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Social Support from Romantic Partners versus Friends as Moderators of Mortality Salience Effects

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Abstract

This study examines the differences between two types of close relationships (friends and romantic partners) in moderating responses to mortality salience. Prior research has shown that mortality salience increases worldview defense as a mechanism for managing the terror of death. It was predicted that social support from romantic partners (but not friends) would alleviate the need to defend one's worldview in response to mortality salience. Following a mortality salience or control prime, participants were given a standardized support note from their friend or romantic partner pertaining to a speech the participants believed they would have to give. Participants were then asked to rate their perceptions of the note and their partner, and rate their opinions of a pro-American and anti-American essay (as a measure of worldview defense). A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between mortality salience and source of social support for worldview defense. Following mortality salience, support from a romantic partner led to less worldview defense than support from a friend. These findings suggest that romantic partners may provide a more effective buffer against existential-anxiety than friends and is consistent with predictions derived from terror management theory.

Keywords: terror management, mortality salience, close relationships, social support

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Many people spend a considerable amount of time and energy looking for romantic love. Even in the presence of other strong social ties, such as family and close friends, establishing a romantic relationship still appears to be a much sought after connection. In fact, when asked to whom they prefer to turn in times of stress, most individuals choose attachment figures, which are typically romantic partners in adulthood (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). Thus, social support provided by a romantic partner seems to be perceived as more valuable (and more desired) than support provided by others, even close friends. However, the existing social support literature, although massive, fails to explore the potential differences between social support sources. In what ways does support from a romantic partner and friend actually differ? Why do people seem to place more emphasis on support from a romantic partner than on support from a friend? In this investigation, we address this question from the perspective of terror management theory (TMT), which speaks to the existential-anxiety buffering properties of specific types of social relations.

Terror Management Theory

Every person must face the inevitability of their own death. According to terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynzki, & Solomon, 1986), which is based on the writings of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1962, 1973, 1975), humans possess the intellectual ability to recognize their own mortality, and this knowledge gives rise to existential anxiety (i.e., an overwhelming fear of death). This terror would be paralyzing if not for the use of existential-anxiety buffers that help individuals to transcend their own terrifying mortality (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Rosenblatt, Veeder, Kirkland, & Lyon, 1990). For example, symbolic transcendence of mortality can be achieved by creating or involving oneself in something that

will continue to exist after one's own death (e.g., artwork, literary work, publications, musical creations, offspring). Research derived from terror management theory has supported cultural worldview (i.e., endorsing a respected worldview that is consistent with societal values) and self-esteem (i.e., feeling good about one's contributions to that culture) as existential-anxiety buffers. An individual's involvement and investment in his or her culture can serve as a symbolic means of achieving immortality, since the culture will continue past the individual's death. Moreover, cultures offer security to those who meet its expectations as a member; thus, in order for culture to properly function as an existential anxiety-buffer, it is necessary for the individual to obtain a sense of worth within that culture. Self-esteem, defined as one's sense of fulfillment at having carried out culturally desirable behaviors, reinforces belongingness to a cultural worldview. A culture may even promise a literal way to achieve immortality, such as through the afterlives depicted by various religions (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989).

Terror management theory posits that in order to defend against the threatening knowledge of their own vulnerability, people are compelled to maintain belief in and defend the cultural worldview to which they subscribe (Rosenblatt et al., 1989). This is presumed to be an ongoing task because people are constantly being reminded of their vulnerability by events in their everyday lives. Simply opening a newspaper or turning on the radio or television can remind one of impending death. Moreover, people depend upon social consensus to validate their conceptions of reality (cf. Festinger, 1954; Kelley, 1967), and as a result, the broad range of conflicting values and beliefs present throughout society pose a challenge to maintaining faith in a particular cultural worldview. Consequently, terror management theory proposes that people favor those who validate their own cultural worldview and dislike those who threaten their cultural worldview (Rosenblatt et al., 1989).

In support of this theory, prior research has shown that cultural worldview validation does indeed act as an anxiety buffer that provides psychological protection against death terror. For example, research has shown that when people are reminded of their own death (i.e., when mortality is made salient), they are more defensive of their cultural worldview and exhibit more pro-social behavior towards in-group members or people who reaffirm their beliefs (Greenberg et al., 1990; Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992), while showing increased hostility towards out-group members (Greenberg et al., 1990), unsuccessful in-group members (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002; Dechesne, Janssen, & van Knippenberg, 2000), and violators of the subscribed culture's standards (e.g., Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Rosenblatt et al., 1989). However, after mortality salience, if an individual's existential-anxiety buffering beliefs are reinforced, their worldview defense decreases, as well as their hostility toward out-group members and cultural transgressors (Fritsche, Jones, Fischer, Koranyi, Berger, & Fleischmann, 2007).

