

# The rejection of animals as an indicator of fear of death

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## Abstract

This study tries to verify if, as the **Terror Management Theory (TMT)** points out, human being tends to distance himself from everything that reminds him of his finitude as a living being, of what makes it evident that death is unavoidable for people, and therefore causes great discomfort. For this, the study focuses on the differentiation of people from other animals, which is one of the issues covered by this theory into the cultural worldview. In this academic work, it is been distinguished between two groups: animalist people and non-animalist people; understanding that people of the first group accept themselves as animals, so they will experience less fear of death.

## Background

Terror Management Theory (TMT) states that all human behavior is motivated by fear of our own mortality. Originally, the theory came up in 1973 with Ernest Becker's book entitled **"The Denial of Death"**. In which, Becker argues that all human action is done to ignore or avoid the anxiety generated by the inescapable death. Specifically, this theory suggests that such anxiety, which consists of (a) faith in a cultural worldview, and (b) self-esteem that stems from living up to the standards of worldview, works to manage the terror associated with consciousness of death. Worldview, is the foundation of human culture, the belief system built to explain and give meaning to life and resist facing the horror of death.

Research shows that when that worldview is threatened, people react defending it, and that is when they become more forceful and aggressive toward the stimuli that provoke such activation. In the TMT is also involved self-esteem, trying to dominate the environment, our bodies and even our instincts as a way to dissociate from what reminds us that we are natural creatures, animals, to believe that we are something more permanent and worthy of immortality. In the article **"I am not an animal: Mortality salience, disgust, and the denial of human creatureliness"**, Goldenberg et al. (2001) investigated the need to distinguish humans from animals and tested the hypothesis derived from the Terror Management Theory that affirms this need come from existential concerns about mortality. Specifically, the authors suggested that recognizing themselves as an animal is a threat because it reminds people of their vulnerability to death, concluding in their experimental study that the salience of mortality led to a greater preference in distinguishing people from animals. Therefore, accepting that humans are animals is interpreted as a threat to the cultural worldview due to the link with the problem of death, that is why thinking about one's mortality should increase this need to distinguish oneself from other animals.

**Animalist person:** person who has an egalitarian vision that tends to equate the human being with other animals, for which he frequently resorts to empathy and compassion for animals.

## Main objective and hypothesis

1. Animalist people will obtain a higher score than the non-animalist ones in the Attitudes Toward Death Questionnaire

2. Animalist people will obtain a higher score than non-animalist ones in the Borgadus Social Distance Scale

3. Animalist people will obtain a higher score with respect to the non-animalist ones in the Empathy Questionnaire (IRI).

Investigate whether animalists are less afraid of death than non-animalists

## Methods

- **Correlational design**
- **Participants**
  - 163 subjects → 46 ♂ and 121 ♀
  - Age: between 15 and 75 years (the highest percentage 23% between 30 and 40 years old)
- **Variables**
  - **V.I.** Animalism
  - **V.D.** Empathy (Perspective taking, Fantasy, Empathic concern and Personal distress)
    - Social distance
    - Attitudes towards death (Fear of death, Avoidance of death, Neutral acceptance, Acceptance of Approach, Acceptance of escape)
- **Procedure and materials**
  - Animal Distance Scale Borgadus
  - Social Distance Scale
  - Interpersonal Empathy Questionnaire reactivity index (IRI)
  - Attitudes Towards Death Questionnaire (PAM-R)
- The whole questionnaires and scales were administered online to the participants, through a link to the Humaniste's platform, which was shared on Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and LinkedIn.

## Results



## Results and conclusions

According to the results, the **main conclusion**, which responds to the research reason of this study, is that animalist people are less afraid of death than non-animalists.

According to the **hypotheses**, it can be concluded that all of them are fulfilled:

- Animalist people have a less anxious attitude towards death, as has been proven in the Attitudes to Death Questionnaire (PAM-R)
- Animalist people are more tolerant according to the scores of the Borgadus Social Distance Scale
- Animalist people are more empathetic with regard to non-animalist people as observed in the Fantasy subscale of the Interpersonal Empathy Questionnaire reactivity index (IRI)

These results are consistent with Terror Management Theory, which says that people with more fear of death will be distanced from everything that threatens their cultural worldview, so they will try to differentiate themselves from what that reminds them of the creatureliness of the human being; on the other hand, the animalist people will show themselves closer to the biological vision, recognizing themselves as animals.

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