

Toward Understanding the Fame Game: The Effect of Mortality Salience on the Appeal of Fame

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Although the appeal of fame in society seems to be increasing, experimental research has yet to examine the motivations that may underlie this apparent appeal. As a first step toward doing so, we conducted three studies to assess whether concerns with mortality play a role in these phenomena. Based on terror management theory and research, we hypothesized that reminders of death would increase people's desire for fame and admiration of celebrities. In Study 1, mortality salience led participants to report greater desire for fame. In Study 2, mortality salience produced greater interest in having a star in the galaxy named after oneself. In Study 3, mortality salience increased liking for abstract art when it was attributed to a celebrity. These findings suggest that the appeal of fame is based in part on the desire for symbolic continuance beyond death. Discussion focused on the implications of these findings and remaining issues.

Keywords: Celebrity; Fame; Symbolic immortality; Terror management.

Now stands my task accomplished, such a work
As not the wrath of Jove, nor fire nor sword
Nor the devouring ages can destroy.
Let, when it will, that day, that has no claim
But to my mortal body, end the span
Of my uncertain years. Yet I'll be borne,

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The finer part of me, above the stars,
Immortal, and my name shall never die.

Ovid (8 AD/1986, p. 379)

Although Ovid's proclamation demonstrates that people's yearning for fame and the immortality it provides has been around since ancient times, the desire for fame seems increasingly prevalent in contemporary human behavior. Popular televised shows such as *American Idol* and *Survivor* provide just a few illustrations of the inordinate lengths to which individuals will go to garner fame. Indeed, in a 2006 Pew Research Center survey (Kohut et al., 2006), a majority of 18- to 25-year-olds reported fame and fortune as their generation's most valued life goals. This is true despite evidence that such goals may hinder psychological well-being (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Schaller, 1997).

Understanding the desire for fame and the appeal of celebrity may at first glance seem like a trivial pursuit in the context of psychological science. But billions of dollars are spent on the music, movies, TV shows, and artifacts of celebrities. Throughout the world, people are drawn to Hollywood and Bollywood, the image of the rock star or supermodel, and other incarnations of fame. Anecdotal estimates suggest that over 1000 young women move to Los Angeles every month seeking stardom. The power that celebrity affords also makes it worth studying. Hitler became something of a celebrity during his 1923 trial for treason, setting the stage for his eventual climb to power. On the more positive side, many current celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, George Clooney, and Halle Berry devote their time and names to drawing attention to, and raising funds for, alleviating human suffering around the globe.

So, the appeal of fame does matter, and yet we know of no prior experiments designed to assess the causes of its appeal. Like aggression, prejudice, and most widespread social phenomena, the appeal of fame is undoubtedly multiply determined and unlikely to be fully explained by any single analysis. Accordingly, the set of studies reported here was designed as just a first step in trying to understand the attraction of fame. We believe that terror management theory can shed some light on the psychological underpinnings of fame. Extending our work on symbolic immortality, these studies therefore examined whether reminders of mortality contribute to the appeal of fame.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) is derived from cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker's (1971, 1973, 1975) efforts to provide a comprehensive account of the motivational underpinnings of human behavior. According to TMT, humans share with all other forms of life a biological predisposition toward survival, but by virtue of their sophisticated capacity for abstract symbolic thinking and self-reflection, they are uniquely able to recognize the ultimate futility of this biological imperative. The awareness that death is inevitable and may signal the absolute end of existence creates the potential for potentially overwhelming terror, which is assuaged by a dual component anxiety-buffer consisting of a cultural worldview and self-esteem. Cultural worldviews are humanly constructed beliefs about reality that convey a sense that the world is meaningful, stable, and permanent, and that offer opportunities for symbolic

immortality (e.g., by having children or amassing a great fortune) or literal immortality (e.g., by the promise of an afterlife) to those who meet the cultural standards of value. Self-esteem is attained by believing that one is a valuable participant in this meaningful universe and therefore qualifies for cultural routes to immortality.

Empirical support for TMT has been obtained in over 300 published experiments demonstrating the anxiety-reducing properties of self-esteem and the role of mortality concerns in defense of one's cultural worldviews and striving for self-esteem. The most heavily studied general hypothesis has been that, to the extent that psychological structures provide protection from the potential for death-related anxiety, reminders of death should intensify efforts to uphold psychological structures affording this protection. Thoughts of one's own death (*mortality salience*; MS) have been shown to affect a wide range of human activities, including prosocial behavior, aggression, nationalism, prejudice, desire of offspring, distancing from reminders that humans are animals, and various forms of self-esteem striving (see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004, for recent reviews).