In addition to investigating the terror-managing role of culture, terror management researchers have extended their queries to further explore the role of death awareness in our everyday lives and on various emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functions. A recent topic of study has been the function of close relationships as existential-anxiety buffers. This research is reviewed next as a backdrop for the current investigation.

Close Relationships as Existential-Anxiety Buffers

In an initial extension of terror management theory to the study of close relationships, Florian, Mikulincer, and Hirschberger (2002) found that individuals primed with mortality salience reported higher commitment to their romantic relationships. Additionally, they found that making relationship commitment salient after mortality was primed moderated effects of

mortality on worldview defense (i.e., by making one less defensive of one's worldview). If a

particular psychological mechanism acts as an anxiety buffer for death terror, then activating this

mechanism after being exposed to mortality salience will lessen the need to use other anxiety

buffering mechanisms such as cultural worldview defense (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski,

1997). Thus, the results of this study suggest that close relationships act an existential-anxiety

buffer. Another study by Hirschberger, Florian, and Mikulincer (2002) reaffirmed the desirability

of romantic partners in the face of an existential threat, showing that participants were willing to

make more compromises in mate selection following mortality salience. Florian et al. theorized

that these results may be due to three possible functions of close relationships: 1) they promote

self-preservation as well as symbolic transcendence of death through increased preservation of

offspring, 2) they help regulate distress, and 3) they are an important source of self-esteem.

The results obtained in both studies support the idea that close relationships may provide

a means of attaining symbolic immortality. By becoming connected with others and becoming

part of a larger whole, one can transcend one's own death. Alternatively, the effects shown in

these studies may have resulted because establishing close relationships is a predominant part of

most worldviews. If this is the case, then it is possible that relationship commitment is a

subcomponent of cultural worldviews and not a distinct death-anxiety buffer (Florian et al.,

2002). Another possible reason for close relationships' terror managing functions, postulated by

Cox and Arndt (2011), involves perceived regard, which functions differently from self-esteem

to provide a sense of security within one's relationship and within one's cultural worldview.

These researchers found that mortality salience increased the extent to which people rated their

romantic partners as regarding them positively, but did not increase the extent to which people

rated themselves positively or the extent to which people thought the average person would view

them positively. These findings suggest that positive regard from close relationships has a terror managing effect, perhaps because it communicates acceptance and integration into an important aspect of one's culture, as well as successful adherence to an important cultural norm, whereas positive regard from the average person does not. Similar to perceived regard, perceived supportiveness of a close other may serve to validate one's relationship and thus reaffirm connections to a mortality-transcending social tie.

Terror management theory studies also suggest that specific types of close relationships may act as existential-anxiety buffers. Cox, Arndt, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Abdollahi, and Solomon (2008) theorized that, as the initial attachment bond, parents provide emotional security and buffer existential-anxiety even into adulthood. Their research found that reminding participants of their parents following mortality salience increased feelings of self-worth, reduced death-thought accessibility, and reduced worldview defense. Additionally, a study by Wakimoto (2007) found that mortality salience increased the desire for nonromantic close friendships among Japanese (as cited in Wakimoto, 2011). However, further research comparing different types of relationships within the same study is warranted. Are friendships as effective as romantic partners in relieving existential-anxiety? Even if friends also serve a terror-management function, romantic partners may offer something that friendship does not: They may help one to achieve another previously studied existential-anxiety buffer, procreation, which is discussed next.

The Terror-Managing Function of Offspring

Procreation may also provide relief from existential anxiety because it allows one to live on vicariously through progeny. Parents can achieve literal immortality by passing their genes on to a new generation that will live on after their death. Children can also offer a sense of symbolic

immortality by providing a way for their parents to be remembered after their death or by carrying on a parent's teachings, ideology, or business (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005).

