The Art of Death: The Effects of Viewing Artistic Paintings of Death on Satisfaction with Life

Mortality related themes have been the subject of art for thousands of years. Death has been represented both as positive and negative, as an end and as a beginning, even as a personified being. A prominent theory in psychology, Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986), suggests awareness of one's inevitable death is a driving force behind a wide range of human behavior. Studies (Routledge et al., 2010) have found, for example, that reminding individuals of their mortality can decrease people's satisfaction with life (SWL). Some research has used graphic imagery to activate death-related cognitions and elicit defensive reactions. However, it remains untested whether the emotional content of death-related imagery – specifically as presented in artistic paintings - differentially influences people's psychological reactions. To assess this question, we conducted a pilot study, (*N* = 836) in which we selected 225 paintings that portrayed death as relatively positive or negative. Participants evaluated these paintings on various dimensions including how much they evoked thoughts of death as well as positive and negative emotions. We selected paintings that equally evoked thoughts of death but differed in their emotional content. In a second study (*N* = 513) participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: viewing paintings portraying death with negative emotions, paintings portraying death with mixed emotions (both positive and negative), writing about the thoughts and emotion evoked by death, and a control condition. Participants then completed a measure of SWL and demographic questionnaires. Results indicate that paintings portraying death with mixed emotions led to greater SWL than did the other conditions. This effect was moderated by participant education, such that death paintings containing mixed emotions increased SWL primarily among those with less formal education. Other effects, implications, and future directions are discussed.