From the perspective of TMT, reminders of death are especially potent threats because death is the only inevitable future event, it may terminate the self, and it thwarts all motives and desires. Although a handful of studies have shown that other threats can have similar effects in certain paradigms (e.g., McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001, Study 3; van den Bos, 2001), a much larger body of studies has shown quite different effects for reminders of death than reminders of other aversive topics, including uncertainty, the notion of being paralyzed, intense pain, general current and future worries, an upcoming exam, speaking in public, and social exclusion (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Schimel, 1999; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Landau & Greenberg, 2006; Landau et al., 2004a, 2004b). Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1997) also found that subliminal primes of death lead to elevated worldview defense relative to subliminal primes of "fail" and "pain." This body of work supports the specific role of concerns about death in worldview defense and self-esteem striving (see, e.g., Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Greenberg et al., 2008).¹

The unique role of death-related concerns is also supported by research on the parameters and cognitive processes associated with MS effects (Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). There is converging evidence (reviewed by Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004) that MS instigates a unique set of immediate proximal defenses followed by delayed distal terror management defenses involving bolstering of the worldview and enhanced striving for self-worth. The latter defenses are triggered by increased accessibility of death-related thought outside of current focal attention, which signals a heightened potential for anxiety (Greenberg et al., 2003). Furthermore, threats to central aspects of an individual's worldview and self-worth increase the accessibility of death-related thought, but not other negative thoughts, and bolstering these structures reduces this accessibility back to baselines levels (e.g., Arndt et al., 1997; Hayes, Schimel, Faucher, & Williams, 2008; Ogilvie, Cohen, & Solomon, 2008; Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007).

Given this prior work demonstrating the role of death-related concerns in various forms of social behavior, the present studies were designed to assess the possible role of death concerns specifically in the appeal of fame.

Immortality Striving

Following thinkers such as Lifton (1979), TMT posits that individuals sustain psychological equanimity despite their knowledge of death by striving for various forms of literal and symbolic immortality. Regarding literal immortality, Osarchuk and Tatz (1973) found that reminders of death increased belief in the afterlife, Norenzayan and Hansen (2006) found that MS increased belief in supernatural powers, and Dechesne et al. (2003) demonstrated that scientific evidence that consciousness continues after death reduced the need to defend the worldview or strive for self-worth after MS. Regarding symbolic immortality, Florian and Mikulincer (1998) found an inverse correlation between self-reports of having bases of symbolic immortality and fear of death, and demonstrated that high symbolic immortality mitigated the effect of an MS induction on worldview defense. The symbolic immortality measure used in their research was a rather broad one based on Lifton (1979). It tapped biosocial (e.g., children), religious (e.g., church membership), creative (e.g., valued achievements), natural (e.g., connections to a mountain), and experiential (e.g., living life to the fullest) modes of death transcendence. Consistent with Florian and Mikulincer's findings, particularly with regard to biosocial modes of symbolic immortality, Wisman and Goldenberg (2005) and Fritsche et al. (2007) found that MS increased desire for offspring, and Castano and Dechesne (2005) proposed that group identification is a basis of symbolic immortality and reviewed research showing that MS generally increases in-group identification.

Thus there is some prior evidence that MS increases striving for symbolic immortality. The current set of studies attempted to conceptually replicate these findings, but focused specifically on whether MS increases the attraction of an increasingly popular basis of symbolic immortality, fame. Thus, in three studies we examined whether MS increases striving for and attraction to fame.

Study 1

In contemporary Western culture, fame seems to be a clear way to attain symbolic immortality, as the images and works of famous athletes, composers, artists, actors, singers, and scientists (e.g., Babe Ruth, Mozart, Monet, Marilyn Monroe, Sinatra, and Einstein) remain with us long after their physical deaths. Therefore, based on terror management theory and research, Study 1 tested the hypothesis that reminders of death relative to reminders of another aversive topic, pain, would increase the desire for fame.

Method

Participants were 269 (129 female, 140 male) psychology undergraduates randomly assigned to the mortality salience or pain salience condition.² Participants completed a packet of questionnaires that began with two personality questionnaires—consistent with the cover story that we were simply examining different aspects of personality and how they relate to each other—specifically, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1992). This was followed by the mortality salience manipulation, which was randomly assigned. In the MS condition, participants responded to two open-ended questions (used in previous TMT studies,

e.g., Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989): “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 as you physically die and once you are physically dead.” Pain-salient participants responded to parallel questions regarding being in intense pain. All participants then completed a self-report mood scale (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994) to assess possible affective consequences of the MS induction, and read a short literary passage to serve as a delay and distraction because previous research (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1994) has shown that MS effects are distal defenses that emerge when death-related thought is highly accessible but outside of focal attention.