A study by Wisman and Goldenberg (2005) found that Dutch men, but not Dutch women exhibited an increased desire to have offspring after a mortality salience manipulation. They also found that men have reduced worldview defense if they are made to think about procreation after a mortality salience manipulation. In contrast, Dutch women showed a decrease in desire to have offspring after mortality was made salient. However, similar terror managing effects to those present in Dutch men can be found in Dutch women if the desire for offspring does not conflict with the desire for a successful career, which is another culturally valued domain and alternative way to manage existential-anxiety. The large amount of responsibility given to a woman in the child-rearing process may threaten her ability to be a successful working and contributing member of society. In support of this idea, Wisman and Goldenberg also found that when compatibility of career strivings and nurturing offspring is made salient, women also showed increased desire for offspring after mortality salience.

Similarly, a study by Fritsche et al. (2007) indicated that German participants (both men and women) expressed an increased desire for offspring following a mortality salience manipulation. Mortality salience increased both death-thought accessibility and offspring-related thought accessibility. Additionally, worldview defense decreased when offspring were made salient following morality salience. Taken together, these findings strongly support the idea that procreation may also serve to buffer existential-anxiety. Because procreation occurs in the context of romantic relationships, romantic relationships may be more effective in providing terror managing functions than non-romantic relationships in which there is no potential for procreation.

The Present Research

In this study, we sought to examine differences in the effectiveness of support from a friend versus support from a romantic partner as an existential-anxiety buffer in response to mortality salience. The source of social support in a mortality salient situation was manipulated so that the terror managing effects of opposite-sex romantic partners and same-sex friends could be compared. Worldview defense, perceptions of a supportive note written by a romantic partner or friend, and perceptions of the romantic partner or friend were measured (following a supportive note from the romantic partner or friend) to determine the extent to which each source of social support acted as an existential-anxiety buffer and was viewed as more or less helpful after a death reminder. Since heterosexual romantic partners have the potential to create offspring in addition to other terror managing functions of close relationships, then following mortality salience, social support from a romantic partner should reduce worldview defense to a greater extent than social support from a friend (hypothesis #1). Additionally, while we expected romantic partners to be perceived as more supportive than friends in both the mortality salience and control conditions, following mortality salience, we expected that this difference would be amplified (hypothesis #2). Because support may serve to reaffirm one's relationship, we predicted that a relationship that provides more relief from existential threat (romantic relationship) would generate a greater need for reaffirmation following mortality salience than a relationship that provides less relief (friendship). This reaffirmation may occur by viewing romantic partners as particularly supportive following mortality salience.

Method

Participants

Sixty-three American undergraduate and graduate students (34 female, 29 male) were the target participants for the study. Participants were recruited by flyers on campus bulletin boards and through the psychology department participant pool website. Participants were told that the study's purpose was to understand people's experiences when engaging in activities either independently or with a partner. A romantic partner or a same-sex friend attended the study with them. One member of each dyad was randomly selected to be the target participant and thus the focus of the investigation. For clarity, the target participants will be referred to as "participants," and their friends or romantic partners will be referred to as "partners." Four participants were excluded from data analysis due to their suspicions about the experimental manipulations, and one participant was excluded only from the analysis of note perceptions due to an incomplete questionnaire. Participants' age ranged from 17 years to 30 years ($M = 19.85$, $SD = 2.32$). With regard to ethnicity, 43.3% of the participants identified themselves as white, 30.9% identified as Asian, 14.1% identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 11.7% identified as other. As compensation, each participant received either course credit or $8 in cash.

Procedure

After informed consent was obtained, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on which they reported demographic information (e.g. age, sexual orientation, gender) and information regarding their relationship with their partner (e.g. How long have you known your partner?). This first questionnaire contained additional filler questions (e.g. Rosenberg Self Esteem, Experiences in Close Relationships) meant to support the cover story. Then, participants worked on a joint activity with their friend or romantic partner: They were asked to play a game

called Catch Phrase, which was meant to help participants feel comfortable in the lab, and also to

support the study's cover story. Immediately following the game, participants were asked to

complete a questionnaire about their thoughts and feelings about the game. The end of this

questionnaire contained the mortality salience manipulation, which participants were told was a

measure of personality. Then, the target participant was asked to work independently for 5 minutes

to prepare a speech while his/her partner worked on puzzles and games in another room. While the

target participant was preparing a speech, his/her partner was asked to copy a pre-prepared

standardized support note in his/her own handwriting ("Good luck. I'm sure you'll do a good

job."). Four minutes into the speech preparation, the target participant was told that he/she had

one minute left to prepare and was given the note that the partner had written to him/her.

