

**IMPACT OF RELIGIOSITY AND LEVEL OF ACCULTURATION ON CULTURAL
ALIGNMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF TERROR MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS
AMONG MUSLIM AMERICAN WOMEN**

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Dissertation Defense

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ABSTRACT

Background: Terror management theory (TMT) is based upon the notion that human beings require ongoing psychological protection from the unyielding, existential threat of death. A large body of evidence has shown that human beings manage death-related terror by aligning with and endorsing the dominant views of their cultural worldviews. Notably, as immigrants experience a new culture, worldviews become rearticulated to incorporate elements of host and heritage cultures. However, it is unclear how individuals with prolonged bicultural exposure effectively buffer death-related fears. Few studies in the vast TMT literature have been conducted with immigrant populations and the terror management defenses of Muslim American women, in particular, have yet to be investigated. As such, the purpose of this dissertation was to extend TMT research by examining the ways in which Muslim American women negotiate diverse aspects of their cultural worldviews to secure terror management benefits.

Objectives: The current investigation examined the terror management defenses employed by Muslim American women in the context of elevated death anxiety and tested the potential moderating effects of acculturation and religiosity. In accordance with the mortality salience (MS) hypothesis of TMT, heightened death awareness was predicted to intensify support of the cultural worldview, such that participants would produce more positive evaluations of a worldview-supporting essay and more negative evaluations of a worldview-threatening essay. The association between increased death salience and worldview defense was also predicted to vary as a function of level of acculturation to U.S. society and religious commitment to Islam.

Participants and Methods: The sample included 53 Muslim American female undergraduate students. Following random assignment to the MS prime condition or control group, participants read and evaluated two essays that were ostensibly written by Muslim American women in response to an image of a Muslim woman wearing an American flag hijab. The essays were designed to activate either secular or religious defensive responses to messages that challenged American and Islamic values, respectively. Measures of affect, death-thought accessibility, religiosity, acculturation, discrimination-related stress, and collective and personal self-esteem were also included.

Results: Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test the main effect of MS and the moderating effects of acculturation and religiosity on worldview defense (i.e., composite essay score). Contrary to expectations, the study's predictor hypotheses were not supported. Heightened death anxiety did not result in the typical increase in worldview defense. Furthermore, the relationship between MS and worldview defense was not moderated by acculturation or religiosity.

Conclusions: Taken together, the results of the present study did not support our hypotheses. In light of strong empirical support for the effects of heightened death awareness on worldview defense in prior studies, our findings were interpreted with caution. Alternative explanations for our results, limitations of our study design and sample, and avenues for future research with Muslim American women were discussed.