Next, participants completed an “Opinion Survey” starting with the statement that: “According to some definitions, fame is being known to people who we don’t know, and who don’t know us.” Participants were then asked: “To what extent do you agree with this definition of fame?”³ followed by three questions intended to assess their desire for fame: “How much would you like to become famous?” “According to the definition of fame above, how famous would you consider yourself now?” “According to the definition of fame above, how famous do you think you will become in the future?” Responses were made on 9-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *somewhat*; 9 = *a great deal*).

Results and Discussion

Responses to the three desire for fame questions were summed and averaged to form a composite index of desire for fame ($\alpha = .79$). These scores were then subjected to a one-way (mortality salience \times pain salience)⁴ ANOVA, which yielded the predicted main effect for experimental condition, $F(1, 248) = 4.19, p < .05$, such that mortality-salient participants reported greater desire for fame ($M = 4.77, SD = 1.75$) than pain-salient participants ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.70$). Consistent with previous evidence that responses to MS do not stem from conscious affective consequences of contemplating death, a MANOVA on the PANAS-X subscales showed no significant effects of MS on subjective affect in any of the present studies (all $ps > .20$).⁵

We also examined whether the personality variables measured (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and narcissism) predicted desire for fame, and whether they moderated the impact of MS. Desire for fame was significantly associated with more extraversion and less neuroticism ($r = .31, p < .001$, and $r = -.19, p < .01$, respectively). Additionally, consistent with prior research showing positive associations between narcissism and interest in fame and celebrity (e.g., Ashe, Maltby, & McCutcheon, 2005; Young & Pinsky, 2006), NPI scores correlated positively with values on the fame composite ($r = .52, p < .001$). However, the effect of MS on fame striving remained significant in separate one-way (mortality salient \times pain salient) ANCOVAs with each personality variable (e.g., all Big 5 traits, narcissism) as a covariate, indicating that these individual differences did not mediate the effect of MS on fame striving. Furthermore, multiple regression analyses showed no significant interactions of MS and the measured traits on the fame composite. Given that moderation of the MS effect was not observed, we did not pursue individual difference analyses further in these studies.

The results of this study provided initial empirical support for the proposition that reminders of death increase the desire for fame. Participants presented with a reminder of their mortality exhibited heightened interest in becoming known by

others they themselves do not know. Furthermore, this effect did not differ as a function of the personality variables measured, suggesting that people in general are drawn to the symbolic immortality afforded by fame aspirations after being reminded of their mortality.

Study 2

Most people in the USA probably long to be famous, or at least did so as children. Yet many of us eventually accept that we will not be known throughout the world, and consequently we pursue more realistic paths to prominence and self-esteem. In many of the endeavors through which people strive for self-worth, opportunities for fame can take less global forms, for instance, on the stage of one's local social network, geographic area, or specific profession. Among social psychologists, only a few figures (e.g., Stanley Milgram, Phillip Zimbardo) have obtained fairly widespread distinction; yet many of us can still become well known to other psychologists. Moreover, through our work we can feel that our names will be known to future generations of psychologists and students of psychology as well. Indeed, most professions allow for the possibility that one and one's works will be known after one's death.

In this sense, people's strivings for symbolic immortality are intimately connected to motivation for self-esteem. Consequently, we do not think striving for self-worth and fame can ever be fully disentangled, and fame is likely one path people use to attempt to enhance self-worth. But some ways to be known beyond one's death are perhaps less associated with self-worth. One example may be identification of the self with enduring physical objects, such as trophies or plaques with one's name on them or having a place named after oneself. Therefore, evidence that MS increases the desire to identify the self with an enduring physical object would strengthen our confidence that MS-induced fame striving reflects at least in part a desire for one's identity to transcend death. In Study 2, we therefore tested the hypothesis that MS would increase the appeal of a service that permanently associates the self with a star in the galaxy.

Also, whereas we contrasted MS with pain in Study 1, in this study we included two control conditions designed to make salient uncertainties. Although a variety of studies have found different effects for MS and uncertainty salience (e.g., Friedman & Arndt, 2005; Landau & Greenberg, 2006; Landau et al., 2004a; Martens, Greenberg, Schimel, & Landau, 2004; Routledge, Arndt, & Goldenberg, 2004), van den Bos (2001) and McGregor et al. (2001) have suggested that MS effects may occur because reminders of death arouse uncertainty. In their research, they found that the two uncertainty salience inductions we employed in Study 2 produced effects similar to MS. Hence, we reasoned they might serve as useful controls in Study 2 and implemented them for this purpose.