Following the speech preparation, the participant was given a questionnaire containing measures of

his/her perceptions of the note, perceptions of the partner, and worldview defense. After the

activities and questionnaires were completed, participants were thoroughly debriefed and

compensated for their participation. Detailed descriptions of the procedure and measures are

provided below.

     Source of Social Support. Source of social support could not feasibly be randomly

assigned, since some participants may not have had a particular source available to bring to the

study, and it would not have been reasonable to assume that all participants were currently

engaged in romantic relationships. To reduce any effects created by allowing participants to

choose their own source of social support, selection of the target participant from the

participating pairs was randomized so that sometimes the person who had initially signed up for

the study and chose their partner was the focus of the data collection (i.e. target participant), and

sometimes the person who had been invited by the initial participant was chosen to be the focus

of the data collection. Twenty-eight of the people who signed up for the study invited their

romantic partners and 31 invited their friends to the study.

Mortality salience manipulation. Similar to past terror management studies (e.g.

Greenberg et al., 1990), mortality was made salient by asking the participants to write down their

responses to two open-ended questions: "Briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your

own death arouse in you" and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what will happen to you as

you physically die and once you are physically dead." Participants in the control group were

instead asked to write down their thoughts and feelings about dental pain, another unpleasant

experience that does not involve death. Thirty participants were randomly assigned to the

mortality salience condition and 29 participants were randomly assigned to the control condition.

Speech. Following the mortality salience manipulation, the target participant was asked to

prepare a speech while his/her partner was in a separate room. Participants were asked to prepare

a "how to" speech on a topic of their choice. The speech preparation served two functions: it

acted as a delay/distraction, since it was been found that mortality salience effects occur when

death-related thoughts are accessible but outside of conscious awareness (Pyszczynski,

Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), and the speech provided a mildly stressful situation for which

social support was warranted.

Perceptions of the support note. Included in the final questionnaire were 17 items (for

which participants responded on a 7-point scale, 1 = "not at all" and 7 = "very much") asking the

participants about their feelings regarding their partner's note. A principal components analysis

indicated that these items loaded on four factors representing perceived care (e.g. "showed that

my partner likes me for the person that I am," 7 items, $\alpha = .885$), supportive note (e.g. "was

intended to make me feel good," 5 items, $\alpha = .713$), positive speech outlook (e.g. "made me look

forward to the speech activity," 2 items, $\alpha = .840$), and negative note perceptions (e.g. "made me feel pressured," 3 items, $\alpha = .490$).

Perceptions of partner. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which each of 33 given adjectives (e.g. understanding, insulting, affectionate, respectful) described their partner on a scale from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("extremely"). A principal components analysis indicated that the items loaded on four factors representing: supportive partner (e.g. "encouraging," "caring," 12 items, $\alpha = .930$), negative partner (e.g. "demanding," "rejecting," 8 items, $\alpha = .909$), stressed partner (e.g. "stressed," "worried," 3 items, $\alpha = .802$), and critical partner (e.g. "opinionated," "insulting," 4 items, $\alpha = .771$).

Worldview defense. Participants were asked to read two short essays written by foreign students (Greenberg et al., 1992). The participants were told that this task was meant to help them relax before delivering the speech. One essay praised the United States, while the other essay criticized the United States. In order to assess the participants' reactions to the essays, after each one, the participant was asked to respond to 5 items, all on 9-point scales (1 = "not at all" and 9 = "totally"). These items included questions to assess the participants' feelings about the authors and the authors' opinions (e.g. "How much did you like this person?," "How much did you agree with this person's opinion of America?"). To calculate worldview defense, the means of the anti-American essay responses were subtracted from the means of the pro-American essay responses. Participants who exhibited increased worldview defense rated positive opinions of America more favorably and negative opinions more unfavorably. Thus, a larger positive difference in essay ratings indicates a greater worldview defense value. Cronbach's alpha was .897 for anti-American essay response questions and .902 for pro-American essay response questions.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Independent t-tests were conducted to check for randomization of variables across social support source condition (romantic partner versus friend), given that participants chose to bring either a romantic partner or friend to the lab. We also checked for randomization of variables across the mortality salience condition (mortality salience versus dental pain). Specifically, we examined potential differences in demographic and relationship characteristics such as gender, age, and length of time knowing the partner. Table 1 shows the results of these analyses.

