

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY AND DEATH THOUGHT ACCESSIBILITY: A TERROR
MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS

by
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DEDICATION

For McKane Shaw,
Your gentle, kind light remains with us.
You are loved. You are remembered.

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I am grateful to Dr. Peter Helm for accepting me as his graduate student, and for his continued support and collaboration throughout this project. Thank you for encouraging me to follow my curiosity and passion, and for creating the space that allowed me to build the foundation for this research.

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I also want to thank my friends, colleagues, and community members. I am deeply grateful to my parents, who raised my sister and me with a deep sense of justice and a strong care for humanity and the natural world, and to my family. Thank you for standing by me when I needed it the most.

This thesis is also for all children of this world, especially those who are told they are too much, or not enough, or that they must fit into shapes that don't hold them. May you grow to fullness. May you be met with wonder, and not with fear. You deserve safety, joy, and the freedom to become exactly who you are.

And finally, to the trans child who might one day read this: you are not defined by who the world tells you to be. You can be who you are becoming. You are enough. You are beautiful. You are loved.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Even though I was given permission to immigrate to Montana by the United States government in 2017, I have always felt the honor and incredible privilege in living and breathing on the land of the Indigenous people who lived here since time immemorial. I want to acknowledge that this thesis was gestated, created, and fully came alive on the land of Assiniboiné, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Cree, Apsáalooke, Gros Ventre, Kootenai, Little Shell Chippewa, Northern Cheyenne, Pend d'Oreille, Salish, and Sioux, and many other nations. You are the past, present, and the future.

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ABSTRACT

Terror Management Theory (TMT) suggests that death thought accessibility (DTA) increases after a cultural worldview threat, particularly for those who put heavy emphasis on the threatened worldview in their social identity. One particularly salient and politically polarizing worldview in contemporary America concerns the rights of transgender people. In Study 1, I examined if reading about an increase in rates of people with transgender identity (vs. increased rates of resident mobility) in the United States would increase Republicans' ($n = 110$) vs. Democrats' ($n = 120$) DTA. Surprisingly, results showed that Republicans' DTA significantly decreased after reading about transgender people. In Study 2, I aimed to replicate Study 1 and included an additional experimental condition and only recruited Republicans ($n = 500$). In the new condition, participants read information that directly and explicitly challenge anti-trans sentiments in the contemporary U.S., such as transgender people having always existed, and deserving respect in their gender-matching bathroom use in society and took the same DTA measure. Results of Study 2 did not replicate Study 1 and found that Republicans' DTA increased after reading both experimental manipulations compared to the control condition. Theoretical contributions and future directions are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

“We will get ... transgender insanity the hell out of our schools, and we will keep men out of women’s sports.”

Donald Trump, U.S. President

“Gender” is not what people look like to other people; it is what we know ourselves to be. No one else should be able to tell you who you are; that is for you to decide.”

Alok Vaid-Menon, gender non-conforming poet, writer, performance artist

“It is revolutionary for any trans person to choose to be seen and visible in a world that tells us we should not exist.”

Laverne Cox, transgender actor

Transgender identity has become a particularly controversial issue in the United States. The term "transgender" serves as an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. Along with the abundant data showing that LGBTQIA+ individuals face high levels of stigmatization, bullying (e.g., Drabish & Theeke, 2021), discrimination (e.g., Lambrou et al., 2022), and prejudice in society due to their gender identity, this population experiences disproportionate health inequities, and faces higher risk of multiple victimizations throughout their lifetimes compared to non-transgender (i.e., cisgender) individuals (Bockting et al., 2013; Messinger et al., 2021; also see McCann & Brown, 2017, for a systematic review on vulnerability and risk factors for transgender individuals in health). Additionally, their social existence has been increasingly threatened by the devastating amounts of anti-trans laws and political rhetoric that fuel hatred against transgender people in the U.S (e.g., Rummler & Panetta, 2024; translegislation.com). The aim of this thesis is to examine the psychological mechanisms that may contribute to the increasing rates of prejudice and hatred directed toward transgender people in the U.S.

This inquiry is particularly pressing in contemporary American society, where transgender individuals are increasingly marginalized in ways that threaten their ability to live dignified lives (Butler, 2024). For example, 13 states have legally banned transgender Americans from using bathrooms that match their gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, January 23, 2025; Rummler & Panetta, 2024), while national policies continue to reject transgender identity as both invalid and illegitimate (Trump, 2025). Such legislation exacerbates the elevated risk of victimization for an especially vulnerable population (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2022; Everytown, 2024; Gower et al., 2018; Göksel, 2024; Horne et al., 2022; Lambrau et al., 2022; Lombardi & Sahni, 2024; Schanzle et al., 2023) and reinforces misinformed portrayals of transgender individuals as threats to American society.

I argue that prejudice against transgender citizens is not limited to gender-nonconforming individuals. Instead, it reflects a broader societal discomfort and a declining tolerance for certain expressions of identity, which are often framed as existential threats to national security (The White House, 2025). Legal immigrants, international scholars, and even those who were born in the U.S. all seem to provoke a heightened sense of threat among certain political factions (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). This thesis aims to explore the psychological mechanisms behind these responses, especially in light of the recent surge in anti-trans legislation (Reed, 2025). By investigating these mechanisms, I hope to contribute to the understanding of the psychological drivers of transphobia in contemporary U.S. politics.