Method

Fifty-five college students at the University of Arizona (39 females, 16 males) were randomly assigned to receive a mortality, temporal discontinuity, or uncertainty induction embedded in a series of neutral personality filler questionnaires. In separate cubicles, participants completed a packet of questionnaires. Participants in the MS condition responded to the same questions presented in Study 1; those in the temporal discontinuity condition responded to the following questions (used in

McGregor et al., 2001): “Please describe the events, people and scene (i.e., locations, sounds, smells, etc.) associated with an important vivid memory from your childhood or adolescence” and “Jot down how you imagine the physical scene of this memory might be different if you revisited it in the year 2035 AD (please be specific). How does it make you feel to imagine this?” Those in the uncertainty condition completed the following questions (used in van den Bos, 2001): “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your being uncertain arouse in you” and “Please write down, as specifically as you can, what you think physically will happen to you as you feel uncertain.” All participants then completed the PANAS-X and a neutral task intended to serve as a delay.

In an allegedly separate survey, participants were then asked to examine advertisements for two products or services ostensibly chosen at random from a larger collection of advertisements. One advertisement was for “YourStar.com,” an Internet-based service where people can pay to have a star named after them. YourStar.com was described as working with the Universal Star Council to ensure that each star is permanently registered with only one name, allowing the person to “own” a star for billions of years. The second advertisement was from “The Comfort Store” and featured a new massage chair. The advertisement highlighted the many attractive features of the chair. Both advertisements were fabricated by the experimenters. The order of the advertisements was counterbalanced across participants. Following each advertisement was an evaluation form containing two questions: “How interested would you be in finding out more about the advertised product or service?” ($-3 = \textit{Not at all}$, $0 = \textit{Somewhat}$, $+3 = \textit{Very much}$) and “If you were to purchase this product/service, how much would you be willing to spend (that is, what is the highest dollar amount that you would still be willing to spend to make this purchase)?” Responses were made on a 7-point scale, where each number from 1 to 7 was labeled with dollar amounts: \$25, \$50, \$100, \$250, \$500, \$750, \$1000.

Results and Discussion

The questions assessing attitudes toward each product were correlated ($r_{\text{star}} = .50$, $r_{\text{chair}} = .50$, both $ps < .001$) so we averaged them to form a total interest score for each product (after converting scores on the first question to a 1–7 scale). We then submitted these scores to a 3 (Priming Condition: mortality vs. temporal discontinuity vs. uncertainty) \times 2 (Product: star vs. chair) \times 2 (Product Order) mixed model ANOVA, with Product serving as a within-subjects factor. The analysis revealed a main effect for Product, $F(1, 49) = 10.58$, $p < .01$, and the predicted Priming Condition \times Product Interaction, $F(2, 49) = 3.29$, $p < .05$. The Product main effect reflected higher overall liking for the massaging chair ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.17$) than the star ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.24$). To interpret the two-way interaction we performed separate ANOVAs for the different products.

A one-way ANOVA on attitudes toward the star-naming service revealed the expected Priming Condition effect, $F(2, 52) = 4.73$, $p = .01$. As predicted, participants in the MS condition were significantly more interested in the star-naming service ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.41$) compared to participants in the temporal discontinuity condition ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.08$) and the uncertainty salience condition ($M = 1.86$, $SD = .95$; both pair-wise comparisons were significant, $ps < .05$).⁶ The analysis on liking for the chair did not attain significance, $F(2, 52) < 1$, $p > .8$.

These results supported the hypothesis that a death reminder would increase the appeal of having a star named for oneself, suggesting that MS does indeed motivate

a desire for symbolic immortality through the endurance of one's identity beyond one's lifetime. Having a star named after you assures that your name will live on after your death. This may offer a measure of fame, analogous to having a building named after you, in that others may learn of your name if they ever learn about the star. However, this effect could also reflect the desire to be identified with something, in this case the star, which lasts far beyond one's own life. Further research will be needed to empirically distinguish these two different ways in which linking one's name to enduring physical objects can afford symbolic immortality.

Further research will also be needed to determine whether this effect is specific to thoughts of death or could be produced by other psychological threats, such as uncertainty, as well. No single study or small set of studies can definitively answer this question. Although this study employed two uncertainty salience inductions used in prior research, stronger uncertainty inductions could produce different results. In addition, our use of the McGregor et al. (2001) induction may have been weakened because in their research imagining 2035 AD was 40 years in the future and in a different century, whereas when the current Study 2 was run, it was only 32 years in the future and in the same century.