Results indicated that there were no significant differences between the social support source conditions and between the mortality salience conditions for gender and length of time knowing the partner. Thus, randomization across conditions was successful for these variables. With regard to the target participant's age, there was no significant difference between mortality salience conditions in age of recruited participants or partners brought to the lab. However, there was a significant (albeit small) age difference in the social support source conditions (see Table 1; $M = 20.79$, $SD = 2.73$ for the romantic partner condition and ($M = 19.00$, $SD = 1.46$ for the friend condition).

Hypothesis Testing

We hypothesized that 1) participants receiving support from a romantic partner should show less worldview defense than those receiving support from a friend following mortality salience, and 2) romantic partners would be perceived as more supportive than friends throughout both conditions, but this difference would be amplified following mortality salience. A series of two-way ANOVAs were conducted with social support source (romantic partner

versus friend) and mortality salience (mortality salience versus dental pain) as the independent

variables, and with worldview defense, partner perception variables, and note perception

variables as the dependent variables. Means and standard deviations of all study variables are

presented in Table 2.

A main effect of social support source was found for perceived partner supportiveness,

indicating that romantic partners were perceived as more supportive than friends across mortality

salience conditions ($F(1, 59) = 6.14$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, participants in the romantic partner

condition perceived their partner as more stressed than participants in the friend condition ($F(1,$

$59) = 5.87$, $p < 0.05$). An effect of social support source was found for perceived care of the note,

indicating that notes from a romantic partner were perceived as showing more care than notes

from a friend ($F(1, 59) = 3.94$, $p = 0.052$). No other main effects were statistically significant.

Results for main effects are shown in Table 3.

As predicted, a significant interaction between social support source condition and

mortality salience condition was found for worldview defense ($F(1, 59) = 8.51$, $p < 0.01$; see

Figure 1). Follow up analyses indicated that participants who received support from a friend had

significantly greater worldview defense in the mortality salience condition ($M = 2.57$) than in the

dental pain condition ($M = 0.36$) ($t(29) = -2.89$, $p < 0.01$), but participants who received support

from a romantic partner did not show a significant difference in worldview defense between

mortality salience ($M = -0.03$) and dental pain ($M = 1.25$) conditions ($t(26) = 1.37$, $p = 0.18$).

Additionally, within the mortality salience condition, participants receiving romantic partner

support ($M = -0.03$) exhibited lower worldview defense than participants receiving friend support

($M = 2.57$) ($t(28) = -2.781$, $p < 0.05$). Within the dental pain condition, there was no difference

between support sources ($t(27) = 1.21$, $p = 0.24$). In contrast to predictions, no interaction effects were obtained for any of the partner perception or note perception variables.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether there is a significant difference in the ways in which people perceive support from a friend or a romantic partner and to explore terror-managing functions as a possible explanation for this difference. Consistent with our hypothesis, romantic partners were perceived as more supportive than friends. Additionally, participants perceived a note that was written by a romantic partner as more caring than a note that was written by a friend. Unexpectedly, participants in the romantic partner condition perceived their partner as more stressed than did participants in the friend condition. Since the target participants were aware that their partners were working on low-stress puzzles and games in a separate room (while the targets were preparing a speech), this difference might be explained by a greater desire to receive empathy from a romantic partner than from a friend. That is, target participants may assume that romantic partners (moreso than friends) are likely to feel empathic distress for the target who must give a speech.

Consistent with our primary hypothesis, the present research indicates that romantic partners may provide more relief from existential-anxiety than friends. The romantic partner group showed less worldview defense than the friend group following mortality salience. While participants receiving support from a friend showed increased worldview defense from the dental pain to the mortality salience condition, participants receiving support from a romantic partner showed no significant change between the conditions. Because support from a romantic partner alleviated worldview defense, which is typically increased following mortality salience, romantic partners appear to play a greater role in managing existential terror than friends. Due to a lack of

a control condition (e.g., with no social support source), no inference can be made about the extent to which friends buffer existential-anxiety compared to receiving no support from this study. Because past research suggests that friends do play a role in managing existential-anxiety (Wakimoto, 2011), it may bethat both types of close relationships have some terror managing function, but romantic partners may be more effective in this regard.

