Death, extraversion, commitment, and sex: a study on terror management

Jalaal Madyun
Buena Vista University

Wind Goodfriend
Buena Vista University
Death, Extraversion, Commitment, and Sex: A Study on Terror Management

Jalaal Madyun & Wind Goodfriend
Buena Vista University

Abstract
Several studies have found that when confronted with mortality (i.e., mortality salience), the desire for intimate relationships and the desire for sex increase (Ben-Ari, 2004; Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2002). The current study examined desire for commitment to a romantic partner and the desire to engage in risky sexual behaviors when mortality is salient and added an examination of how these constructs overlap with the personality trait of extraversion. Results showed that, as expected, extraversion was correlated with the desire to engage in risky sexual behavior. Surprisingly, however, individuals under mortality salience were less likely to desire risky sexual encounters, compared to a control group. Implications for adult close relationships and terror management theory are discussed.

Death, Extraversion, Commitment, and Sex: A Study on Terror Management
At one point or another each human being has contemplated the inevitable conclusion of life. Because all humans share the same fate, the path through life teaches all members of the species common lessons and establishes common experiences that are valued and considered essential to our own existence and overall satisfaction with life. For instance, many individuals have the privilege of experiencing close family relationships, romantic connections, and even love. During the course of our lives, these ties provide emotional shelter and comfort in times of distress (Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2002). Research has shown that individuals who are not able to form these close relationships suffer from more severe identity crises and are more likely to exhibit self-destructive behaviors (Mikulincer, Florian, & Tolmacz, 1990). It is important to understand how interpersonal relationships thus serve as possible anxiety buffers when contemplating death. The purpose of the current study was to examine the interplay between mortality salience, relationship commitment level, and the desire to engage in risky sexual behavior. In addition, the present study investigated the role of extraversion as a predictor of one’s desire to engage in risky sexual behavior.

Terror Management Theory
Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) postulates four major arguments: 1) Human beings are aware that our own death is inevitable, 2) awareness of this fact is psychologically crippling, 3) we develop worldviews to distract ourselves from existential concerns (“death awareness”), and 4) when our life is threatened or we are primed to think about death (“mortality salience”), we cling to these worldviews (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997).

Repeatedly, studies have shown two behaviors elicited by mortality salience. First, participants demonstrate cognitive and behavioral motivation to have their worldviews validated (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Existing evidence showing that participants have more negative views of other groups of people who do not share worldviews similar to their own supports the aforementioned claim (Greenberg et al., 1997). The second change seen in participants under mortality salience conditions is that they demonstrate cognitive and behavioral motivation to increase their self esteem by
perpetuating positively appraised cultural standards (Greenberg et al., 1997). For example, the results of three studies conducted by Arndt and colleagues found that participants who were primed to think about death were motivated to reduce their identification with in-groups when the perception of their group was not favorable (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002).

These two general tendencies (worldview validation and boosting of self-esteem) can manifest themselves in a variety of specific cognitive processes or behaviors. In the current study, the effects of mortality salience are focused in the specific area of romantic and sexual adult relationships. Many studies (reviewed below) have explored the associations among these constructs, but some researchers have produced mixed results, and no single study is complete. The goal of the present study was thus to expand knowledge about the intersection of Terror Management Theory and close relationships, and to add the new variable of extraversion because of the interesting connection between extraversion and sexual decision making.

**TMT, Risky Sexual Behaviors, and Commitment**

In the opinion of many, sex is the ultimate destination of interpersonal physical connection. Several studies have examined interplay between sex and terror management theory, and a pattern seems to have appeared. When mortality is salient, the desire to engage in risky sexual behavior will increase because procreation is used as a means to symbolic immortality (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005). Put another way, the desire to engage in risky sexual behavior will increase under mortality salience conditions if intimacy is emphasized because it creates a sense of transcendence and continuity (Goldenberg, Cox, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2002). The sexual act can make some individuals feel connected to something larger than themselves when sex is perceived in a romantic light.

Several reasons have been proposed to explain this response, including an increased desire for procreation (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005). Having children may serve as an anxiety buffering technique against existential concerns. Literally and figuratively, procreation seems to establish a sense of immortality and self-worth by contributing to a cause greater than oneself. There is evidence that this effect is stronger for men than for women. For example, Wisman and Goldenberg (2005) established that career strivings moderated the effect of mortality salience on a desire for offspring for women, but not for men. Furthermore, they revealed that when the compatibility of having children and a career was made salient, women responded to mortality salience with an increased number of desired children. The combined results suggest that a desire for offspring can function as a terror management defense mechanism. In general, the results of the study support the prediction that mortality salience would increase procreation strivings for both men and women, but women’s reactions become more complex due to factors such as endangered career opportunities in comparison to men, who do not face similar sacrifices during child conception (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005). In short, increased procreation strivings under mortality salience will lead to an increase in sexually risky behaviors.

