

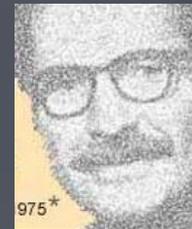
The School of Natural and Behavioral Sciences  
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM  
APRIL 19, 2012 – FORT LEWIS COLLEGE

# Mortality Salience Amplifies Moral Appraisal

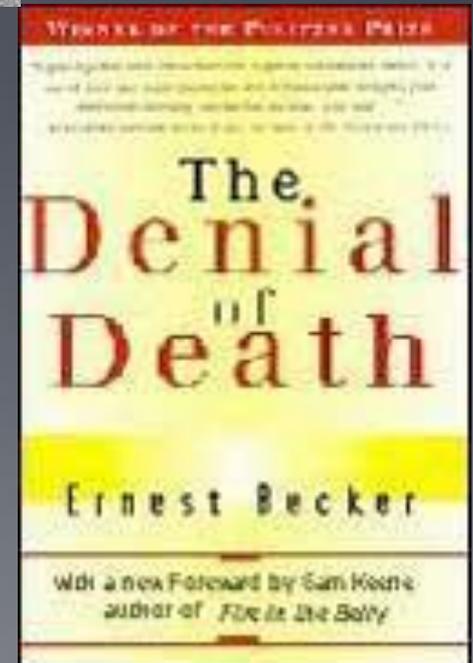
Taylor, C. A., & Burke, B. L. (2012).  
*FLC Department of Psychology.*

# Terror Management Theory

- Ernest Becker
- DENIAL OF DEATH (1974)
- Multidisciplinary approach to humanity



975\*



# THE PROBLEM

**Instinct for self-preservation  
(all animals)**

**+**

**Awareness of mortality  
(humans only)**

**=**

**TERROR or anxiety!**

# Proposing The Solution

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- Maintain a strong belief in a **cultural worldview**
    - Provides a sense of meaning and individual importance
    - The promise of symbolic-- or literal—immortality
  - Different **existential systems** exist
    - E.g., the philosophical idea of death vs. the immediate experience of death
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# Death and Politics

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- **Political views** are in part shaped by our need to manage death
    - E.g., overall effect size for death reminders on political attitudes was significantly higher than for other attitudes and behaviors (Burke et al., 2011)
  - **Conservative shift hypothesis:** when reminded of death, people's attitudes & behavior shift in defense of their worldview
    - E.g., high government approval following 9/11/01 (38% of people living within blocks of the WTC became more conservative vs. 13% more liberal post 9/11; Bonanno & Jost, 2006)
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# Death and Morals

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- Two of the most vital components of a cultural worldview = **politics** and **morals**
  - Morals may also be particularly critical parts of the cultural worldview (Kesebir et al., 2011)
  - *So how are morals affected by death reminders?*
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# Moral Foundations Theory

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What are morals good for?

“Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, practices, institutions, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible” (Haidt, 2008, p. 70)

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# Moral Foundations Theory

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- Two distinct functions of **moral systems**:
    - Function by protecting individuals directly (the “**Individualizing**” approach)
    - Function by strengthening groups and institutions (the “**Binding**” approach)
  - Different political views = different moral concerns
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MORAL CONCERNS