Study 3

Modern life in mass-media-oriented cultures like the USA and the nations of Europe is characterized not only by the seeking of personal fame but also by the adulation of celebrities. In *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, Giles (2000) examined the biographies of famous people and found that they commonly started as admirers of other illustrious or legendary figures. For example, Alexander the Great, arguably the first globally famous person, was virtually obsessed with the mythic Greek heroes and gods (Braudy, 1986/1997). From a TMT perspective, this makes sense because the exemplars of fame—those who have attained symbolic immortality—provide the hope that we too can extend our existence beyond physical death.

Thus, MS may lead our American participants to react positively to famous others because famous people may strengthen the assumption in Americans' worldviews that anyone can potentially achieve fame in US society, and that it is possible through fame to be known, and in a sense still present, after death. But there are two other TMT-consistent rationales for this hypothesis as well. Celebrities are valued within the context of the worldview, so increased attraction to celebrities after MS may be a way to bolster faith in one's worldview; if one's worldview includes the idea that this famous person is special and talented, then judging that person especially favorably could be one way to reinforce faith in the validity of that worldview. In addition, admiration of celebrities may increase identification with them. Thus MS may increase such admiration so people can bolster their self-worth through basking in the reflected enduring glory of the famous (Cialdini et al., 1976; Cialdini & de Nicholas, 1989).

So, for any of these three TMT-based reasons, MS should increase the appeal of those who are famous. If it does, this would suggest that mortality concerns contribute to celebrity worshipping. An opportunity to test this hypothesis was suggested to us by a 2007 exhibition at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (SMOCA) on art by and about celebrities. In the text for the exhibit—which, like the current paper, was oriented toward understanding the appeal of celebrity—SMOCA museum curator Marilu Knode (2007) noted that celebrities have a difficult time

getting their talent as painters and their paintings taken seriously within the art world. Knode suggests two reasons for this. One is that it is easy to attribute attention such art gets to the celebrity name attached to it rather than the inherent quality of the work; the other is that for people famous for their music (Janis Joplin, David Bowie) or acting (Peter Falk, Charles Bronson), their endeavors as painters are assumed to be dabbling rather than a serious attempt at creating art. Because such attributions of celebrity art are likely even for people outside the art world, we hypothesized that people would generally judge art produced by celebrities more negatively than the same art produced by an artist. However, if the admiration of celebrity serves a terror-management function, after a reminder of one's mortality, liking for art attributed to a celebrity should be increased.

To test this hypothesis, in Study 3 we manipulated MS, this time using the salience of meaninglessness as the aversive control condition, and asked college students to assess reproductions of three abstract paintings that were attributed to either a famous celebrity or an unknown artist. Of course, which celebrities people admire is a somewhat idiosyncratic matter, so we wanted to choose a celebrity who does in fact create art (Knode, 2007) and who is very popular and appealing to college-aged people. Given the popularity of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, and his success in both mainstream and more critically acclaimed films, we chose actor Johnny Depp as the celebrity artist. Our hypothesis was that whereas in the meaninglessness salient condition, the paintings would be viewed more positively when attributed to an unknown artist, MS would increase the appeal of the art when it was attributed to Johnny Depp.

Method

Sixty-three college students (50 females, 13 males) were randomly assigned to a mortality or meaninglessness salience induction embedded in a series of neutral personality fillers. Participants arrived 3–5 at a time and after a general introduction were escorted to separate private cubicles. Participants in the MS condition responded to the same questions presented in Studies 1 and 2, while those in the meaninglessness salient control condition responded to the following parallel items: “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of life being meaningless arouses in you” and “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically experience life being meaningless and once you have experienced life being meaningless.” All participants then completed the PANAS-X and two filler questionnaires intended to serve as a delay.

In a purportedly separate study, participants read that we were planning a series of studies in conjunction with SMOCA on the psychology of art appreciation. SMOCA was described as specializing in modern abstract painting, art by celebrities, and digital installations. Participants were then asked to view images of three paintings from the collection “by _____, who, while living in France, has produced a substantial oeuvre of abstract paintings.” Based on random assignment, the blank was filled in as either: “Robert Stiltson, a relatively unknown contemporary American artist” or “Johnny Depp, the well-known contemporary American actor.” Thus, all three paintings were attributed either to Stiltson or Depp. We chose abstract paintings that have been found to be moderately appealing in prior research (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002), partly because, to the untrained eye, the skill involved in producing such art is likely to be more ambiguous and subjective than for representational art. After each painting,

participants were asked four questions about the painting: “How much do you like this painting?” “How skillful do you think this painting is?” “How creative do you think this painting is?” “How interested would you be in owning a poster of this painting?” (on scales from 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *a great deal/extremely*). No participant expressed familiarity with Robert Stiltson during debriefings.