One of the recent real life examples that illustrates the validity of TMT occurred in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In the months following the attacks, the United States experienced an increase in the marriage rate and hospitals reported an unusually rapid increase in births (CNN, May 2002, as cited in Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005). This occurrence suggests that there is a connection between experiencing life threatening events and the desire to procreate. However, it is unclear if mortality salience leads to a desire to procreate or if it
leads to a desire for meaningful relationships, which consequently increases the chances of procreation. In the words of Goldenberg (2005), human sexuality represents our animalistic urges, whereas love portrays the higher symbolic meaning of human uniqueness, and both reflect basic natural existential needs of humans. The thought of love after thoughts of the physical aspects of sex has also been found to reduce the threat of mortality salience (Goldenberg, 2005). With the abundance of evidence connecting sex, love, and risky behavior, other authors have been inspired to apply similarly meaningful contexts to a variation of other related bodily experiences. In a study exploring the interplay between death awareness, fear of intimacy, and unsafe sex, Ben-Ari (2004) found that both risky sexual relationships and fear of intimacy brought about higher death-related thought accessibility, which demonstrates that the participants mentally made a connection between the two variables and their own mortality. The authors of the current study will further examine the use of close relationships versus risky sexual behaviors as anxiety buffering techniques.

As defined by the Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) commitment in a romantic relationship is predicted by partners’ satisfaction level in the current relationship (positively correlated), the perceived alternatives (negatively correlated), and the magnitude of investment in the current relationship (positively correlated). Based on the concrete body of research that has already been conducted, inferences can be made using the assumption that commitment is a prominent method of anxiety buffering (Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2002). In other words, despite comparative relationship differences such as mate selection standards and relationship harmony, individuals will use commitment or close relationships in high frequencies as a way of deflating the terror associated with mortality salience (Smieja, Kalaska, & Adamczyk, 2006).

Furthermore, extant research has shown interesting connections between relationship behaviors and self esteem. The desire for close relationships during mortality salience is not limited to individuals with low self esteem. Smieja, Kalaska, and Adamczyk (2006) found that high self esteem participants exhibited higher mate selection standards than low self esteem individuals and were less willing to compromise these standards in neutral conditions, but when mortality was salient, their willingness to compromise those standards drastically increased. In concurrence, Hirschberger, Florian, and Mikulincer (2002) also reported that when exposed to death reminders, people seem to be strongly motivated to form close relationships even at the cost of finding a less than ideal partner. There is also evidence that criticism or scrutiny within a relationship may be of little consequence to the desire for intimacy, as even following a partner’s expressions of complaint, people still maintained a high desire for intimacy (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). All of the abovementioned examples are clear illustrations of the effectiveness of close relationships as anxiety buffering strategies.

**TMT and General Risky Behaviors**

It is reasonable to wonder whether increased mortality salience would lead to a higher desire to engage in sex, as described above, if the sexual act is considered “risky.” For example, if a potential sexual partner is not well known, or potentially carries sexually transmitted diseases, one might assume that increased thoughts about death would decrease desire for sex with that partner due to the risk of exposing oneself to fatal diseases such as HIV. Surprisingly, however, among the many defense mechanisms against mortality salience is the desire to engage in risky behaviors. Ben-Ari (2000) conducted a study examining the effects of terror management theory on risky behaviors while driving. According to the biological principle of self preservation, risky
behaviors such as reckless driving should be viewed as aversive (Ben-Ari, 2000). On the contrary, in five out of six studies, mortality salience led men who perceived driving as relevant to their self esteem to engage in more reckless driving than did men who did not perceive driving as relevant to their self esteem (Ben-Ari, 2000). As was discussed earlier, one response to mortality salience is to boost one’s self esteem. In these studies, the men’s assessment of thrill and social acknowledgement were significant enough to bolster their self image. With any situation involving risk, the decision to act is based on the desire to minimize possible losses and the desire to maximize gains (Ben-Ari, 2000). In other words, the extent to which one is willing to take risks depends on the perception of the value of potential gains versus potential losses. In the Ben-Ari study, the participants viewed the potential gains (self esteem boost) to be important enough discount the potential losses (bodily harm). It is possible that individuals may view a sexual encounter as a way to boost self-esteem, and thus this motivation may outweigh any doubts due to the physical health aspects of the act.