To explore these mechanisms, it is crucial to consider how individuals psychologically respond to perceived threats, particularly through the lens of political ideology. Indeed, contemporary political trends suggest that political orientation significantly influences social perceptions, particularly of transgender individuals. A particularly salient variable—at least on

the surface level—is conservative political orientation (e.g., Jost et al., 2007). In their meta-analysis of transprejudice predictors, Hatch et al. (2022) found a moderate association between political conservatism and negative attitudes toward transgender individuals ($N = 10,784$, $r = .48$). Additionally, they identified links between transprejudice and beliefs that males and females are essentially different (i.e., gender essentialism; $N = 3,542$, $r = .46$), endorsement of traditional gender roles ($N = 4,242$, $r = .60$), social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 1987; $N = 4,675$, $r = .46$), and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; $N = 5,129$, $r = .58$), among other predictors. Social dominance orientation reflects a preference for social hierarchies, while RWA involves endorsing authoritarian values such as high levels of conformity, submissiveness to authority, and willingness to defend values dictated by external powers (Saunders & Ngo, 2017). Religiosity also correlates with transprejudice to a smaller degree ($N = 5,259$, $r = .28$; Hatch et al., 2022), exemplified by the late Catholic leader Pope Francis, who claimed that teaching children about gender and gender identity in schools poses one of the biggest threats in contemporary history (Zengarini, 2024) and likened supporters of such ideas to the “Hitler youth” (McElwee, 2015). Importantly, political conservatism intercorrelates with several of the constructs listed above (e.g., Ching et al., 2020; Christopher & Mull, 2006; Ellison, 2024; Perez-Arche & Miller, 2021; Prusaczyk & Hodson, 2020; Puckett et al., 2019; Tebbe et al., 2014; 2020; Wilson & Sibley, 2013), suggesting that it may serve as an underlying ideological driver behind many of these correlations.

Similarly, Republican Party affiliation is associated with opposition to transgender rights (Prusaczyk & Hodson, 2020). For instance, key members of the Republican Party have legally barred recognition of transgender identity as a gender identity (Executive Order 14168, January 20, 2025). Republicans have also opposed inclusive practices such as using the terms “gender”

and “gender identity” in public educational curricula (Lambda Legal, January 29, 2025). Indeed, the Republican Party actively denies the concept of “gender” as a social construct (see Bollinger, 2025, for the Trump administration’s active stance on this issue) and proposes replacing “gender” with “sex” in legal language. By enforcing this replacement and stripping transgender people of legal protection status (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, January 28, 2025), the state denies transgender people recognition and human dignity—advancing policies rooted in discrimination

These political and psychological patterns suggest that conservative worldviews may underpin reactive responses to transgender rights, which the studies in this thesis aim to explore. Given the strong association between politically conservative ideology and political affiliation with the Republican Party in the U.S. (Saad, 2022), one can infer that political party affiliation and political orientation could influence the perception of transgender individuals as threatening. To examine these mechanisms, I will approach the issue through an existential lens, considering how people’s unconscious responses to stimuli related to transgender identity may serve as a response to a perceived threat to their worldview. The present studies aim to investigate the possibility that transgender identity functions as an existential threat for individuals who adhere to conservative political ideologies in the U.S. One theory that can inform this inquiry is Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg & Arndt, 2012), which posits that individuals’ worldviews and beliefs serve an existential function. When these belief systems are threatened, it can lead to prejudicial and discriminatory behavior (e.g., Hirschberger et al., 2016; Jonas et al., 2013; Tabri et al. 2023). My hypothesis is that transgender identities may function as an existential threat for individuals with politically conservative worldviews.

Terror Management Theory

Terror Management Theory (TMT) primarily derives from the writings of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1969, 1972, 1975), who proposed that humans face a unique dilemma: they recognize the inevitability of death while simultaneously navigating the existential threat that this awareness brings. To live functional lives without being overwhelmed by this threat, humans developed mechanisms to protect themselves from the terror and anxiety that arise when thoughts of personal death enter consciousness (Greenberg et al., 1997).

TMT suggests two core mechanisms that guard against death awareness: self-esteem and cultural worldviews. Cultural worldviews refer to belief systems that make life appear predictable, meaningful, and orderly, while self-esteem reflects the subjective sense that one is living in accordance with those beliefs. According to TMT, individuals enhance their self-esteem, and feel valued as members of society, by investing in and adhering to these worldviews. Religion, political ideologies, nationalism, and even beliefs about gender can function as such worldviews (Schimel et al., 2019). According to TMT, these mechanisms prevent death thoughts from reaching the fringes of consciousness, where they might otherwise provoke anxiety. In this sense, both worldviews and self-esteem serve as psychological boundaries separating death awareness from unconscious fear. Because constant death awareness could paralyze individuals from engaging in everyday life, such as leaving home to go to work, humans subscribe to cultural worldviews (e.g., political conservatism, support for opposition to transgender rights) to suppress unconscious death thoughts and navigate an unpredictable world without becoming overwhelmed by existential paralysis (Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 2015a).