LIBERAL  
CONSERVATIVE



↑  
Individualizing Morals

↑  
Binding Morals

# Current Study

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- Will Death cause a conservative shift in moral concerns?
  - Hypothesis 1: mortality salience will cause a conservative shift in moral concerns
  - Hypothesis 2: immediate death reflection will cause liberal shift in moral concerns
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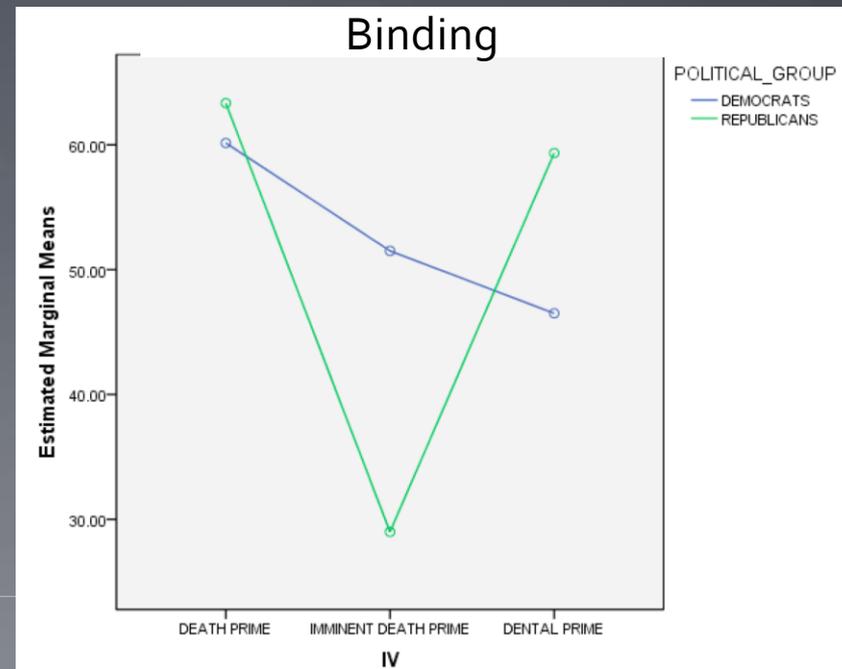
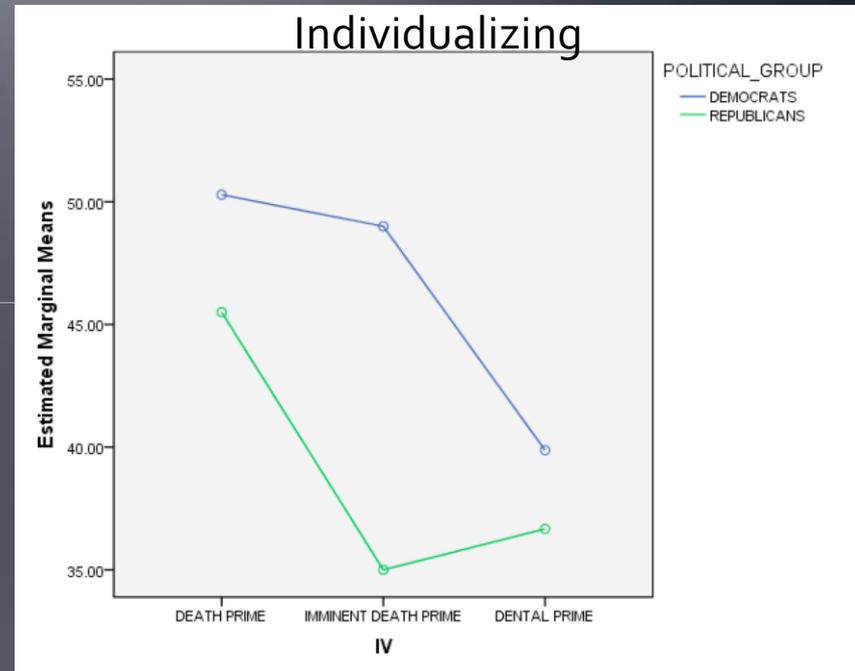
# Methods