**Extraversion**

Finally, there is a role for the personality trait of extraversion in research regarding risk taking; those who score high on extraversion scales are generally very outgoing thrill seekers who have a tendency to act without significant forethought (Freyd, 1924). An introvert is “an individual in whom exists an exaggeration of the thought processes in relation to directly observable social behavior, with an accompanying tendency to withdraw from social contacts” (Freyd, 1924, p. 74). In contrast, an extravert is “an individual in whom exists a lack of the thought processes in relation to directly observable social behavior, with an accompanying tendency to make social contacts” (Freyd, 1924, p. 74). Individuals who score high on extravert measures should be more likely to display characteristics such as impulsiveness and social openness, and thus are expected to be more likely to assert willingness to engage in risky sexual behaviors in general.

Schmitt (2004) investigated the relationship between the “Big Five” personality traits and risky sexuality as part of the International Sexuality Description Project, which included more than 16,000 participants across 52 nations. That study reported that extraversion was more highly related with sexual promiscuity than any of the other Big Five personality traits in most regions across the world. It was also found that extraversion was a predictor of sexual promiscuity (Schmitt, 2004). In a study investigating personality traits and sexual behavior on college campuses, Gute and Eshbaugh (2008) found that extraversion was positively associated with hooking up behaviors. Hooking-up was defined as a casual sexual encounter between two strangers or brief acquaintances that may or may not include intercourse. This study was particularly relevant because it examined risky sexual behavior among college students, which is also the primary population of the current study. Extraversion was a predictor of the likelihood that a participant would have sex with someone once and only once, and with having intercourse with someone they have known for less than 24 hours (Gute & Eshbaugh, 2008). These studies, however, did not include any prime that would heighten the thought of risks associated with sexual behavior. Of interest to the current study is whether extraversion is a predictor of behavior in scenarios involving sexually risky encounters.

**Hypotheses of the Current Study**

Based on the research described above, the following hypotheses are proffered:

Hypothesis 1: Extraversion will be positively correlated with desire to engage in risky sex.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals in a mortality salience condition will be more likely to desire...
risky sex than will individuals in a control condition.

Empirical research has supported the notion that (a) extraverts are more likely to engage in impulsive behaviors (e.g., Freyd, 1924) and (b) that sexual encounters can be used as anxiety buffering techniques against mortality salience (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005). To describe a situation as “risky” is to insinuate that there are potentially dire consequences associated with the decision to partake in such an act, and therefore, careful consideration would be recommended. With past research indicating that participants in general are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior when mortality is salient (see above), it would make sense that individuals with more impulsive personalities would be even more inclined to indulge in sex, seeking pleasure before accurately assessing the potential outcome.

Whether it is because the closeness of a relationship (which happens to include sex) is comforting or because procreation signifies transcendence to an immortal cause, sexual relationships are possible coping mechanisms. The results of past research (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005) indicate that the perceived gains of engaging in risky sexual behavior outweigh the potential harm. The authors predict that our findings will be in accordance with previous studies.

Hypothesis 3: Participants in a morality salience condition will express a higher commitment level to current relationship partners than those in a control condition.

Even when the quality of a relationship is not desirable, participants express a desire to maintain the relationship when mortality is salient (Hirschberger et al., 2002). Relationships provide a sense of connectedness and continuity that can be used to combat the anxiety produced by mortality salience (Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2003). Mikulincer and Florian’s study (2000) found that participants exposed to a mortality salience induction reported more desire for relationship intimacy after hypothetical situations than did participants in the neutral condition. The authors predict that the results will replicate this established pattern.

Hypothesis 4: In the mortality salience condition, when participants are asked about commitment level before risky sexual behaviors, there will be a decrease in the desire to engage in risky sexual behavior, compared to participants who were asked about risky sexual behavior first (i.e., an order effect).

