Compassionate Callousness: A Terror Management Perspective on Prosocial Behavior

Gilad Hirschberger
Department of Psychology, Bar-Ilan University

Prosocial, compassionate, and benevolent behaviors constitute the foundations of most, if not all, cultural worldviews. Those who behave in a manner that benefits others, especially when such behavior seems to come at the expense of oneself, are honored and revered by their culture. Pursuing this idea, recent terror management research has demonstrated that subtle reminders of mortality increase charitable attitudes and behavior (Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, & Almakias, 2007; Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). These findings support the contention that prosocial behavior restores the belief that one is a valuable member of a meaningful culture – a belief that defends the self from the threatening awareness of personal mortality. However, other research has shown that at times the awareness of death does not promote prosocial motives and behavior, and in fact may diminish prosocial tendencies. This research has demonstrated that reminders of death may lead to withdrawal of compassion from people with disabilities (Hirschberger, Florian, & Mikulincer, 2005), to stronger motivation to blame or derogate innocent victims (Hirschberger, 2006; Landau et al., 2004), and to reduced willingness to sign an organ donation card or help a person with a physical disability (Hirschberger et al., 2007). My lecture and chapter will reconcile these seemingly contradictory findings and argue that compassionate and callous behaviors are two sides of the same existential coin. The decision to engage in or refrain from prosocial behavior depends on the impact this behavior is likely to have on the promotion or disruption of terror management (i.e., management of death anxiety).