

Mortality salience and namesaking: Does thinking about death make people want to name their children after themselves?

Abstract

According to terror management theory, people cope with the awareness of death by investing in practices that lead to symbolic immortality. The purpose of the present research was to investigate whether naming children after oneself stems from a desire to symbolically extend one's life. Participants were primed with thoughts of death or a control topic and then asked the likelihood that they would name future offspring after themselves or relatives. Results showed that people in the mortality salience condition reported a greater likelihood of naming their children after themselves, but not after relatives. Attachment orientation moderated this effect in that anxious individuals in the mortality salience condition expressed an even greater desire to name their children after themselves.

Keywords: Terror management theory; Attachment theory; Desire for offspring; Mortality salience; Namesaking; Procreation

In the summer of 2000, former heavyweight boxing champion George Foreman appeared in several commercials for Meineke Discount Mufflers. One of the ads featured Foreman and five of his children. In the ad, Foreman stated to the audience that his trust in the company's integrity could be assured by the fact that he had "included George, George, George, George, and Georgetta" in the commercial alongside him. Some viewers may have been perplexed by Foreman's comment—surely he didn't name all of his children after himself? However, the line was not a gimmick. Foreman did, in fact, give all of his children his own name.

George Foreman is certainly not the only individual to name his child after himself or another family member. Landmark studies conducted in the 1960's and 1980's found that nearly 70% of boys and 50% of girls were named after a relative (Alford, 1988; Rossi, 1965). It is important to note that, while some parents may choose to give their child a first name that is the same as another relative's (as in the case of Foreman), the tradition of giving children family names is not limited to this specific form. For example, a mother and daughter may share the same middle name or a father may choose to use his own name as his daughter's middle name (as in the case of another of Foreman's daughters, "Freedra George").

Why do people choose to name their children after themselves or a loved one? Some researchers have argued that the desire to *namesake* (naming a child after another person) serves an evolutionary purpose. For example, namesaking can be thought of as a method of conveying genetic relatedness, thereby increasing the feelings of attachment experienced by the child's parents. A study of single mothers provided support for this claim, in that children who were named after the purported father received more contact

and financial assistance from this man compared to children who were not namesaked in this way (Furstenberg & Talvitie, 1979). However, research conducted by McAndrew, King, and Honoroff (2002) found mixed support for the notion that namesaking serves an evolutionary function. On the one hand, males were more likely to be namesaked than females, which was predicted given that names are a limited resource that should be invested in the child for whom wealth and status matter the most. On the other hand, girls were not any more likely to be namesaked from the paternal versus maternal side of the family, which was predicted given paternal uncertainty. In sum, evolutionary theory may help to explain the phenomenon of namesaking, but only to a limited extent.

Recent research in terror management theory may help to shed new light on the namesaking process. The “terror” of terror management theory stems from the conflict that people are programmed to survive, yet also have the ability to understand their own mortality (Becker, 1973). To deal with this terror, people rely on two mechanisms. First, people cling to cultural worldviews that provide them with a sense of symbolic immortality by allowing them to feel a part of something that is more enduring. For instance, people who have been reminded of their own death tend to increase their preference for people who share their beliefs (Greenberg, et al., 1990). Second, people act in ways that enhance their self-esteem and are looked upon positively by a culture (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). For example, Mikulincer and Florian (2002) found that reminding people of death led them to attribute positive outcomes to internal causes and negative outcomes to external causes, thereby bolstering self-esteem.

Several researchers (Fritsche, et al., 2007; Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005) have suggested that having children may be another way of managing existential terror. Not

only can having children increase one's feelings of self-worth, but having children can also result in both a symbolic and literal sense of immortality. For instance, people can attain symbolic immortality through their children's memories of them or through the values, beliefs, and characteristics that are passed along. Immortality can also be obtained through children in a more literal sense, in that approximately 50% of a person's genes are passed on to his or her child—a child who is potentially then perceived as a physical extension of oneself. In a series of studies, researchers had participants write about either their own death (the "mortality salience" condition) or a control topic and then answer questions regarding how many children they would like to have in the future. Results demonstrated that men in the mortality salience condition desired more children compared to men in the control condition (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005). In a similar study, researchers found that both men and women were more likely to desire children following mortality salience (Fritzsche, et al., 2007).

Assuming children provide a means to defend against the terrors of mortality, it is possible that naming one's child after oneself would fulfill a similar purpose. To investigate this issue, participants in the present study were primed with either thoughts of death or of failing an exam and were then asked how likely they would be to name their future children after themselves or various relatives. It is unclear whether the practice of naming a child after another relative also would serve the purpose of symbolically extending one's own life. On the one hand, perhaps namesaking after relatives serves a similar purpose because this individual shares one's own genes or because there is an emotional bond to the person whose name is being carried on. On the other hand, it is not one's own life that is symbolically represented.

