

Death anxiety prompts people to believe in intelligent design, reject evolution: research

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Researchers at the University of British Columbia and Union College (Schenectady, N.Y.) have found that people's death anxiety can influence them to support theories of intelligent design and reject evolutionary theory.

Existential anxiety also prompted people to report increased liking for Michael Behe, intelligent design's main proponent, and increased disliking for [evolutionary biologist](#) Richard Dawkins

The lead author is UBC Psychology Asst. Prof. Jessica Tracy with co-authors Joshua Hart, assistant professor of psychology at Union College, and UBC psychology PhD student Jason Martens.

Published in the March 30 issue of the journal [PLoS ONE](#), their paper is the first to examine the implicit psychological motives that underpin one of the most heated debates in North America. Despite scientific consensus that [intelligent design](#) theory is inherently unscientific, 25 per cent of high school biology teachers in the U.S. devote at least some class time to the topic of intelligent design. And in Canada, for example, Alberta passed a law in 2009 that may allow parents to remove children from courses covering evolution.

British evolutionary biologist Prof. Dawkins, like the majority of scientists, argues that life's origins are best explained by Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. However, intelligent design advocates such as Prof. Behe, a U.S. author and biochemist, assert that

complex biochemical and cellular structures are too complex to be explained by evolutionary mechanisms and should be attributed to a supernatural creator.

"Our results suggest that when confronted with existential concerns, people respond by searching for a sense of meaning and purpose in life," says Tracy. "For many, it appears that evolutionary theory doesn't offer enough of a compelling answer to deal with these big questions."

The researchers carried out five studies with 1,674 U.S. and Canadian participants of different ages and a broad range of educational, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds.

In each study, participants were asked to imagine their own death and write about their subsequent thoughts and feelings, or they were assigned to a control condition: imagining dental pain and writing about that.

The participants were then asked to read two similarly styled, 174-word excerpts from the writings of Behe and Dawkins, which make no mention of religion or belief, but describe the scientific and empirical support for their respective positions.

After going through these steps, participants who imagined their own death showed greater support for intelligent design and greater liking for Behe, or a rejection of evolution theory coupled with disliking for Dawkins, compared to participants in the control condition.

However, the research team saw reversed effects during the fourth study which had a new condition. Along with writings by Behe and Dawkins, there was an additional passage by Carl Sagan. A cosmologist and science writer, Sagan argues that naturalism – the scientific approach that underlies evolution, but not intelligent design – can also provide a sense of meaning. In response, these participants showed reduced belief

in intelligent design after being reminded of their own mortality.

Tracy says, "These findings suggest that individuals can come to see evolution as a meaningful solution to existential concerns, but may need to be explicitly taught that taking a naturalistic approach to understanding life can be highly meaningful."

Similar results emerged in the fifth study, carried out entirely with natural science students at graduate and undergraduate levels. After thinking about death, these participants also showed greater support for the theory of evolution and liking of Dawkins, compared to control participants.

The researchers say these findings indicate a possible means of encouraging students to accept evolution and reject intelligent design.

"Natural science students have been taught to view evolutionary theory as compatible with the desire to find a greater sense of meaning in life," says Tracy. "Presumably, they already attain a sense of existential meaning from evolution."

Provided by University of British Columbia

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