Table 3 reports the means, standard deviations, alphas, and ranges for the primary variables of interest. Correlations between key variables are in Table 4.

Table 3

Study 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	*M* (*SD*)	Range	Cronbach's Alpha
Religiosity (MARS)	56.81 (10.22)	14 – 70	.94
U.S. Acculturation (DSI)	45.87 (5.62)	14 – 56	.74
Discrimination Stress (SAFE)	52.25 (12.58)	13 – 91	.81
CSE American Membership Esteem	5.18 (.89)	1 – 7	
CSE American Private Regard	4.95 (1.05)	1 – 7	
CSE American Public Regard	4.50 (0.96)	1 – 7	
CSE American Identity	4.27 (1.24)	1 – 7	
CSE Muslim Membership Esteem	4.91 (1.27)	1 – 7	
CSE Muslim Private Regard	5.99 (1.01)	1 – 7	
CSE Muslim Public Regard	4.16 (0.96)	1 – 7	
CSE Muslim Identity	5.68 (1.24)	1 – 7	
Self-Esteem	27.87 (6.48)	10 – 40	.91
PANAS – Positive Affect	24.23 (5.70)	10 - 50	.81
PANAS – Negative Affect	14.89 (5.05)	10 - 50	.83
Worldview Defense (Pro-Islamic/Anti-American)	6.65 (2.27)	1 – 10	.97
Worldview Defense (Pro-American/Anti-Islamic)	4.15 (2.33)	1 – 10	.93

Table 4

Study 2: Correlations for Primary Variables of Interest

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Islamic Sect	-	-	-	.	-	.3	.3	.2	.1	-	-.04	.11	-	.1	.0
Hijab Practice	-	--	.5	-	.0	.0	-	-	-	.49	.42	.09	.38	.1	.3
Religiosity	-	--	--	-	.2	.0	.0	.0	.1	.69	.81	.25	.63	.2	.3
U.S. Acculturation	-	--	--	--	-	.2	.17	.17	.09	-.31	-.36	-.29	-.27	-.0	-.2
Discr.-Related Stress	-	--	--	--	--	-.18	-.31	-.38*	.02	-.13	.12	-.22	.09	-.25	.03
American Memb. Esteem	-	--	--	--	--	--	.44**	.48**	.08	.36*	.23	.24	-.09	.35**	.14
American Priv. Regard	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	.49**	.32*	.17	.10	.20	.04	.20	-.09
American Pub. Regard	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.08	.32*	.06	.14	-.07	.50**	.09
American Identity	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.18	.01	.16	.27*	-.04	.04
Muslim Memb. Esteem	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.69**	.31*	.57**	.47**	.38**
Muslim Priv. Regard	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.31*	.60**	.31*	.38**
Muslim Pub. Regard	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.06	.27	.01
Muslim Identity	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-.02	.22
Self-Esteem	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	.14
Composite Essay Score	-	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Note. $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$

Mortality Salience as a Predictor

To test if MS led to a more positive evaluation of a worldview-supporting essay and a negative reaction toward a worldview-threatening essay, hierarchical linear regression was used. The model included the composite essay score as the outcome and experimental condition as the predictor while controlling for hijab practice and Muslim membership esteem. The proportion of variance explained by the initial model ($R^2 = .185$, adjusted $R^2 = .152$) was not meaningfully different following the addition of condition (R^2 change $= .002$; $R^2 = .187$, adjusted $R^2 = .137$). In other words, MS was not a predictor of composite essay scores (i.e., worldview defense).

Moderating Effect of Acculturation

The second hypothesis predicted that compared to those less acculturated, more acculturated participants would react with greater defense of the pro-American, anti-Islamic essay over the pro-Islamic, anti-American essay, as a function of experimental condition. Contrary to

predictions, U.S. acculturation did not moderate the association between MS and worldview defense ($R^2 = .20$, $F = 2.35$, *ns*).

Moderating Effect of Religiosity

The third hypothesis predicted that religiosity would moderate the link between MS and worldview defense, such that compared to less religious participants, more religious participants would evaluate the pro-Islamic, anti-American essay more favorably than the pro-American, anti-Islamic essay, as a function of condition. A hierarchical linear regression was conducted with religiosity as a moderator in the interaction term. Findings revealed that the relationship between MS and worldview defense did not change based on participants' religiosity levels ($R^2 = .20$, $F = 2.33$, *ns*).