To elaborate, both friendships and romantic relationships are consistent with cultural expectations and thus the presence of either relationship can bolster one's self esteem within their subscribed worldview. The difference between these two types of close relationships in moderating worldview defense could be due to the additional potential for procreation that is present among heterosexual couples. Not only can a romantic partner provide symbolic immortality by reaffirming one's belonging to a transcendent culture, but they can also provide a biological legacy. An alternative explanation is that the observed difference could be due to an unbalanced emphasis on the importance of various relationships in American culture, which focuses on the importance of acquiring a significant other more-so than the acquisition of friends. For instance, while both are culturally desirable, most entertainment mediums center around the topic of romantic love. Additionally, while dating websites are becoming increasingly more popular, it is much rarer to hear about people finding friends online. With romance being highlighted throughout American culture, the presence of a romantic partner might provide one with a deeper sense of belonging within one's culture compared to the presence of a friend.

Although romantic partners were perceived as more supportive than friends and exhibited less worldview defense following mortality salience, there was no interaction between mortality salience and source of social support predicting perceived partner support. It is possible that the standardized note was too supportive, which led to a ceiling effect. The mean rating of romantic

partner support for the dental pain condition was 4.13 (SD = 0.51) out of a possible rating of 5. This left little room for participants in the mortality salience condition to exhibit a significantly increased score (M = 4.29, SD = 0.58). We attempted to prevent this type of ceiling effect when designing the study by keeping the support notes brief; however, the results indicate that even the brief support notes were perceived as highly supportive across conditions. In future research, it will be important to deal with this ceiling effect either by increasing the stressfulness of the situation (such that the brief support note may not be perceived as highly supportive by all), or by altering the content of the note to be more ambiguously supportive. Additionally, due to the difficulty of randomizing support source, it is possible that there was a bias regarding the partner that each person who signed up for the study decided to bring with them. To reduce effects of this potential bias, the "target participant" was randomly selected for each dyad. Although the person who signed up for the study might have specifically chosen a friend or romantic partner, it is possible that the person they chose would not necessarily have chosen to invite the same support source. Also, the fact that relationship length did not differ between friend and romantic dyads adds to the confidence that we can place in the equivalent stability of the relationships in each support source condition.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the present research fills a large gap in the social support literature which fails to compare multiple types of relationships within the same study. In addition to comparing two types of close relationships, this study recruited participant dyads rather than individual participants, thus providing a realistic representation of support from a friend or romantic partner. Moreover, this study contributes to the few existing studies that consider close relationships from a terror management theory perspective.

Future research is warranted to determine if the potential for procreation mediates the difference in worldview defense between friends and romantic partners. For instance, research looking at whether homosexual or infertile couples still provide the same existential-anxiety buffering effects could offer insights into this domain. On a broader scale, further exploration of the terror managing functions of different types of relationships is warranted. Though most past studies have considered the terror managing effects of one type of relationship (e.g. Cox et. al, 2008; Cox and Arndt, 2011; Florian et. al, 2002; Wakimoto, 2011), there is a need for research comparing different types of relationships – not just with regard to terror management research but in the close relationships literature more broadly. In addition, research comparing effects of various sources of social support (within the same study) is lacking in the social support research as well. It is also important that future research is conducted in non-student samples to ensure generalizability to a broader population.

Understanding the ways in which individuals are affected by different types of relationships could offer valuable insights into the specific roles that each type of connection might play in our lives. Most research focuses solely on the benefits of one particular type of relationship. However, without empirical comparisons of more than one relationship type within the same study, we cannot discern the unique qualities of each type of relationship. Uncovering these differences could provide important knowledge regarding the selection of relevant sources of support in a given situation – and may inform future support interventions. For instance, it may be that one source of support is particularly helpful for someone during a medical crisis (which is likely to prime mortality), whereas a different source may be more helpful when preparing for a stressful exam. Though more empirical evidence is warranted, this study

indicates that romantic partners may play a powerful role in assuaging death terror, which is not matched by close friendships.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, t-values, and p-values for quantitative demographic variables, and number and percent of participants for categorical demographic variables between social support source and mortality salience conditions.