The theory posits that worldviews provide a sense of continuity through both literal (e.g., reincarnation or an afterlife) and symbolic (e.g., through art, legacy, or offspring) forms of immortality. For instance, having children may foster a sense of symbolic survival through descendants, offering comfort in the face of mortality. More concretely, faith in cultural worldviews protects individuals by connecting them to something larger or beyond themselves, thus keeping death-related thoughts outside conscious awareness (Pyszczynski et al., 2015b).

Importantly, TMT suggests that in order to preserve the existential support offered by their worldviews—and the validation they receive from others who share those beliefs—people defend their worldviews against perceived threats. These threats often come from outgroups with differing beliefs or alternative meanings. As such, threats to worldviews tend to elicit outgroup derogation and increased death-related cognition, as these threats temporarily weaken existential defenses (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2009).

Research has illustrated this connection in various ways. For example, McGregor et al. (1998, Study 1) recruited strongly conservative and liberal participants. Following a mortality salience (MS) manipulation (e.g., asking participants to write about what they think and feel about death) participants read essays that either aligned with or challenged their political worldviews. The primary dependent variable was the amount of hot sauce participants allocated to the essay's author, with a note stating the author did not like spicy food. Participants allocated significantly more hot sauce when their worldviews were challenged following a mortality reminder. In a follow-up study (Study 4), participants allocated less unpleasant juice, used as an alternative to hot sauce, when their worldview was not threatened, even when mortality awareness was present. These findings provide experimental support that death awareness increases outgroup derogation and aggression.

More pertinent to the current studies, some research has found a direct link between threatening people's worldviews and increased death thought accessibility (DTA). For instance, Schimel et al. (2007) asked politically conservative participants to read an anti-conservative essay and measured their DTA using a word-fragment task. This task provides unfilled word stems (e.g., D E _ _) embedded in a list of 20-to-25-word fragments, which can either be completed with death-related words (D E A D) or non-death related words (D E A F; Greenberg & Arndt, 2012). They found that participants' DTA increased after exposure to information that challenged their worldviews. Other studies have shown that increased DTA mediates outgroup derogation after mortality salience (Das et al., 2009), such that the elevated DTA explains the increase in outgroup derogation behaviors (Jimenez et al., 2020). Thus, there is substantial experimental evidence in TMT research linking outgroup derogation, aggression, prejudice, and even terrorism against outgroups to defensive mechanisms designed to protect individuals from experiencing existential anxiety (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2020; Schimel et al., 2019; Pyszczynski et al., 2009).

Critically, the negative behaviors triggered by worldview threats in TMT research conceptually resemble the discriminatory and prejudicial reactions to transgender people in contemporary America. It seems plausible, therefore, that the disproportionate number of anti-Trans bills introduced by GOP members in federal and state legislations reveals that transgender identity may be particularly threatening for Republicans. In this regard, I aim to examine whether transgender identity functions as an existential threat for politically conservative individuals, whose political beliefs often correlate with anti-trans worldviews.

Current Research

With two studies, I aim to contribute to experimental analyses of TMT and to the scientific literature on unconscious motivations behind transprejudice. Of course, other important theories may also explain psychological mechanisms behind transprejudice, such as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 1996), Gender Essentialism (e.g., Lee et al., 2020) and Heteronormativity (e.g., Habarth, 2015), and Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). SDO (Sidanius & Pratto, 1996) argues that some people have a social orientation that promotes social hierarchy and dominance of some (e.g., cisgender majority) over others (e.g., transgender minority). Gender essentialism (e.g., Lee et al., 2020), supports the idea that being male and female have fundamentally and exclusively different “essences,” a sentiment frequently associated with endorsement of heteronormativity (Habarth et al., 2015), which views heterosexual relationships (i.e., between men and women) as the only normal form of romantic and sexual relationship, regarding any other way as abnormal. Similarly, ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) involves benevolent or hostile attitudes toward women that may be linked to anti-trans attitudes (e.g., Leaper, 2024). However, to understand the root causes of anti-trans attitudes, I reasoned that examining unconscious, and existential motivations would provide the best opportunity to identify the underlying causes of these attitudes. For this reason, I chose TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986) and aimed to investigate whether transgender identity or transgender people themselves represent an existential threat for politically conservative individuals, traditionally opposed to transgender rights, by increasing their DTA.

I predict that people with conservative worldviews (e.g., Republicans) will report increased DTA after reading about the growing demographics of transgender Americans (Study 1) or the legitimacy of transgender experiences, supported by cultural and historical data (Study2), as compared to those who read about the increasing rates of residential mobility in the

nation (control condition in Studies 1 and 2), or those whose worldviews are supportive of transgender people (e.g., Democrats in Study 1). If the findings support these predictions, it will help explain why politically conservative officials devote so much time and resources taking away transgender rights. Specifically, it would suggest transgender people represent an existential threat to conservative ideology.

STUDY 1

MethodsProcedure

This study employed an experimental manipulation, and anticipated moderation by participant worldview. Participants were recruited if they reported conservative or liberal leaning on a political ideology screener in CloudResearch. All participants completed the survey online in exchange for \$1. After providing consent, participants answered questions assessing their attitudes toward social hierarchy and egalitarianism using the Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Pratto et al., 1994). Participants were then randomly assigned to either the experimental condition, which consisted of reading information about increasing rates of transgender Americans, or the control condition, which consisted of information about the changing rates of geographic mobility.

