Humans are social creatures and groups play an important role in their lives. From an evolutionary perspective, groups are vital because they increase people’s chances on survival. Groups physically protect their members against threats, and facilitate essential needs such as food gathering and the reproduction of one’s genes. Moreover, groups may provide psychological protection against mortality threats, a function that is one of the central concepts in Terror Management Theory (TMT).

TMT posits that, over the years, humans have developed a set of defensive mechanisms that help them to cope with the mortality threats we encounter on a daily basis (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). In everyday life we are constantly reminded of the temporary nature of life. Newspapers, television, and the Internet offer a constant stream or death reminders, ranging from terrorist attacks to natural disasters. According to TMT, we can cope with these threats - that would otherwise generate paralyzing fear - by affirming our cultural worldview and maintaining a high sense of self-esteem. In this dissertation, I extend previous research by emphasizing the role of groups in this terror managing process. In particular, I have argued and demonstrated that large groups may provide such a defensive function, and that people therefore affiliate with, and conform to groups, when they are confronted with their mortality.

Over the past decade, hundreds of psychologists have researched the effects of mortality salience on people’s behavior, attitudes, and cognition. A search on Google Scholar at the end of June, 2008, returns close to 1800 papers that refer to “Terror Management Theory” (http://scholar.google.com), and this number is still going up. Since the first TMT article was published (REF), psychological studies on the effects of mortality salience have intrigued many researchers, as this research continues to show how pondering death tend to change the way individuals perceive and interact with their social surroundings.
With this dissertation, I aimed to add to the extant TMT literature by researching what role groups play in coping with existential threat. The ultimate goal of this endeavor was to get a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms of TMT. Hence, the aim was not only to show that people are attracted to groups when mortality is salient, but also why, and what this adds to our understanding of TMT.

At the basis of my explanation of the benefits groups may offer in the face of existential threat, are two basic needs groups may fulfill; the need to comprehend and the need to self-enhance. These needs offer a unique perspective on how people interact with groups, while both needs are closely related to the two core defensive mechanism of TMT. That is, on the one hand, the need to comprehend and understand one’s social environment is linked to achieving a stable and coherent cultural worldview. Secondly, the need to enhance is closely related to high self-esteem striving. The four empirical chapters in my dissertation were building upon these two basic motives that help people to cope with mortality salience, as these needs give more insight into the origins of people’s behavior in such situations. I have found that the need to comprehend, and the need to enhance play a central role in explaining what people are attracted to in groups when they are reminded of their mortality, and more importantly, why this occurs.

Chapter 2

Previous research has shown that, when mortality is salient, individuals tend go to great lengths to defend their personal worldview. They react more negatively to people who think differently and react more positively to people who share their beliefs (Greenberg et al., 1990), and in particular, who strengthen their beliefs on topics that validate their cultural worldview (McGregor, Zanna, & Holmes, 2001). However, to date, no TMT research has shown how people react...
to opinions or beliefs held by others, if these are not central to their worldview. In Chapter 2, this gap was filled, as I showed that people do not necessarily cling to what they already believe when they are confronted with their own mortality. Instead, in three separate studies, I found that individuals rather adopt mainstream beliefs, and go with the flow. The reasoning behind this is that people often assume that the group is right, and by conforming to the opinions of the group, people are able to fulfill their comprehension goal. Completing this goal, and affiliating with the group, consequently has a positive effect on one’s self-esteem. Thus, I found that people may sometimes change their opinions to match those of the group instead of the other way around. This interpretation of the findings in Chapter 2 is also at the foundation of people’s preference for larger political parties, as described in Chapter 3.

**Chapter 3**

Identifying with groups that support one’s worldview and distancing from those groups that go against it, has found to be an effective terror managing strategy (Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt et al., 1989). However, as shown in Chapter 2, large groups can in itself also aid in coping with mortality threats. Indeed, in Chapter 3 I found that individuals tend to prefer bigger political parties when mortality is salient. Not only did the size of the political parties affect people’s evaluation, it also affected subsequent behaviors such as voting and supporting policy change. Again, these findings can be explained by the fact that mainstream views, as often held by bigger parties, may aid in constructing a stable and coherent cultural worldview. Moreover, siding with a majority or large group may positively affect one’s self-esteem. The interpretation of the findings in Chapter 2 and 3 fit TMT, as people are motivated to comprehend their environment and maintain self-esteem. However, the findings also add a unique insight to earlier TMT musings That is, in threatening and uncertain times,
people’s attitudes and preferences may be formed and shaped by what they believe is valued by the masses.

**Chapter 4**

Chapter 4 can be seen as an other example of how important group characteristics are, when people are reminded of their mortality. Here, I argued that, when mortality is salient, the need to be a part of a group is so basic that even abstract representations of groups offer a terror-managing function. Thus, when people are confronted with their own mortality, figures that resemble large and cohesive groups make them feel safer, even when these pictures represent abstract non-human figures that only symbolically represent togetherness and cohesiveness. Indeed, in the two studies reported in Chapter 4, I demonstrated that abstract and meaningless figures consisting of more items close together, made participants feel safer. Thus, coping with existential fear seems to go beyond culture and established (in)groups. This may indicate that certain features that humanity has found to be valuable in real-life groups, such as size and cohesiveness, exert influence even when they are presented in an abstract form.