While studies show evidence that mortality salience causes an increase in commitment (Smieja, Kalaska, & Adamczyk, 2006) and in the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors (Ben-Ari, 2004), the authors’ prediction is that there will be a decrease in the desire to engage in risky sexual behavior after commitment serves as an anxiety buffer. Close relationship seeking when mortality is salient has been a common anxiety buffering technique in past studies (e.g., Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2003). After being primed to think about death, participants found that the physical act of sex without the emotional aspects is not desirable. The reasoning for this conclusion is that sex with no intimacy reminds us of our own animalistic (thus mortal) desire (Goldenberg, 2005). Thus, participants will use the desire for commitment as an anxiety buffering technique, eliminating the need to use sex as an additional anxiety buffering technique. However, the relationship between commitment level and the desire to engage in risky sexual behavior is not reciprocal. That is, when mortality is salient, participants’ level of commitment will remain high even after thoughts of risky sexual behavior. The authors predict that thinking of commitment level will be the primary anxiety buffering technique.

Hypothesis 5: Regardless of mortality salience condition, men will be more willing to engage in risky sexual behavior than women (a main
effect). In addition, the difference between sexes will be even larger in the mortality salience condition (an interaction).

It is interesting to investigate whether men or women seek sex more. It is a common topic of debate within social circles, but the question has not been limited to informal discussions. Studies have shown the men are likely to engage in sex sooner, more often, and with lower requirements (Ben-Ari, 2004, Buss & Schmitt, 1993). For men, it is advantageous to reproduce with as many partners as possible. For women, there is much more practical analysis required before deciding to engage in sex. A woman incurs the majority of the risks because she has to endure pregnancy and hope that her mate can provide for her and the child after the birth; i.e., women have a greater parental investment (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Therefore, it is reasonable to test whether mortality salience will have differential effects on men versus women in terms of their subsequent decision making regarding sexual encounters.

**Method**

**Participants**

Eight-one undergraduate students (46 women, 35 men) from a small, private university in the Midwest agreed to participate in the study for extra credit in a psychology class. Ages ranged from 18 to 45, with a mean of 21 years ($SD = 4.31$). From demographics, 63% identified as Caucasian, 23% identified as Black, 6% identified as Hispanic, 5% identified as Bi-Racial, and 2% identified as Asian. All participants specified that they were in a romantic relationship at the time of the study (which was a requirement). The mean length of the relationship, in total months, was 27.94, with a standard deviation of 25.65. As for the nature of the relationship, 75% identified as “exclusive; we only date each other,” 17% identified as “engaged or living together,” 5% were married, and 2% identified as “very casual; we also date other people.”

**Independent Variables**

*Extraversion.* The extraversion personality trait was measured using the items relevant to extraversion from Eysenck’s Personality Inventory Scale (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). The scale included 24 items with responses being either “yes” or “no.” An example item is, “Do you like going out a lot?” Nine items are reversed scored, items are dummy coded into 1’s and 2’s, and then all items are averaged to form a composite variable. Higher scores indicate higher extraversion; this sample had a mean score of 1.13 ($SD = 0.16$), and internal consistency was good, alpha = .71.

*Mortality salience.* Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. Within the mortality salience condition, as in previous studies (e.g., Hirschberger et al., 2002), participants were asked to respond to an open ended essay which read: “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you. What do you think happens to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead?” In the control condition, participants were given the following essay instructions: “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of a painful dental experience arouses in you. Explain your thoughts step by step.”

**Dependent Variables**

*Commitment.* A seven item commitment scale was extracted from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). Questions were answered with a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (do not agree at all) to 8 (completely agree). For each item, the response is an indication of the commitment level to the relationship; an example is, “I want our relationship to last forever.” Questions 3 and 4 were reverse scored. Scores were averaged to create a composite score ($M = 6.97$, $SD = 1.31$) and internal consistency was good, alpha = .63.
Risky sexual behaviors. Willingness to engage in risky sexual behaviors was assessed using an 11 item self-report scale. This scale was constructed in a previous study by Ben-Ari through in-depth interviews with Israeli participants (Ben-Ari, 2004). Each question involves a hypothetical scenario with a proponent of sexual risk (e.g., not using condoms with new partners). For example, “You met a girl through some friends. You are dating for a few weeks and things seem quite promising. You invite her to your place, and she arrives. You have a cup of coffee; listen to some music and talk. As the evening goes on you both get closer to each other. At a certain point she asks you if you brought a condom. You tell her that you did, and ask her if it is 'a must' for her. She hesitates. What are the chances that you will have sex without a condom?” Participants were asked to write in the chance they will engage in the behavior on a scale from 0% (no chance) to 100% (almost certainly). Items were worded such that heterosexual relationships were assumed. An average was calculated for the 11 items (Mean = 22.45, SD = 18.27), with higher scores indicating a higher tendency to engage in risky sexual behavior. The scale’s internal consistency was good, alpha = .87.