After reading the information, participants responded to a manipulation check item, completed the word-fragment task measuring death thought accessibility (DTA; Greenberg & Arndt, 2012), the Heteronormative Attitudes Scale (Habarth, 2015) to measure their endorsement of traditional gender norms and beliefs about gender being biologically determined and exclusively binary. Finally, participants answered demographic questions, responded to items about their views about transgender people, and were fully debriefed.

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Montana State University (IRB Protocol #2023-997).

Participants

Participants ($n = 363$) were recruited through Cloud Research (Douglas et al., 2023). A G*Power 3.1 analysis (Faul et al., 2007) indicated a minimal sample size of 386 to achieve 80% power with a small-to-medium effect size ($\eta_p^2 = .02$), based on a similar study (Jimenez et al., 2020; Study 2). Thus, the current sample is slightly underpowered. A post-hoc power analysis indicated the observed power for the interaction between condition and political affiliation effect to be 0.507. Given that these values are below the conventional 0.80 threshold, the study was underpowered to detect these effects.

The primary dependent variable in this study is a word-fragment task. Because of this, I removed 27 participants who indicated their native language was not English. Additionally, I removed 11 participants for taking less than 10 seconds to read the manipulation, 2 for failing the manipulation check, 8 for failing attention checks, and 10 for incomplete responses to the dependent variable. The final sample consisted of 304 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.98$, $SD = 12.99$). The political party affiliations of the sample included $n_{\text{Democrats}} = 120$, $n_{\text{Republicans}} = 110$, $n_{\text{Independent}} = 50$, $n_{\text{Libertarian}} = 8$, $n_{\text{Green Party}} = 2$. Twelve participants chose “none of the above” for their political party affiliation.

Most participants were Caucasian ($n = 249$), followed by African American/Black ($n = 47$), Hispanic ($n = 34$), and Asian ($n = 30$). Additionally, the majority of participants self-identified as male cisgender ($n = 176$), followed by female cisgender ($n = 144$), and non-binary ($n = 7$). Most of the participants reported their religious affiliation as Christian ($n = 172$), followed by Agnostic ($n = 78$), and Atheist ($n = 51$). Similarly, most participants reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual ($n = 284$), homosexual ($n = 12$), and bisexual ($n = 29$).

Measures

See Appendix for the full set of manipulation text and all measures used in both studies.

Social Dominance Orientation Scale

Previous studies showed that Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) predicts negative attitudes toward transgender people. This orientation reflects a desire for powerful groups to dominate those seen as inferior. Those with higher SDO may be more likely to view the marginalization of transgender people as natural, even desirable, as it aligns with a belief in maintaining the dominance of the cisgender and heterosexual majority. Previous research has demonstrated that higher SDO is linked to more negative attitudes toward transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (e.g., Perez-Arche & Miller, 2021). Thus, I included the SDO measure to explore whether it moderates the effect of condition, explains transprejudice, or covaries with the condition in predicting DTA.

The SDO scale (Pratto et al., 1994) consists of 17 items that assess attitudes toward social hierarchies using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*; $\alpha = .94$). Example items include “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups” and “It would be good if groups could be equal” (reverse-coded). This scale includes two subscales: Social Dominance Orientation, measuring preference for hierarchy and ingroup dominance, and Egalitarianism, which reflects a preference for social equity rather than hierarchy (e.g., Ho et al., 2015). Higher scores on SDO indicate a stronger endorsement of social hierarchies, while higher scores on the Egalitarianism subscale reflect a preference for social equity.

Independent Variable

Participants were randomly assigned to either the control or experimental condition. In the experimental condition, participants read a press release discussing the increasing rates of transgender identity in the U.S., adapted from studies on racial dynamics (Jimenez et al., 2020). This press release stated that transgender identity was becoming more common in the U.S. and projected that by 2042, nearly 1 in 10 Americans would identify as transgender (see Appendix for full text of manipulations).

In the control condition, participants read a press release about the increasing rates of residential mobility in the U.S, which has been used in prior studies examining DTA and worldview threat (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Jimenez et al., 2020). This manipulation was designed to avoid threatening any participants' worldviews, as it did not mention transgender people or their gender identity.

Dependent Variables

Manipulation Check

To ensure participants attended to the content of the press release, they were asked to select from three options regarding the content of the article: changes in rates in geographic mobility, changes in rates of gender expression, changes in rates of mortgage for new homeowners. Participants who did not correctly identify the topic of their assigned press release were excluded ($n = 2$).

Death Thought Accessibility

To assess DTA, I used a word-stem task (Rosenblatt et al., 1989) used frequently in TMT research (Steinman & Updegraff, 2015). Participants were given 25 word-stems and asked to complete each with the first word that came to mind. Six of these stems could be completed with death-related word. For example, “D E _ _” could be completed as “dead” or “deaf,” or “G R A _ _” could be completed as “G R A V E” or “G R A D E.” The number of death words were summed to create a composite DTA.

Exploratory DV's

Participants completed two sets of questions for exploratory purposes. The first set consisted of three health questions, adapted from Jimenez et al. (2020), that assessed participants' agreement with health policies regarding the health gap between cisgender and transgender citizens on a 7-point scale (1= strongly disagree 7= strongly agree; $\alpha = .93$). The second set included three questions about attitudes toward transgender people: the perceived safety of transgender people around children (1 = extremely unsafe, 7 = extremely safe), perceived mental stability of transgender people (1 = extremely unstable to 7 = extremely stable), and the degree to which participants believed transgender people belong in society (0 = They do not belong at all, to 100 = They completely belong). These items were analyzed separately due to low overall reliability ($\alpha = .20$).