There may be other factors that interact with mortality salience to influence this namesaking desire. Specifically, attachment orientation has the potential to be relevant because it has been found to be related to the appraisal of stressful events and methods of coping with these events (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995), as well as to the fear of death (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998). Indeed, research has demonstrated that attachment moderates the effects of mortality salience in that, following reminders of death, highly anxious individuals (who are characterized by their fear of rejection and constant worry about a relationship) and highly avoidant individuals (who are characterized by their lack of trust and reliance on others) are *more* likely to respond with an activation of worldview defenses (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). Mikulincer and Florian (2000) argued that more secure individuals (who are lower in anxiety and avoidance) were less likely to activate worldview defenses because of their strong internal resources that allow them to deal with distress. Given these findings, it may be the case that both anxious and avoidant individuals will respond to mortality salience with an increased desire to namesake. On the other hand, it is possible, considering differences in prototypical functioning in regards to relationships with others, that anxious and avoidant individuals will differentially respond concerning the desire to namesake. Specifically, individuals high in avoidance tend to prefer emotional distance from others and adopt a self-reliant orientation, perhaps making it less likely that they would respond to death concerns with a desire to behave in a manner (namesake) that would represent a close association with another individual. Individuals high in anxiety, however, tend to have a strong need for closeness, which would potentially lead to a greater desire to namesake.

Method

Participants

Participants were 116 undergraduates from a Midwestern university who participated in exchange for course credit. The median age was 19 ($M = 19.13$, $SD = 1.17$). Fifty-one percent of participants were female.

Materials and Procedure

Participants first completed a demographics survey and the Experiences in Close-Relationships-Revised inventory (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), a 36-item questionnaire designed to measure attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. Cronbach's alpha for the present sample was .90 for anxiety and .94 for avoidance.

Participants were then randomly assigned to write about either their own death or a control topic with an aversive outcome (i.e., failing an exam). Specifically, they were asked to write about the emotions that thinking about the experience aroused in them as well as what they thought would happen as this experience occurred and afterward. Participants then completed a crossword puzzle as a filler task.

Participants were then asked to imagine that they were to have a child in the next 5 years that was the same gender as him or herself. Participants were asked four questions about the likelihood that they would name the child after themselves. Specifically, they were asked the likelihood of giving their future child their own first name (e.g., Michael James naming his son Michael), giving their future child a middle name that is the same as their own first name (e.g., Michael James naming his son Ryan Michael), giving their child a middle name that is the same as their middle name (e.g., Karen Marie naming her daughter Jessica Marie), and giving their child a variant of their own name (e.g., Carol

naming her daughter Caroline). Response options ranged from one (not very likely) to seven (very likely).

Participants were asked similar questions regarding the likelihood of giving their children their own mothers', fathers', grandmothers', and grandfathers' names. In each case, the question specified that the child was the same gender as the target individual (e.g., "How likely would you be to give your son a first name that is the same as your father's first name?").

Results

For the sake of simplicity, the scores for the questions concerning each individual target were averaged together to create a composite score for each target. In other words, the responses concerning the likelihood of participants giving a child their own first name, a middle name that is the same as their first name, their same middle name, and a variant of their name were averaged together into a composite score (Cronbach's alpha = .61). Average scores for father, mother, grandfather, and grandmother were computed in the same way (Cronbach's alpha = .69, .66, .82, and .71, respectively).

To determine whether thoughts of death, attachment anxiety, or the interaction between these variables influenced the naming of one's offspring after oneself, anxiety and avoidance were centered in relation to their mean and condition was dummy coded such that the MS condition was coded as 1 and the control condition was coded as -1. In Step 1, the composite score for participants' own names being used for the offspring was regressed on condition, anxiety, and avoidance. In Step 2, the interactions between anxiety and condition and avoidance and condition were entered.

Results revealed a main effect for condition, $\beta = .26$, $t(112) = 3.04$, $p = .003$, such that individuals in the mortality salience condition expressed a greater likelihood of naming their children after themselves. There was also a main effect for anxiety, $\beta = .32$, $t(112) = 3.46$, $p = .001$, such that highly anxious individuals expressed a higher likelihood of naming their children after themselves. There was no main effect for avoidance, $\beta = .01$, $t(112) = .08$, *ns*. There was a Condition \times Anxiety interaction, $\beta = .20$, $t(110) = 2.18$, $p = .03$, such that highly anxious individuals were even more likely to want to name their children after themselves if they were in the mortality salience condition (see Figure 1). Simple slope analyses revealed that the association between anxiety and namesaking was significant in the mortality salience condition, $\beta = .46$, $t(62) = 4.06$, $p < .001$, but not in the control condition, $\beta = .18$, $t(50) = 1.31$, *ns*. There was no Condition \times Avoidance interaction, $\beta = -.05$, $t(110) = -.52$, *ns* (see Table 1).