Procedure
Five to 15 participants attended each research session; all sessions took place in a classroom with participants sitting in every other chair. The experimenter stated that the purpose of the study was to help understand the link between memory, extraversion, commitment, and sex, and explained that each participant would be asked to complete several surveys describing their current romantic relationship. After viewing the consent form, the participants specified demographic information, and then completed the extraversion index, followed by the essay manipulation task. Due to previous research which shows that mortality salience effects are stronger after a brief time delay (Greenberg et al., 1997), participants completed the PANAS-X Scale (Watson & Clark, 1994) and a word search containing baseball terms; both of these were filler items and thus no analyses were conducted on these items. Finally, participants completed the scales for relationship commitment and for risky sexual behaviors. The order of these final two scales was randomly assigned, in order to test Hypothesis 5. The participants completed the questionnaires at their own pace. After everyone in the session was finished, participants were thoroughly debriefed and thanked for their assistance.

Results
Hypothesis 1
Hypothesis 1 expected that extraversion would be positively correlated with desire to engage in risky sex. There was a significant correlation between extraversion scores and the desire to engage in risky sexual behaviors, \( r(79) = .221, p = .04 \). This supported Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2
Hypothesis 2 was that participants in the morality salience condition would express a higher desire to engage in risky sex, compared to participants in the control condition. A t-test yielded statistically significant results \( t(79) = 2.41, p = .018 \), but in the opposite of the predicted direction. The control condition reported a greater desire to engage in risky sexual behavior (Mean = 27.15, SD = 19.25) than the mortality salience condition (Mean = 17.64, SD = 16.07). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Hypothesis 3
The third hypothesis expected that participants in the mortality salience condition would express higher commitment to their current relationship partners, compared to participants in the control condition. Analysis of means revealed the expected direction, where commitment from participants in the mortality
salience condition \((Mean = 5.85, SD = .87)\) was higher than commitment from participants in the control condition, \((Mean = 5.52, SD = .69)\). A t-test revealed that this difference was marginally significant, \(t(79) = 1.92, p = .058\), supporting our hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 4**

Hypothesis 4 expected an order effect: In the mortality salience condition, when participants were asked about commitment level before risky sexual behaviors, we expected a drop in their desire to engage in risky sex due to their reinforced commitment to their partner.

The mean desire for risky sex in participants who were asked about commitment first \((Mean = 16.56, SD = 15.93)\) was lower than the mean for participants who were asked about risky sexual behaviors first \((Mean = 18.61, SD = 16.52)\). As expected, the findings suggest that participants were slightly less willing to engage in risky sexual behavior when they answered questions regarding commitment first. Although the results were in the direction of the hypothesis, they failed to achieve statistical significance, \(t(38) = .40, p = .69\).

**Hypothesis 5**

Finally, Hypothesis 5 expected that first, regardless of mortality salience condition, men will be more willing to engage in risky sexual behavior than women (a main effect). In addition, the difference between sexes will be even larger in the mortality salience condition (an interaction). The comparison was done using an analysis of variance.

As expected, across conditions, men were much more willing to engage in risky sexual behavior \((Mean = 31.59, SD = 21.31)\) than women \((Mean = 15.50, SD = 11.58)\), and this difference was statistically significant, \(t(79) = 4.34, p < .001\). We also examined means by TMT condition. In the mortality salience condition, men \((Mean = 23.82, SD = 18.97)\) were more willing than women \((Mean = 12.58, SD = 11.34)\) to engage in risky sexual behavior. In the control condition, men \((Mean = 39.81, SD = 21.04)\) were also more willing than women \((Mean = 18.18, SD = 11.56)\) to engage in risky sexual behavior. When analyzed in an ANOVA, the main effects of sex \([F(1,77) = 21.77, p < .001]\) and condition \([F(1,77) = 9.39, p = .003]\) were both strongly significant, but the interaction was not. Here, our hypothesis was partially supported.

**Discussion**

The current study sought to examine the interplay between TMT, extraversion, commitment, and the desire to engage in risky sexual behaviors. Although not all of our hypotheses were confirmed, some of our results achieved significance and establish possible paths for further experiments.