Heteronormative Attitudes Scale

The Heteronormative Attitudes Scale (Habarth, 2015) was used to assess participants' views on gender norms and whether they held beliefs about gender and sex being the same construct. This was included as an additional worldview that may be threatened by the experimental condition as it is correlated with anti-trans beliefs. Participants rated their

agreement with statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1= Strongly disagree, 7= Strongly agree; $\alpha = .96$). The scale includes two subscales: Essential Sex and Gender ($\alpha = .96$) and Gender Normative Behavior ($\alpha = .75$) with eight items in each.

Example items for the first subscale include “All people are either male or female.” and “Gender is something we learn from society (reverse-coded).” Example items for the second subscale include “In intimate relationships, women and men take on roles according to gender for a reason; it’s really the best way to have a successful relationship” and “People should partner with whomever they choose, regardless of sex or gender (reverse-coded).”

Demographic Questions

Demographic questions included age, racial and ethnic identity, annual income, whether English was their native language, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and the importance of their religious beliefs to their identity (0= not important, 100= extremely important). The continuous variable of political orientation was measured on a sliding scale (0= left-leaning, 50= equally left and right-leaning, 100= totally right-leaning), and this served as the primary grouping variable. The secondary grouping variable was political party affiliation. Primary focus was on Democrats and Republicans, yet data were also collected from participants who reported affiliation with the Libertarian and Green parties, identified as Independent, or selected “None of the above.” They were also asked about their voting intentions in the 2024 U.S. Presidential election (Donald Trump, Joe Biden, someone else, ‘I do not plan to vote’, or ‘I have not yet decided who to vote for’). Note that the data collection occurred in April 2024, before the actual Presidential elections, and before Kamala Harris replaced Joe Biden (Matza & Cabral, 2024).

Finally, participants indicated their gender identity (Male Cisgender, Female Cisgender,

Non-binary, Transgender, Genderfluid, Agender, Two-spirit, Other, or Prefer not to say).

Results

Zero-order bivariate correlations between variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, right-leaning political orientation was strongly and negatively associated with perceptions of transgender individuals' safety around children, mental stability, and belonging in society. In contrast, political conservatism was strongly and positively associated with essentialist gender beliefs and normative attitudes toward gender. A moderate positive correlation was also found between right-leaning political orientation and social dominance orientation. Finally, egalitarianism was moderately and negatively correlated with right-leaning political orientation.

To test whether condition and political orientation predicted DTA, I conducted a multiple linear regression. I created two new variables: a centered version of political orientation and an interaction term between political orientation and condition. The analysis indicated a null effect, $p = .58$.

To test whether other worldviews interacted with condition to predict DTA, I conducted a series of ANOVAs using the following variables as moderators: SDO (measured separately as Egalitarianism and Social Dominance subscales), health policy support, beliefs about the safety of trans people around children, perceived mental stability of trans individuals, perceived belonging of trans individuals in society, and heteronormative attitudes (Essential Sex and Gender and Normative Behavior subscales) as the moderators. No significant interactions emerged ($ps > .12$).

I then compared the mean differences in DTA between the Threat and Control conditions using a one-way ANOVA. Participants in the Threat condition ($M = 1.81$, $SD = 1.04$) did not

significantly differ from those in the Control condition ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.06$), $p = .23$. Similarly, political orientation did not significantly predict DTA ($p = .94$), nor did it interact with condition, $F(1, 298) = 1.22$, $p = .27$. This null effect held even when utilizing an ANCOVA and controlling for SDO ($p = .98$), heteronormative attitudes ($p = .42$), gender normative beliefs ($p = .18$), and attitudes towards transgender people, including ratings of children's safety ($p = .32$), mental stability ($p = .87$), and their societal belonging ($p = .73$).

Table 1. Zero-order Bivariate Correlations in Study 1

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Social Dominance	-								
2. Policy Support	-.58**	-							
3. Safe Around Children	-.33**	-.60**	-						
4. Mentally Stable	-.42**	.81**	.56**	-					
5. Belonging In Society	-.50**	.75**	.82**	.75**	-				
6. Essential Sex and Gender	.42**	-.82**	-.81**	-.76**	-.81**	-			
7. Gender Normativity	.48**	-.71**	-.74**	-.81**	-.81**	.82**	-		
8. Political Orientation	.42**	-.76**	-.73**	-.72**	-.72**	.80**	.71**	-	
9. Egalitarianism	.72**	-.63**	-.55**	-.56**	-.56**	.54**	.51**	.60**	-
10. Religiosity	.17**	-.30**	-.32**	-.38**	-.38**	.43**	.51**	.41**	.20**

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the .001 level (2-tailed). Higher scores in Social Dominance, Policy Support, Safety, Mental Stability, Societal Belonging, Essential Sex and Gender, Gender Normativity, and Egalitarianism represent higher endorsement of the corresponding worldviews. Higher scores in Political Orientation represent right-leaning political orientation, and higher scores in religiosity represent elevated attribution of importance of religion in their personal identity.