Regression analyses were conducted in the same manner described above with the composite scores for father, mother, grandmother, and grandfather serving as the dependent variables. There were no main effects of condition, anxiety, avoidance, or interaction effects concerning condition and the attachment orientations, on the targets of father ($F[5,110] = .55$, *ns*), mother ($F[5,110] = .68$, *ns*), grandmother ($F[5,109] = .94$, *ns*), or grandfather ($F[5, 109] = .59$, *ns*).¹

Discussion

It is likely that a parent is influenced by many factors when deciding on a name for his or her child. Will it be easy for people to spell and pronounce? Is it unique, but not too peculiar? The present research demonstrates that there may be an even more

important question flowing through a parent's mind, albeit subconsciously: Does the name allow me to symbolically extend myself?

The results of the present research provide support for the notion that mortality salience increases the desire to namesake. Participants who were primed with thoughts of death indicated a greater desire to give their children their own name. Mortality salience did not result in an increased desire to name one's child after other relatives, demonstrating that naming a child after one's own parents or grandparents does not serve to symbolically extend one's life.

It is possible that familiarity may play a role in the heightened desire to namesake after mortality salience, in that individuals may turn to the familiar (in this case, their own name) as a source of comfort after experiencing the anxieties associated with death. An examination of the present data shows that people are not any more likely to name their child after their parent (whose name would be more familiar to them and whose name would be more commonly used in society) versus their grandparent, which seems to indicate that familiarity cannot fully explain the findings. However, future research should attempt to more fully investigate the role that familiarity plays in namesaking, perhaps by testing whether people are more likely to name their children common versus uncommon names and whether this desire differs after mortality salience.

The present research also showed that individual differences in attachment were related to the desire to namesake. Highly anxious individuals, regardless of condition, indicated a greater desire to name their children after themselves. Perhaps, given their increased desire to be close to others and tendency to fear rejection, highly anxious individuals were more likely to bestow their own name upon their children in the hopes

that this act would bring about the closeness they desire. Additionally, highly anxious individuals in the mortality salience condition reported an even greater likelihood of naming their children after themselves. This finding coincides well with previous research by Mikulincer and Florian (2000) which showed that insecure individuals were more likely than secure individuals to cling to worldview defenses following thoughts of death. According to Wisman and Goldenberg (2005), children may serve a worldview defense role in that parents may hope that children carry on their own ideology and values. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that anxious individuals reacted to mortality salience with a heightened desire to name their children after themselves. It is unclear from the present research why avoidant individuals did not respond in a similar manner. Additionally, given that anxious individuals strive to be close to others, it also may be the case that anxious individuals' increased their desire to namesake following mortality salience because of a desire to increase closeness to the child. Although research has shown that close relationship strivings tend to increase following mortality salience, this effect is generally not found for anxious or avoidant individuals (see Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003, for a review), making this explanation less likely (although previous research has focused primarily on romantic relationships, making it difficult to generalize).

Future studies should attempt to investigate why individuals high in avoidance did not react to mortality salience with a heightened desire to namesake, as well as whether namesaking also could serve as a literal form of defense, a way to achieve closeness with others, a self-esteem enhancer, or a combination of these factors. Additionally, a terror management based investigation into cultures with various namesaking traditions (e.g.,

Ashkenazic Jews tend to name their children after deceased relatives; Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews tend to name their children after living relatives; Icelanders always attach their own name to the child's first name) may illuminate cultural variability concerning the effect of mortality salience on the namesaking practice.

In summary, the present research provides for the first step in the process of understanding how namesaking is influenced by mortality salience and serves as an extension of existing research on the terror management function of having offspring. Essentially, people who had been primed with thoughts of death experienced a heightened desire to name their offspring after themselves, consistent with the hypothesis that naming children after oneself serves to symbolically extend one's own life. It remains to be determined whether naming multiple children (as in the case of Foreman's five sons "George" and daughters "Georgetta" and "Freeda George") results in an even greater reduction in the terrors associated with death.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Although men ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.22$) expressed a greater desire than women ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.00$) to give a child their own name, $t(114) = 2.42$, $p = .018$, $d = .45$, they did not express a greater desire to namesake after other relatives. Also, sex did not interact with condition concerning namesaking after self or others.

Figure 1. Predicting desire to namesake after oneself as a function of condition and attachment anxiety.

Table 1

Summary of Regression Analyses: Predicting the desire to namesake after oneself as a function of condition, anxiety, and avoidance

Effect	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Step 1				
Condition	.59	.20	.26	3.04*
Anxiety	.36	.11	.32	3.46*
Avoidance	.01	.11	.01	.08
Step 2				
Condition	.60	.19	.27	3.12*
Anxiety	.35	.11	.31	3.39*
Avoidance	.03	.11	.03	.31
Condition \times Anxiety	.23	.11	.20	2.18*
Condition \times Avoidance	-.05	.11	-.05	-.52

* $p < .05$