Results and Discussion

The four questions regarding each of the three paintings were averaged to form a composite measure of liking for each painting (alphas were .80, .91, and .87 for the three paintings, respectively). The mean of the composite ratings of the three paintings was then computed as the measure of liking for the art attributed to an unknown artist or the celebrity. We submitted this measure to a 2 (Priming Condition: mortality vs. meaninglessness) \times 2 (Artist: unknown vs. famous) ANOVA. The analysis revealed a main effect of Priming Condition, $F(1, 59) = 4.30, p < .05$, and the predicted Priming Condition \times Artist interaction, $F(1, 59) = 9.44, p < .003$ (for cell means, see Table 1). The main effect was due to higher overall liking for the artworks after MS ($M = 5.45, SD = 1.24$) compared to meaningless salience ($M = 4.76, SD = 1.36$).

Consistent with our predictions, pairwise comparisons showed that participants in the meaninglessness control condition liked the artworks better when they were attributed to the unknown artist than when attributed to the celebrity, $F(1, 59) = 5.42, p < .03$. In contrast, those primed with mortality preferred the artworks more when they were attributed to the celebrity, $F(1, 59) = 4.13, p < .05$. In addition, whereas there was no difference in liking for the paintings of the unknown artist as a function of the Priming Condition, $F(1, 59) < 1, p > .4$, the celebrity art was liked better in the MS condition than in the control condition, $F(1, 59) = 13.87, p < .001$.

While Studies 1 and 2 showed that mortality salience increases personal interest in attaining eternal renown, Study 3 further showed that MS increases favorability toward the achievements of others known to be famous. As Knobe (2007) proposed, in the control condition, the art was viewed more positively when attributed to an unknown artist rather than to Johnny Depp, presumably because of rational inferences either that the artist is more dedicated to painting than Depp is, or that Depp’s paintings are known because of his fame rather than because of their quality. In contrast, after a mortality salience induction, the paintings were viewed more positively when attributed to the celebrity than when attributed to the unknown artist.

TABLE 1 Liking for Art by an Unknown and a Famous Artist as a Function of Mortality Salience

Priming condition	Artist	
	Stiltson	Depp
Meaninglessness salience	5.28 (1.55)	4.30 (0.99)
Mortality salience	4.97 (1.41)	5.90 (0.88)

Note: Higher scores indicate *greater* liking of art. Scale ranged from 1–9. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

As noted earlier, although the findings support the idea that mortality concerns contribute to admiration of celebrities, there are three plausible explanations for this. One is that the MS-induced increase in liking for celebrity art may have occurred because celebrities reinforce the possibility that fame is an attainable route to symbolic immortality for ourselves as well. This explanation relies on the idea that our participants harbor some hope of attaining fame themselves, as many of us did as children, and that the expanding fame of an already famous person might nonetheless be experienced as informative about the self. We think this is plausible, but MS could have also increased rating of the celebrity art to reinforce the participants' worldview or to enhance their identification with the culturally valued individual. Further study will be needed to assess the relative merits of these three TMT-consistent explanations.

Further research is also needed to examine if this effect would generalize to other celebrities and to a non-admired celebrity as well. Could the effect be dependent specifically on something about Johnny Depp? We picked him because he has unusually wide appeal across different genders, ages, and other demographic variables. But the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies specifically have to do with themes of mortality and immortality, so perhaps that played a role. Given Hollywood's penchant for movie themes of death and immortality, one would be hard pressed to find an actor whose films would not relate in some way to death, but perhaps famous singers or athletes could be used in future research.

Regarding a non-admired celebrity, terror management theory does not provide a clear prediction. If an individual thinks Johnny Depp is brilliant but Paris Hilton is not worthy of admiration, then MS is likely to lead to viewing things associated with Depp more positively, but perhaps things associated with Hilton the same, or even more negatively. On the other hand, because even non-admired famous people are glorified by the prevailing culture, perhaps MS would even lead to increased admiration of things associated with them.

Finally, although we employed a meaninglessness salience control condition that paralleled our MS induction, additional research would be needed to determine whether other operationalizations of the threat of meaninglessness might produce, in their own right, an increase in the appeal of celebrities.

General Discussion

The present research provides support for the idea that the appeal of fame derives partly from existential needs engendered by the uniquely human awareness of death. In Study 1, a reminder of death increased the desire for fame relative to a reminder of pain. In Study 2, mortality salience led to a greater appeal of having a star named for oneself relative to reminders of temporal discontinuity and personal uncertainty. Being a famous star or having a galactic star share one's name thus appear to serve a terror management function by providing a sense of symbolic immortality.