	Mortality		Dental Pain			
	M	SD	M	SD	t-value	p-value
Age	19.67	2.06	20.03	2.58	0.61	0.55
Length of Relationship (months)	17.70	18.94	19.14	26.57	0.24	0.81
	N	Percent	N	Percent		
Gender					-0.14	0.89
Male	14	46.7%	13	44.8%		
Female	16	53.3%	16	55.2%		
Ethnicity						
White/Caucasian	12	40.0%	16	55.1%		
Asian	10	33.3%	8	27.6%		
Hispanic or Latino	4	13.3%	3	10.3%		
Black/African American	4	13.3%	0	0%		
Other	0	0%	2	6.9%		

	Romantic Partner		Friend			
	M	SD	M	SD	t-value	p-value
Age	20.79	2.73	19.00	1.46	3.18	0.00
Length of Relationship (months)	22.50	17.11	14.57	26.70	1.34	0.19
	N	Percent	N	Percent		
Gender					1.68	0.10
Male	16	57.1%	11	35.5%		
Female	12	42.9%	20	64.5%		
Ethnicity						
White/Caucasian	17	60.7%	11	35.4%		
Asian	8	28.6%	10	32.3%		
Hispanic or Latino	2	7.1%	5	16.1%		
Black/African American	1	3.6%	3	9.7%		
Other	0	0%	2	6.5%		

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for essay evaluations (worldview defense), partner perceptions, and note perceptions

	Salience			
	Mortality		Dental Pain	
Support Source	M	SD	M	SD
Romantic Partner				
Pro-American essay responses	5.75	1.67	6.03	1.09
Anti-American essay responses	5.77	1.86	4.78	1.36
Worldview defense (difference)	-0.03	2.83	1.25	1.91
Supportive partner	4.29	0.58	4.13	0.51
Negative partner	1.25	0.36	1.43	0.53
Stressed partner	2.24	1.07	2.03	0.88
Critical partner	1.62	0.72	1.69	0.75
Caring note	5.93	0.97	5.29	1.00
Supportive note	6.76	0.27	6.66	0.34
Positive speech outlook	4.47	1.91	4.73	1.49
Negative note	1.64	0.97	1.61	0.73
Friend				
Pro-American essay responses	6.87	1.45	5.31	1.98
Anti-American essay responses	4.29	1.87	4.95	1.29
Worldview defense (difference)	2.57	2.26	0.36	2.00
Supportive partner	3.79	0.85	3.72	0.79
Negative partner	1.23	0.49	1.24	0.51
Stressed partner	1.56	0.69	1.69	0.54
Critical partner	1.42	0.74	1.39	0.62
Caring note	4.91	1.37	5.09	1.26
Supportive note	6.69	0.38	6.49	0.68
Positive speech outlook	4.43	1.76	3.97	1.70
Negative note	2.07	0.98	1.62	0.77

Table 3. Main effect results for essay evaluations, partner perceptions, and note perceptions.

	Mortality		Dental Pain			
	M	SD	M	SD	F-value	p-value
Pro-American essay responses	6.31	1.64	5.63	1.65	2.30	0.13
Anti-American essay responses	5.03	1.98	4.88	1.53	0.14	0.71
Worldview defense (difference)	1.27	2.84	0.76	1.98	0.62	0.44
Supportive partner	4.04	0.76	3.91	0.70	0.39	0.53
Negative partner	1.24	0.42	1.33	0.52	0.59	0.45
Stressed partner	1.90	0.95	1.84	0.72	0.04	0.84
Critical partner	1.52	0.70	1.53	0.69	0.02	0.89
Caring note	5.44	1.27	5.18	1.14	0.57	0.45
Supportive note	6.72	0.33	6.57	0.56	1.50	0.22
Positive speech outlook	4.45	1.81	4.31	1.63	0.05	0.83
Negative note	1.85	0.98	1.62	0.74	1.07	0.30

	Romantic Partner		Friend			
	M	SD	M	SD	F-value	p-value
Pro-American essay responses	5.88	1.41	6.06	1.88	0.23	0.63
Anti-American essay responses	5.31	1.88	4.63	1.60	2.14	0.15
Worldview defense (difference)	0.56	2.49	1.43	2.38	2.06	0.16
Supportive partner	4.22	0.54	3.76	0.81	6.14	0.02**
Negative partner	1.33	0.45	1.24	0.50	0.69	0.41
Stressed partner	2.14	0.97	1.62	0.61	5.87	0.02**
Critical partner	1.65	0.72	1.40	0.67	1.84	0.18
Caring note	5.63	1.02	5.00	1.30	3.94	0.05*
Supportive note	6.71	0.30	6.58	0.56	1.05	0.31
Positive speech outlook	4.59	1.70	4.18	1.71	0.77	0.38
Negative note	1.63	0.85	1.83	0.89	0.90	0.35