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- Participants
    - 59 FLC students: 36 females, 23 males
    - Ages 17-42 (mean = 21.2)
  - Measures
    - Condition 1: **Idea of Death**: 2 open-ended questions
    - Condition 2: **Immediate experience of Death**: fire scenario
    - Condition 3: Dental Pain (control) 2 open-ended questions
    - **Moral Foundations Questionnaire** (Haidt, 2008)
      - 30 items to rate the moral relevance of each foundation
  - Procedure
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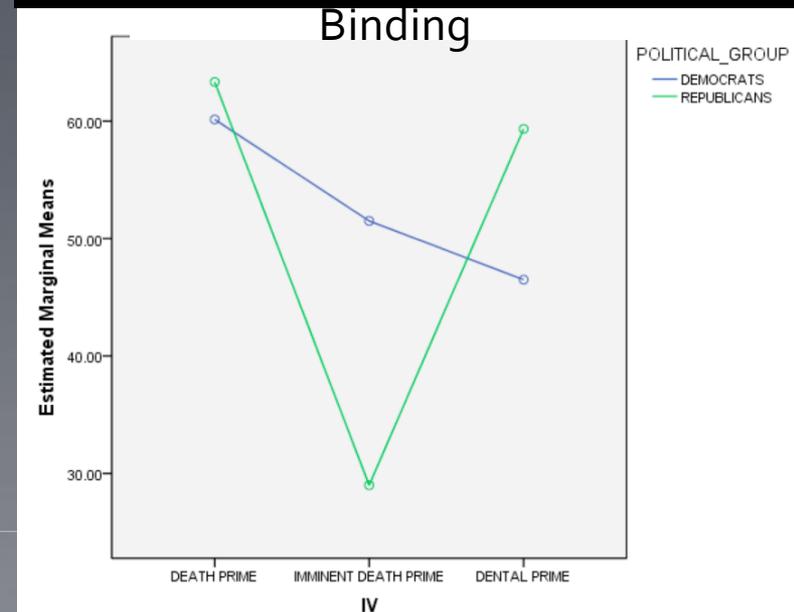
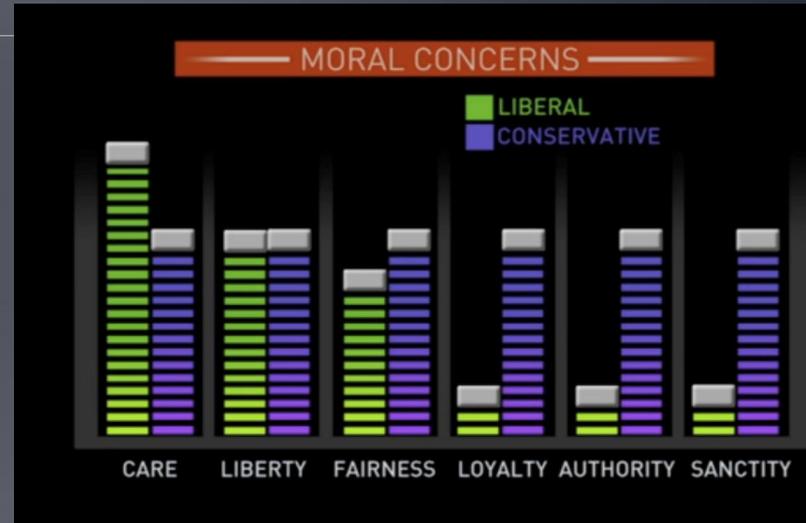
# Results

- **Thoughts of Death** significantly increase **individualizing** foundations overall – with no interaction effect
- Significant **interaction effect** found on **binding** foundations – Democrats and Republicans were affected differently
- In **control group**, Democrats scored higher on the individualizing foundations and lower on binding as expected



# Discussion

- “Death Reminders” reliably caused increase in moral concerns overall (all moral foundations) = **Conservative shift**
  - Overall, this could explain the **conservative shift** as default death reaction (Burke et al., 2011) – all 3 **binding** morals increased in the death group vs. control
- “Imminent Death Experience” condition led to *decrease* in all 3 binding/groupish values (no change in individual), especially for self-reported Republicans
  - Thus, imminent death made people less groupish (cf. Blackie & Cozzolino, 2011) and hence less conservative (**liberal shift**)



# Conclusion



- **Death** and **Politics** are interrelated
- Democrats and Republicans seem to rely of different **sets of morals**
- The **immediate experience of death** has different psychological effects than the abstract idea of our mortality.
  - **E.g., people are less concerned with sociocultural GROUPS and more concerned with INDIVIDUAL rights**
- Our research supports the hypothesis that **political shifts** follow from **moral shifts**.
- Underlying **goal** is to increase understanding of how and why we evolved to be moral, so we can learn to be more **open-minded** and **civil** with each other.



"I think the worst part is knowing my own expiration date."