In addition to seeking death-transcending fame, terror-management needs are served by admiring those who have achieved that goal—it is that very admiration that provides a route to the symbolic immortality of fame, and such admiration may bolster one's worldview and self-worth as well. Study 3 showed that a reminder of mortality, but not meaninglessness, increased liking for abstract paintings when they were attributed to the famous celebrity Johnny Depp. This finding supports the idea that mortality concerns contribute to the appeal of celebrity as well as the desire to be one.

Utilizing four different control conditions across the three studies, reminders of mortality were found to increase both the desire for some sort of fame and the perceived favorability of celebrity. This supports the age-old idea that fame plays a role in providing some basis for transcending one's own death. Of course, additional research is needed to assess whether other psychological threats not compared to mortality in the present studies, or whether other operationalizations of aversiveness, uncertainty, or meaninglessness could produce effects similar to those we have found here for thoughts of mortality.

Remaining Questions

To our knowledge, this is the first experimental investigation of determinants of interest in fame and the appeal of celebrity. As the initial foray into understanding the motivations underlying the appeal of fame, a variety of important questions remain. Research examining behavioral manifestations of the desire for and appeal of fame is needed. Cross-cultural research is required as well. Virtually all cultures boast their own legendary heroes, and Hollywood icons, movies, and television shows are often popular worldwide. In addition, reality shows that offer fame to ordinary people are popular internationally—outside the USA there are at least 21 versions of *Survivor* and 37 versions of *American Idol*. Clearly fame is of interest in a wide range of cultures, but whether mortality concerns play a role in fame striving in other cultures is an open question.

Is Fame a More Prevalent Desire Now, and If So Why?

Based on anecdotal evidence, there are indications that the fame game may be more popular than ever before. Consider the worldwide increase in the popularity of television and movies worldwide, along with the spread and influence of the Internet (e.g., YouTube) and wireless transmission. Since fame is, or at least seems, easier to attain, it makes sense that more people than ever are seeking it. Indeed the 2006 Pew Research Center survey (Kohut et al., 2006) found that 18- to 25-year-olds reported greater interest in fame and fortune than 26- to 40-year-olds did, and while this is a cross-sectional study confounded with cohort (i.e., age), this piece of evidence remains suggestive.

From a TMT perspective, fame may also be increasingly valued because people generally have become less devoted to the literal immortality ideologies offered by religion and consequently more committed to symbolic means of death transcendence (cf. Rank, 1932). Consistent with this idea, Maltby (2004) found an inverse relationship between religiosity and celebrity worship.

Other Reasons for Fame Striving

There are undoubtedly a variety of additional reasons that people seek or admire fame. Fame brings attention and adulation, money, and power; consequently fame may be sought for these more pragmatic reasons, as well as for symbolic terror-management purposes. Admiring famous people may provide inspiration and give direction to our own strivings for self-worth (Lockwood & Kunda, 1999). Research is needed to assess the roles of these motives and their relative weights in contributing to striving for fame and the appeal of celebrity.

Even from the perspective of TMT, fame can serve a number of functions. It can provide a sense of continuance beyond death and a widely validated sense of self-worth, but it also helps validate one's worldview by creating a sense of a

shared worldview. Within the USA, if you meet a person from another part of the country for the first time, you may not have much in common in terms of people and places you know personally, but you readily share a knowledge of the famous dead such as George Washington, Marilyn Monroe, Albert Einstein, and the famous living such as Johnny Depp, Barack Obama, and Bill Gates.

Varieties of Fame

Questions also remain concerning individual differences in the desire for fame and what types of fame matter to people. Study 1 suggests that fame striving as a response to existential concerns with death occurs independent of differences in Big 5 personality traits (John et al., 1992) and narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Giles (2000) proposed a typology of types of fame. It may be of value to examine levels of fame, from the small stages of one's own town or profession to the larger stages of national and global recognition. And these different levels of fame may serve different psychological purposes. From a TMT perspective, the larger the stage of fame, the better. However, within professions, awards and honors can help buttress the more limited versions of fame.

The Infamous

Can fame for doing something negative also serve a terror-management function? Among the eight major motives identified in The Secret Service Exceptional Case Study Project (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998)—a psychological case review of 83 persons who attacked or threatened a prominent public official or figure—the aim of achieving notoriety topped the list. People may thus strive to become famous not only for admirable accomplishments or attributes, but for despised actions as well (see, e.g., Giles, 2000). Individuals such as Jack the Ripper, John Dillinger, Josef Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler remain famous primarily because of the evil things they did. Could it be that some people engage in evil acts precisely to obtain the symbolic immortality fame provides? Cho Sueng-hui, who massacred 32 people on the campus of Virginia Tech University in April 2007, appears to be an example of such an individual.