** indicates that the value falls below the significance cutoff ($\alpha = 0.05$)
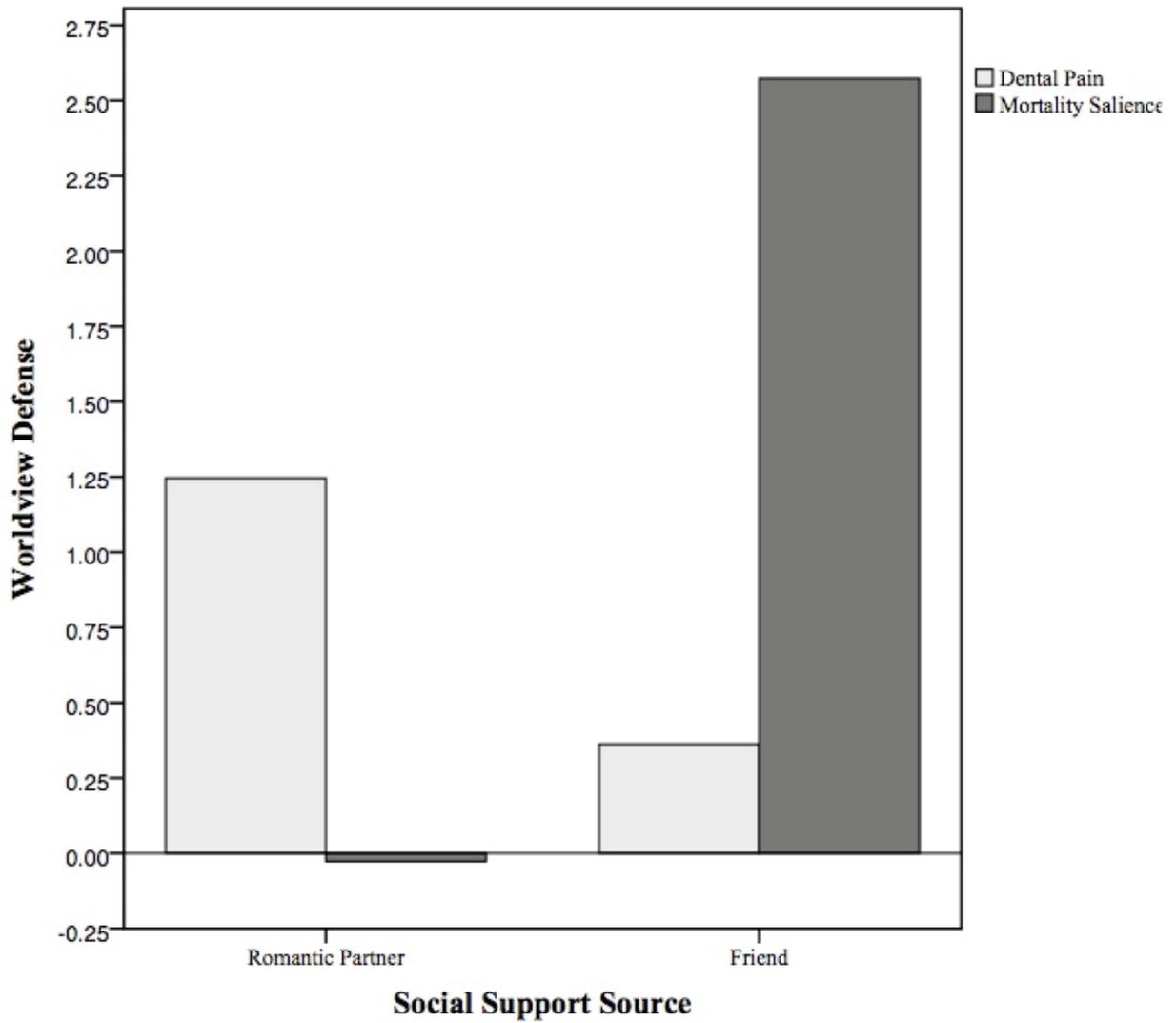* indicates a marginally significant finding

Figure 1. Worldview defense (pro-American minus anti-American essay ratings) following support from a romantic partner or friend as a function of mortality salience.