Given that the continuous measure of political orientation did not moderate the effect of condition, I conducted a 2 (Political affiliation: Democrat vs. Republican) x 2 (Condition: Threat vs. Control) between-group analysis of variance (ANOVA), including only participants who

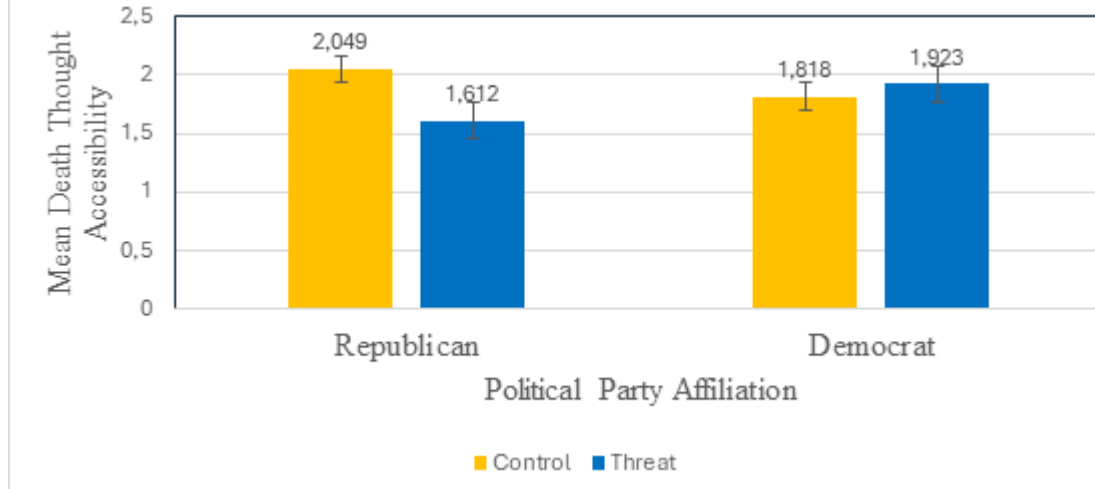
identified either as Republican ($n = 110$) or Democrat ($n = 120$). Results revealed a significant interaction effect, $F(1, 226) = 3.94, p = .048, \eta_p^2 = .017$ (see Figure 1).

To decompose this interaction, I examined the simple effects of condition within each political group. Among Democrats, there were no significant difference in DTA scores between the Threat and Control conditions ($p = .57$). However, among Republicans, DTA scores significantly differed between the Threat ($M = 1.61, SD = 1.06$) and Control ($M = 2.05, SD = 1.04$) conditions, $F(1, 108) = 4.72, p = .028, 95\% CI = [-.826, -.048], \eta_p^2 = .021$.

Although the anticipated null effects were observed among Democrats, the effect of condition among Republicans was in the opposite direction from predictions, with lower DTA scores in the Threat condition compared to Control.

Finally, to assess whether the interaction between political affiliation and condition remained significant after accounting for additional covariates, I conducted an ANCOVA. The results showed that the interaction was no longer significant when SDO, Egalitarianism, Gender Essentialism, and Gender Normativity were included as covariates ($ps > .13$), although the p-value remained relatively small, $p = .061$. SDO. While the initially significant interaction became nonsignificant with the addition of covariates, this outcome is perhaps unsurprising given the moderate to high correlations between the covariates and political orientation (see Table 1).

Figure 1. Death Thought Accessibility by Political Party x Condition.



A graph of DTA based on political parties.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 were unexpected and contrary to the original hypothesis. I anticipated that Republicans would exhibit heightened DTA in response to a press release reporting an increase in transgender identification in the United States, as such a message might challenge conservative worldview structures. However, the data revealed a significant difference in DTA among Republicans across conditions, but in the opposite direction: Republicans in the Threat condition reported *lower* DTA scores than those in the Control condition. No significant differences were found among Democrats.

While the current data does not provide a definitive explanation for this pattern, the Dual Process Model of Terror Management Theory (Kosloff et al., 2019), summarized in Figure 2, offers a useful theoretical framework for interpreting these results. Below, I briefly outline this model before exploring how its mechanisms might relate to the observed findings.

Dual-Process Model of DTA

Terror Management Theory proposes a dual-process model for how people defend against mortality-related threats. According to this model, defensive responses occur in two stages: proximal defenses, which occur while death-related thoughts are in conscious awareness, and distal defenses, which emerge once these thoughts recede from conscious focus. These two pathways are theorized to function as psychological mechanisms that shield people from the paralyzing awareness of mortality and help maintain psychological equilibrium (Kosloff et al., 2019).

Proximal Defenses: Suppressing Death Thoughts

Proximal defenses occur when death thoughts are conscious, such as after being reminded explicitly of mortality-related stimuli. These defenses function to suppress or rationalize death-related thoughts by trivializing the significance of death or rationalizing how one is invulnerable to death by reminding of exercise and healthy diet habits (Greenberg et al., 1999; Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Vail et al., 2012a). These responses are generally aimed at pushing death thoughts out of awareness, resulting in a temporary reduction in DTA.