He was a lonely, disturbed individual who felt picked on and ignored. After killing two people on that tragic day, he left the campus to mail video and written materials to NBC Television in New York, before returning to campus to kill an additional 30 people. The material was clearly sent in an attempt to immortalize himself; he portrayed himself as a martyr like the famous Columbine killers Kleibold and Harris, whom Sueng-hui so admired, while also comparing himself to Jesus Christ. Although most of us would judge his view of himself as a hero who killed on behalf of the meek and downtrodden as delusional, by committing the worst killing spree in US history, through his heinous acts, he did in fact secure himself a place in history the vast majority of people never attain. Thus, the desire for fame, which seems to be on the rise, may fuel desperate people who have no hope of attaining fame through admired acts, to engage in horrendous acts to make an enduring mark on the world.

Reluctance to Admit to the Desire for Fame

If fame is so valuable for symbolic immortality, why don't even more people seek it, and why don't more people claim to want it? In Study 1 the overall mean for how much participants desired fame was only 4.6 on a 9-point scale. Becker (1973) argued

that we all want to be heroes and to be famous, but as adults, most of us deny that urge because of the expectations and potential ridicule that would go with admitting it. System theory ecologist Tyler Volk, while researching a book about what death is and what role it plays in ecological systems, became aware of terror management theory, and, as he described in that book, it led him to realize he had been denying his own desire for fame:

I was about thirteen ... reading one of the books in the Times-Life Science Library. The illustrations showed pictures of famous people ... Along with their images, IQs were boldly put forth in ink. I ... was overjoyed to see that mine was higher than [George] Washington himself. That meant I could be as famous as he is ... What immortality I then saw ahead for myself ... It has become surprisingly clear to me that I have been using this incident, ever since I was a young teen, and others like it, as part of my personal terror management ... despite taking up the slogan that "fame is worthless," deep down the quest for fame still motivates me ...

Volk (2002, pp. 121–123)

Conclusion

This set of experiments has provided an initial step toward understanding fame by showing that thoughts of mortality contribute to its appeal. The research conceptually replicates prior work on increased desire for symbolic immortality based on mortality salience, with specific focus on fame. Futile as it may be, the desire to outlast and outshine death has been with us at least since ancient Egypt. With the continued ascendancy of mass communication and the dwindling focus on literal afterlife beliefs in western culture (Giles, 2000), there is little reason to expect this yearning to wane anytime soon, as the proliferation of award ceremonies, celebrity obsession, mass media opportunities, and clamoring for Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame seem to attest. Perhaps, then, the best we can hope for is to direct these urges for fame and celebrity fandom toward prosocial activities that contribute to the alleviation of human suffering and enrichment of people's lives.

Notes

1. More complete discussions of how death relates to other threats can be found in Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, and Maxfield (2006) and Landau, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (2007).
2. Data from 19 participants (10 in the pain salient condition and 9 in the MS condition) were excluded from the analyses because they did not complete the experimental materials or were not fluent in English.
3. This question was intended as a filler to obscure the purpose of the dependent measure and we did not expect or find a difference between MS and control group on responses to it ($p = .74$, *ns*). Furthermore, factor analysis on all four fame items (with varimax rotation) revealed two components, with the three target items loading reliably only on the first factor (coefficients = .82, .80, and .90, respectively) and the single filler item loading reliably only on the second factor (.96).
4. Gender did not interact with the manipulated variables in these studies.
5. We also conducted one-way (mortality vs. pain salient) ANOVAs on the individual items of the fame composite. This analysis revealed that MS only had a significant effect on the item most directly assessing desire for fame, "How much would you like to become famous?" MS participants showed higher ratings on this item ($M = 6.07$, $SD = 2.03$) than pain-salient participants ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 2.15$),

$F(1, 248) = 11.50, p = .001$. These results suggest that MS elevates striving for future fame more than heightening perception of one's current fame status or the likelihood that one will attain fame in the future.

6. A 2 (Prime: MS vs. temporal discontinuity vs. uncertainty) \times 2 (Product: star vs. chair; within) \times 2 (Question 1 vs. 2; within) ANOVA revealed the predicted Prime \times Product interaction, $F(2, 52) = 3.29, p = .046$ and no three way, $F < 1$. Thus the predicted interaction was not different for the two questions. Furthermore, pairwise comparisons of responses to each question revealed the same significant differences as reported for the composite.

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