Exploratory Analyses

Worldview Defense Measure – Pro-Islamic, Anti-American Essay

To examine the effects of condition on the evaluation of the pro-Islamic, anti-American essay, an independent samples t-test compared ratings between the MS and control groups. Means on the pro-Islamic, anti-American essay did not differ between the MS (7.11 ± 1.80) and control groups (6.21 ± 2.59), .90, 95% CI [-.33, 2.13]. The MS induction also did not affect the overall evaluation of the pro-Islamic, anti-American essay, $t(46.468) = 1.472$, $p = .148$, $d = .40$.

Worldview Defense– Pro-American, Anti-Islamic Essay

To examine the effects of the MS manipulation on the favorability of the pro-American, anti-Islamic essay between conditions, an independent samples t-test comparing participants' evaluations was performed. Means on the pro-American, anti-Islamic worldview defense measure were marginally different between the MS (4.72 ± 2.23) and control groups (3.72 ± 2.34), 1.10, 95% CI [-.16, 2.36]. Thus, there was a small effect of the MS manipulation on the overall evaluation of the pro-American, anti-Islamic essay, $t(51) = 1.75$, $p = .086$, $d = .43$.

General Discussion

According to TMT, worldviews protect people by making enduring values that outlast them salient. However, worldviews are influenced by multiple streams, and migration affects many aspects of the self, demanding the reconstruction of personal worldviews. Fast-paced globalization patterns in the U.S. have resulted in demographic transformations as immigrant populations grow. Despite this, remarkably little TMT work has been conducted with immigrant samples. Moreover, although the U.S. population is comprised of approximately 3.45 million Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2017), psychological research with Muslim American samples is startlingly low (Amer & Bagasra, 2013). The current work suggests that, contrary to typical TMT findings, Muslim Americans may not rely heavily on conventional worldview defenses to mitigate the discomfort of mortality salience.

Our findings offer new insights into the psychological and terror management processes of this understudied and difficult-to-recruit population. The current findings also call into question the universality of cultural worldview defense in response to death anxiety. Other studies

investigating terror management have reported similar null results (Lambert et al., 2014; Yen & Cheng, 2010), suggesting that cultural worldview defenses may not be generalized to people of all cultures and immigration statuses, particularly in non-Western populations. Together, it is clear that terror management theory needs further clarification from cross-cultural and immigration perspectives.

Roles of Acculturation and Religiosity

Given that we aimed to identify how acculturation impacts self-protective beliefs and terror management defenses and that the acculturation process—particularly for Muslims who immigrate to the U.S.—is often shaped by religion, we expected that religiosity would act as a moderator. For instance, past research has found that intrinsic religiosity can effectively buffer death anxiety and eliminate MS effects (Jonas & Fischer, 2006). However, there was no moderation of religiosity in Study 2—this suggests that Muslim women may not rely on the cultural worldview defense, even when they identify strongly with their religion.

In a related vein, evidence shows that acculturative stress influences Muslim Americans' identification with the U.S. (Ahmed et al., 2011). More specifically, discrimination-related stress (e.g., Islamophobia) relates to lower acculturation to Western society (Ciftci, 2012). In terms of TMT, threats to one's prevailing worldview could result in either increased derogation of threatening out-group members (i.e., Americans) or disengagement from identity-threatening domains such as their own stigmatized group. Given the finding that people in our sample who endorsed a preference for the U.S. detached from *both* targets in Study 1, the modern targets may not have been viewed as members of American mainstream society.

To further investigate the multiplicity of worldview defense strategies, the second study aimed to examine death anxiety defenses employed by Muslim American women when presented with both the opportunity to defend religious practices or secular cultural worldview. Unexpectedly, a standard mortality salience prime did not lead to worldview defense. We also found no interaction between MS and U.S. acculturation levels, insofar as more highly acculturated participants did not favor the pro-American essay over the pro-Islamic essay when primed with death. Finally, religiosity did not moderate the relationship between MS and worldview defense, such that more religious people did not prefer a pro-Islamic essay to a pro-American essay in response to MS. In order to interpret our unanticipated results, a number of methodological, empirical, and theoretical factors should be taken into consideration.

Potential Explanations for the Failure of the Mortality Salience Hypothesis

Overall, our results did not support TMT predictions as those in the MS condition did not respond with a conventional worldview defense, and neither acculturation nor religiosity moderated MS effects. These findings are in stark contrast to MS effects found in prior investigations (Burke et al., 2010), and contrary to cross-cultural generality in previous research (e.g., Vail et al., 2012). However, past findings should be interpreted with caution given regional differences (i.e., some past work was conducted outside of the U.S.), methodological disparities (e.g., inexplicit MS manipulations; Das et al., 2009)and the limited number of investigations on this topic.