First, Hypothesis 1 found a significant correlation between extraversion and the desire to engage in risky sexual behavior. As expected, participants who were more extraverted expressed a greater willingness to take risks and engage in sexual endeavors impulsively. It was expected that participants thinking about mortality salience would also have a higher desire to engage in risky sex, but the opposite was found: individuals thinking about death were actually less likely to desire risky sex. Due to the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases and their direct and indirect links to health concerns, it is important to continue research on personality traits and cognitive mindsets of individuals when faced with these choices. If extraverts are more likely to engage in risky sex—or at least, desire to do so—perhaps media messages such as public service announcements endorsing the use of condoms could take this information into account. Along the same lines, if people thinking about death are less likely to engage in risky sexual acts, as our findings suggest, those same commercials might want to point out the physical dangers associated with unprotected sexual encounters. In short, this research may help shape media messages relevant to sexual choices. Future research could explore other
personality traits which might be apropos, such as the trait Openness to Experience, or Narcissism.

Note, extraversion was correlated with the desire to engage in risky sexual behaviors. This could mean one of two things: 1) Extraverts are actually more willing to engage in risky sexual behaviors than introverts, or 2) extraverts are more liberal with reporting their desire to engage in risky sexual behaviors. There is a distinct difference between the two. In the current study, we asked participants to estimate the likelihood that they would engage in different hypothetical scenarios. However, that is not necessarily tied to what they would actually do in reality. For example, an extravert who suspects that he/she would be likely to engage in one of the scenarios may record an 80% chance, while an introvert with the exact same disposition may record a 50% chance due to different tendencies in self reporting tasks. Future research may wish to include measures such as social desirability, or the desire to present oneself in a positive manner, to see if that construct affects results.

Testing of Hypothesis 2 showed that, as expected, thinking about death was associated with higher commitment levels (although this effect was marginal). There is a strong body of previous research that has shown commitment in romantic relationships increases under mortality salience (e.g. Hirschberger et al., 2002; Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2003). Combined with the findings from Hypotheses 1 and 2, the situation becomes increasingly complex. Individuals who think about death are more interested in risky sex (especially, apparently, if they are extraverts), but they can also manage their “terror” by emotionally strengthening the bond with their current partner. For many people, the latter option will be a healthier choice, perhaps both psychologically and physically. Indeed, the overlap between variables was more directly tested in Hypothesis 4, which attempted to show that if people who are thinking about death are given the opportunity to express love for their partner, their desire for risky sex will increase. Unfortunately, this result was not significant.

Finally, men were more willing to engage in risky sexual behavior regardless of condition, doubling the mean for women. Past research in several areas of psychology has demonstrated men’s greater desire for sexual access (e.g. Buss & Schmitt, 1993). However, it was noted above that the trend for extraverts may have actually been the result of extraverts being more willing to report the desire for risky sex. The same could be true for men: society allows for men to express a desire for both risk-taking and for sex, whereas if women show these desires, they may receive social punishment. Again, including scales for social desirability is an interesting avenue for future research.

Limitations and Future Research

Our sample primarily included undergraduate students. College students are not necessarily thinking about death, whereas people of older ages may be more in tune with the thought of death. Therefore, mortality salience should, theoretically, have a stronger effect on their behavior. Also, in addition to being more likely to be married, older people generally have been sexually active for a longer period of time and may be less fascinated with the idea of engaging in risky sexual behaviors. Married couples only accounted for a small percentage of the entire sample. Had the study included more married couples, one could expect that responses on the commitment scale would be quite different. Assuming a couple’s marriage follows traditional American standards, they normally have been together longer, have invested more assets, and depending on the type of relationship, have eliminated exploring alternatives (Goodfriend & Agnew, 1998). Alternatively, it would be interesting to see if being married increases some people’s desire to explore alternatives.
because of the cliché, "People want what they can't have."

Another possible limitation of the current study was that there was no minimum length of time or paragraph size in written responses to the mortality salience essay manipulation. Therefore, our manipulation may not have been as strong for some participants as it was for other participants who went into depth with their reflections. In a replication of the current study, there could be a minimum length requirement on the essay or a set time interval to ensure that each participant is influenced relatively equally by the mortality salience manipulation.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, research could understand the complex pattern of prediction among various constructs, such as age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, overall personality scores, commitment to their relationship, mortality salience, and desire to engage in risky sexual behavior. The current study only included some of these variables and thus was simply another step in the path toward this goal. As other scholars have asserted (e.g. Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2003), further examination of terror management theory has the potential to uncover details which lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience.

**References**