In summary, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 provide solid evidence for the terror managing function of large groups.

**Chapter 5**

In the first three empirical chapters, I show that groups can play an important role in managing existential threat. Another important contribution this dissertation makes to TMT, apart from showing that people often affiliate with and conform to larger groups when mortality is salient, comes from the last empirical chapter. In Chapter 5, the need to comprehend and the need to enhance were disentangled by using positive and negative stereotyping as the dependent
variables. Comprehension and enhancement are often intertwined. However, as said before, important differences between the two motives can be distinguished. By using stereotypes, I was able to determine whether mortality salience would lead to a comprehension goal (as evidenced by both positive and negative stereotyping) or a self-enhancement goal (as evidenced by negative stereotyping only). The findings presented in Chapter 5 indicate that people use more positive and negative stereotypes to interpret ambiguous behavior when they are reminded of their mortality. This shows that people use all available stereotypical traits to make sense of the behavior, which suggests that mortality salience elicits a comprehension goal.

However, there are contexts where this comprehension goal is overruled by an enhancement goal, resulting in negative stereotyping only. Particularly, in the final experiment of Chapter 5, I show that in an intergroup context, people use negative, but not positive stereotypes. Thus, when there is a direct threat to one's (group) self-esteem from an outgroup, people tend to use negative stereotypes only, indicating that they have the need to self-enhance. This is an important theoretical distinction that has not been made up to now. Nevertheless, it is in line with TMT since it argues that individuals are motivated to affirm their worldview to make sense of the world around them when mortality is salient, which will indirectly keep up their (cultural) self-esteem. If there is no direct threat, comprehension will thus be preferred over enhancement. However, when individuals face a direct threat to their self-esteem by a rivaling outgroup, they will be motivated to eliminate this threat by derogating the outgroup in order to maintain their self-esteem and protect their cultural worldview.

General Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown that groups play a vital role in terror management processes. In Chapters 2 and 3, I have demonstrated that,
when mortality is salient, people are more guided by group opinions and group beliefs compared to when mortality is not salient. I have argued that his tendency to “go with the flow” may be explained by the fact that groups, especially large groups, aid in the need comprehend. That is, large groups help people to make sense of their social environment, and to establish a stable cultural worldview (“If most people think this, it must be right.”). On top of this, groups also provide social support, as they aid in maintaining one’s self-esteem (“I feel better in groups that are large and do well.”). However, as Chapter 4 has shown, people do not only conform to larger groups more often when mortality is salient, they also identify with more abstract groups because this makes them feel safer. In Chapter 5, I attempted to follow up on this by disentangling the two needs (comprehend and enhance) that drive the results found throughout Chapter 2, 3 and 4. Hereby, I hoped to find out which need people prefer to fulfill in a forced choice situation. I found that in a stereotyping paradigm, people are more likely to fulfill a comprehension goal instead of an enhancement goal. However, if a threatening outgroup is present, the opposite is true, and people rather fulfill an enhancement goal.

In sum then, I can say that groups may help people in managing existential threat by, on the one hand, offering a feeling of safety and security to the individual. On the other hand, groups may provide meaning, and help people to create and maintain a stable worldview. Future research will be needed to find out more about the limitations of the terror managing function of groups, how the different needs relate to each other, and where they might differ.

Future questions

This dissertation did not only answer some questions (I hope), it perhaps also raised some new ones (I hope). One of these questions is to what extent do people prefer the larger group, for example, if it contrasts with their personal
beliefs. Several studies have shown that, following mortality salience, people identify more with groups that share their outlook on the world, while they distance from groups that are different (for example, see Greenberg et al., 1990; Florian & Mikulincer, 1997). It would be interesting to see how this interacts with group size, and where the line is between choosing for the group that supports your worldview, or the group that is the largest, or the most cohesive.

The vast majority of TMT research that involves groups examines to what extent people engage in worldview defense (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997). That is, whether or not people behave in a more favorable way towards their ingroup, and or more negatively towards outgroups. However, groups are more than a worldview confirming or disconfirming entity. Groups can be a source of information, or enhance one’s self-esteem and offer psychological safety. In this dissertation I have examined these more basic functions of groups, and I therefore opted to use groups that are not vital to one’s cultural worldview. This allowed me to examine how people react to groups, based on other characteristics than to what extent these groups (dis)confirm one’s worldview. The only exception to this is Study 5.3, where I examined the effects of mortality salience on stereotyping, with and without the presence of a threatening outgroup. The results of this study indeed show that people respond differently when there is a “threatening” outgroup present.

This leads us to another question that needs to be answered. Study 3 of Chapter 5 indicates that people may respond quite differently following mortality salience depending on whether these is an intergroup situation or not. One might wonder what this means for the classic worldview defense paradigm that is often used in TMT research (e.g., Arndt et al., 1997). Could it be, as the results of Chapter 5 suggest, that threatening outgroups focus people more on defensive reactions - such as worldview defense - whereas more neutral situations open up possibilities for more neutral responses, aimed at understanding the situation? These and other questions may provide the starting point for a new line of
research that may add to our understanding of TMT, and how people respond to existential threats.

One day people might fully comprehend what happens when they think they are dying. However, until that day comes, people will rely on groups to guide them, and make them feel safe.