Interestingly, similar proximal defenses can be activated not only by explicit mortality reminders but also by other aversive emotional stimuli, such as disgust (Burris, & Rempel, 2004; Cox et al., 2007; Goldenberg et al., 2000; Hayes et al., 2010; Kelley et al., 2015), or fear of destruction (Vail et al., 2012b). This possibility is particularly relevant for the current study, given that the manipulation involved a topic, transgender identity, that may evoke disgust-based moral reactions among some conservative individuals. Similarly, it is possible that participants' perceptions of transgender people may be influenced by an enhanced fear of destruction (for

practical indications pointing at this possibility, see Folk, 2022; Oklahoma Senate, 2023). If the message triggered proximal defenses, this may have led to suppressed DTA among Republicans in the Threat condition.

Distal Defenses: Worldview Confirmation

Over time, however, suppression becomes cognitively taxing (Wegner, 1994), and death thoughts may rebound and become hyper-accessible, especially when focal attention shifts. At this stage, distal defenses come online. These defenses operate outside of conscious awareness and typically involve affirming cultural worldviews, promoting ingroup identity, or derogating outgroups (Greenberg et al., 2000; Kosloff et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2020). When activated, distal defenses also lead to a decrease in DTA, but through worldview confirmation rather than suppression.

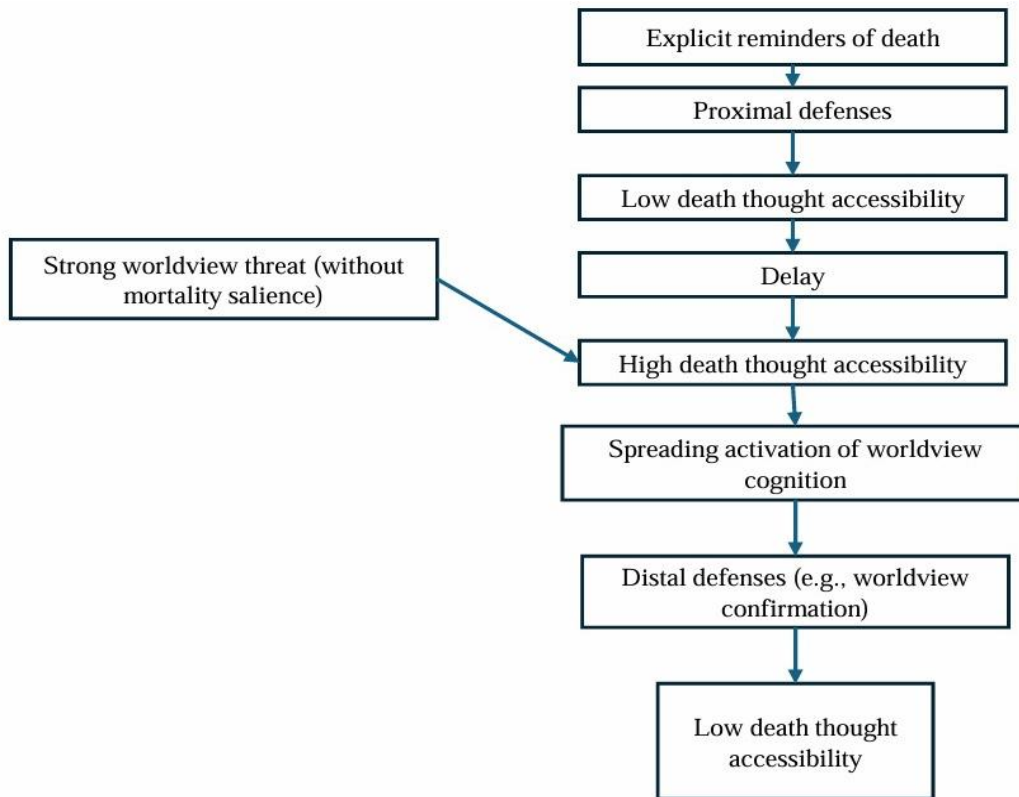
Importantly, the temporal dynamics of the dual-process model may help contextualize the observed decrease in DTA among Republicans. Because DTA was assessed immediately following the manipulation, it is possible that Republicans engaged proximal defenses, particularly if they perceived the content as emotionally aversive and identity-threatening. This interpretation is speculative but offers one potential explanation for why the pattern of results was in the opposite direction from what was initially expected.

Additionally, given that the observed effect among Republicans reflected a decrease in DTA in the Threat condition among Republicans, it is possible that their distal defenses were activated as a result of reading the manipulation. The message that transgender identity was becoming more prevalent in the U.S. may have activated a sense of threat that led participants' to unconsciously reaffirm their existing worldviews (e.g., see Ramaswamy, 2021 for an example of

a liberal, “woke agenda” aimed at increasing transgender people in the nation), which may then have caused a decrease in participants’ DTA.

See Figure 2 for a graphical model of these processes.

Figure 2. Dual Process Model of DTA in TMT (Adapted from Goldenberg & Arndt, 2008 & Kosloff et al., 2019)



STUDY 2

Because the primary focus of this thesis is to understand psychological motivations behind transprejudice, in Study 2, I recruited only Republicans to reduce the required sample size. In addition, I chose to implement a new manipulation that provide a more direct worldview threat for anti-transgender sentiments in the U.S. (for a review, see Butler, 2024). For this reason, I used explicit information that contradicts the belief that transgender identity is a recent phenomenon or part of a harmful agenda.