Studies with non-significant or null MS effects are useful in illuminating key factors that diminish MS effects. First, there is evidence that self-esteem suppresses death thoughts (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997), thereby eliminating the need for distal defense systems. Although it is possible

that high dispositional self-esteem diminished the threat of death in Study 2, it is unlikely as self-esteem scores in our sample were moderate, and differences in self-esteem between conditions were negligible.

Opportunities to affirm a valued aspect of one's cultural worldview (e.g., religious beliefs) prior to a MS induction can eliminate the effect of MS on death-thought accessibility and need for worldview defense, independent of self-esteem (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005). The administration of personality, culture, and relationship questionnaires before the death prime in Study 1 may have provided a distal defense opportunity that accounted for the lack of MS effects. However, the presentation and order of measures in Study 2 were carefully considered to avoid inadvertently solidifying faith in one's worldview prior to the MS induction. For example, measures assessing acculturation, religiosity, and discrimination-related stress were administered only after the measure of worldview defense was completed. As such, it is unlikely that worldview affirmation could explain the elimination of MS effects in the current study.

We included a death thought accessibility measure in the second study to explore not only the impact of death priming but also to better understand the psychological processes involved in going from conscious thoughts of death to worldview defenses. Prior TMT research reliably shows an increase in death-related thoughts following mortality salience, which is an important condition for the occurrence of cultural worldview defense (Arndt et al., 1997). Although our participants in the MS condition had higher DTA for *one* of the six target items, there was no effect of MS on the overall DTA measure. In sum, it seems unlikely that high trait self-esteem, experimentally enhanced self-esteem, worldview affirmation, or insufficient delay accounts for the suppression of death-related constructs.

Terror Management and Islam

There is some evidence within the TMT literature suggesting that confidence in religious beliefs mitigates the fear of death (Norenzayan et al., 2009). Investigations conducted specifically with Muslim samples, though sparse, show that religiosity may be associated with reduced death anxiety (Saleem & Saleem, 2020), though findings are mixed (Ellis et al., 2013). While there are considerable variations in Muslims' beliefs about death, some of which derive from sectarian differences and differences in national, ethnic, and folk cultures, commonly held Islamic views on mortality and afterlife merit reflection (Yasien-Esmael & Rubin, 2005).

First and foremost, death is viewed as Allah's will, and acceptance of Allah's will is integral to faith in Islam. Upon death, the soul departs the physical body and returns to Allah. Death is not to be resisted; rather, it is part of the divine plan. Secondly, death is not considered the end; it is simply the transition into a new phase of being. The emphasis placed on one's mortal life is to live in accordance with Islamic faith. Moreover, frequent reflection upon death in daily life is encouraged. Given the conviction that death is Allah's will, and the belief in continuity between mortal life and the afterlife, it is possible that highly religious Muslims generally exhibit little death anxiety. Our participants reported high levels of religiosity, with over 92% scoring above the midpoint on the MARS religiosity scale.

We also explored written reactions to assess whether death had been properly primed. As expected, everyone in the MS condition wrote about their own death, whereas those in the control condition made references to fear and discomfort but never death. This suggests that our unexpected findings were not attributable to a lack of death priming. Nevertheless, in accordance with traditional Islamic views on death (Qutb, 2006), some in the experimental condition conveyed a sense of acceptance and peace when contemplating their own death (e.g., "We all die, some

sooner than others. Its natural so I'm not going to say I don't want to die, or that I do, but when it happens, it'll happen."), which may suggest a buffering effect against death priming among Muslims.

Limitations

As in our study, a common challenge in conducting research with Muslim Americans is recruitment (Ahmed et al., 2017; Amer & Bagasra, 2013). We ensured that every aspect of our study was culturally sensitive and confidential. Despite this, our study included the "red flag" topics of religion and culture, so self-selection effects may have occurred if potential respondents shied away due to fear of being profiled. Due to small sample sizes, we had decreased power to detect potential effects.

Like prior research with Muslim participants, our studies drew from student samples. While this limits generalizability, recruiting college students preserved methodological consistency with most previous TMT research. Moreover, past work shows that MS effects are larger for college than non-college participants.

Although there is strong evidence that MS affects attitudes toward people more than other attitudes (Burke et al., 2010), our findings yielded no such support. This may be due in part to our identification of the fictitious reaction essay authors as Muslim American women. The messages of each Study 2 essay contrasted with respect to religious and secular stances, but knowledge that the authors were Muslim and American may have attenuated the threat of the essays. People may have aligned with *both* authors given that they were members of the Muslim community. As a result, those in the MS condition may not have needed to respond with conventional worldview defense.

Constraints on Generality

The Study 2 sample was primarily non-muhajabba (those who do not veil) who may not strongly identify with the hijab aspect of the Islamic faith, and so may not have felt that the worldview defense measure was personally relevant. Future studies should be sensitive to the heterogeneity of hijab practice, as it bears multiple meanings of a religious and social symbol. We also cannot conclude whether our findings would generalize to Muslim men.

One of the inherent challenges of conducting studies with Muslim Americans is their heterogeneity. Thus, whether the lack of MS effects could be attributed to within-group diversity of the sample merits consideration. Future work should be considerate of the complexities of conducting psychological research with this group, particularly within hostile sociopolitical contexts.

Future Directions

Given the rise of Islamophobia in the U.S. since 9/11 and the reverberation of anti-Muslim hostility under the Trump administration, Muslim American women frequently encounter attacks on their religious beliefs as well as doubts about their place in mainstream U.S. society (Pew Research Center, 2017). Subversion of the Islamic faith often promotes the false belief that being a devout Muslim disqualifies one from upholding the democratic, pluralistic, freedom-fighting ideals of the secular West (Ciftci, 2012). Exposure to widespread stereotypes may result in diminished emotional responsiveness to relatively less threatening anti-Muslim rhetoric, as was

used in the current study. As such, future TMT investigations that employ more divisive worldview defense measures may be needed to instigate defensive reactions. For example, worldview defense measures that characterize Muslim Americans as dangerous relative to other groups may elicit more defensive reactions.

Conclusions

As reminders of death in the current work did not result in increased support for psychological structures underlying terror management defenses, the ways that Muslim Americans manage concerns of eventual death are yet to be uncovered. This topic is especially important because there are few studies investigating the nuances of worldview defenses among recent immigrants struggling with issues of acculturation and even fewer examining terror management processes in Muslims. We found that Muslim American immigrants did not rely on worldview defenses in response to MS and that religious and national affiliations may be more closely and meaningfully integrated than initially thought. Given the lack of MS effects found in other non-Western samples, our null findings begin to fill in potential gaps in TMT among understudied populations. It is likely that Muslim American women are accustomed to adapting their attitudes and behaviors in response to changing environments. Even when confronted with existential threats of death, it is possible that Muslim American women, and perhaps Muslim Americans at large, struggle to separate their religious and secular worldviews to optimize defenses against mortality concerns.

Footnotes

[4] DTA scores did not differ between MS (1.69 ± 1.26) and control groups (1.37 ± 0.97), .32, 95% CI [-.30, .94]. MS condition participants had higher DTA levels as indicated by only one of the death-related terms (*buried*) than control condition participants. However, a weak association was found between the single death-related item and the dependent variable (-.04), suggesting that it was an unlikely worldview defense mediator.

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APPENDIX A

Cultural Worldview Defense Image

APPENDIX B

Cultural Worldview Defense Essays

Pro-Islamic/Anti-American Essay

I actually despise this image. I feel like it makes America seem like it's so much more open than it really is toward Muslims. But everyone knows that Muslims are considered outsiders, regardless of how long someone has been in the U.S. and how "American" they dress, speak, or act. Americans don't understand the beauty of the hijab and what it actually represents: modesty, religious commitment, and faith in Allah. Regardless of what this image is trying to say, the hijab will never be viewed as an American symbol. The truth is, as long as Muslims don't talk about Islam, and don't support it in public, then America will put up with it. But I really don't care how America sees Islam, because I'm proud to be Muslim and always will be.

Pro-American/Anti-Islamic Essay

I honestly can't stand this picture. Obviously, the beautiful thing about America is that everyone has the right to practice their religion however they choose, but it angers me that this image is supporting, even encouraging, the Islamic oppression of Muslim women. The American flag is a symbol of hope, freedom, and equality. But the hijab symbolizes the powerlessness that so many Muslim women feel, all over the world. Wearing the hijab is not even a choice for women in some parts of the world. That's why the best part of being a Muslim woman in America is that you are free to express yourself, free to speak your mind, and free to dress however you want. That's how I feel and that's why I'm incredibly proud to be an American.