Indeed, even though people with expansive gender identities have existed throughout centuries (American Psychological Association, 2024), and in many cultures (PBS, 2023), many contemporary conservatives who oppose equal rights for transgender people claim that transgender is a new social trend. These belief systems often frame transgenderism (Stryker, 2017) as a planned agenda designed to cause harm, contaminate, or destroy American society, separate people from the Church, and confuse children (e.g., Anderson, 2018; Butler, 2024; Carlson, 2022, 2024; also see Ramirez, 2018). Butler (2024) describes these conservative and right-wing sentiments responding to a “gender phantasm,” a projection of fear onto an imagined threat (p. 110-111). The proposed manipulation would counter these claims by stating that transgender people have always existed in human societies and that their existence is normal and natural.

By including an additional condition, I aim to replicate Study 1 and examine whether a different threat, one that more directly challenges anti-transgender attitudes, elicits higher DTA. I predict that the new threat manipulation will produce significantly higher DTA than the control condition. I also anticipate the original manipulations to replicate the patterns found in Study 1.

Methods

Procedure

This study uses a between-subjects design to examine how Republicans' DTA scores vary across three conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: experimental condition 1, experimental condition 2, or the control condition. Those in the experimental condition 1 read the same article used in Study 1, which stated that more Americans identify as transgender, and this increase is projected to continue in the near future. Those in experimental condition 2 read a brief news article stating that transgender people have always existed (the new threat condition). Meanwhile, those in the control condition read the same control article from Study 1 about increasing rates in resident mobility.

All participants conducted the survey online in exchange for \$1 and followed the same procedures as Study 1 with only a few changes. The SDO scale was changed to the short SDO scale (Ho et al., 2015) and following the DTA measure, participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) instead of the extra measures used in Study 1. The manipulation check was also moved to the end of the study to avoid participants in the control condition seeing information about transgender people. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Montana State University (IRB Protocol #2023-997).

Participants

Participants ($n = 500$) were recruited from Cloud Research (Douglas et al., 2023) on March 19th, 2025. A priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) determined that a total sample of 453 participants would be needed to detect an effect size of $f = .132$, which was the effect size found in Study 1, with an alpha level of .05 and power of 0.80 in

a three-condition ANOVA. To account for potential missing data, incomplete responses, or failed attention checks, I recruited a slightly larger sample of 500 participants.

I excluded 28 participants who indicated that English was not their native language, 42 participants who failed the manipulation check, three who failed the attention check, and two who responded only one of the six DTA word-stems. The final sample contained 455 participants ($M_{age} = 42.90$, $SD = 13.62$). Although I aimed to collect data exclusively from Republicans, some participants reported different political affiliations: 9 Democrats, 462 Republicans, 19 Independents, 5 Libertarians, and 6 who indicated “none of the above.” I excluded all non-Republican participants from the analyses.

Most participants were Caucasian ($n = 376$), followed by American/Black ($n = 34$), Hispanic ($n = 28$), American Indian/Native Alaskan ($n = 5$), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ($n = 2$), Middle Eastern ($n = 2$) participants and those who chose “other” as the option ($n = 5$). The majority of participants self-identified as female cisgender ($n = 259$), followed by male cisgender ($n = 211$), non-binary ($n = 1$), other ($n = 21$), and “prefer not to say” ($n = 8$). Most participants reported their religious affiliation as Christian ($n = 360$), followed by Agnostic ($n = 37$), and Atheist ($n = 12$), Jewish ($n = 10$), Muslim ($n = 2$), Spiritual ($n = 9$), and Buddhist ($n = 4$). Some participants chose “Prefer not to say” ($n = 11$), and “other” ($n = 10$). Most participants reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual ($n = 435$), followed by homosexual ($n = 2$), bisexual ($n = 10$), asexual ($n = 5$), pansexual ($n = 2$), and one participant who chose “prefer not to say.”

Measures

Social Dominance Orientation Short Scale

The SDO-7 scale, developed to shorten the original scale by Pratto et al. (1994), includes two subscales: Pro-trait Anti-Egalitarianism and Con-trait Anti-Egalitarianism. Ho et al. (2015) identified four items for each subscale, with “Pro-trait Anti-Egalitarianism” ($\alpha = .87$) reflecting higher endorsement of social dominance values, and “Con-trait Anti-Egalitarianism” ($\alpha = .88$) reflecting higher endorsement of egalitarianism and social equity. The scale uses a 7-item Likert style (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). An example item for the Pro-trait Anti-Egalitarianism subscale is “People should not push for group equality,” while an item for the Con-trait Anti-Egalitarianism subscale is “People should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed.” The mean score for each subscale was calculated separately.

Independent Variable

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: Experimental 1, Experimental 2, Control. Experimental 1 and control conditions were the same as in Study 1. The second experimental condition introduced a new manipulation, titled “*Transgender people have always existed*,” followed by three short paragraphs stating that it is unethical for society to expect transgender people to use bathrooms and locker rooms not matching their gender identity. This issue is especially relevant in anti-trans legislation, including in the state where this study was conducted (Silvers, 2025), which motivated the inclusion of the sentiment (for an analysis of negative impacts of bathroom laws, see Murib, 2020; also see Rushin & Carroll, 2017).

Dependent Variables

Death Thought Accessibility. The same word-stem task (Rosenblatt et al., 1989) from Study 1 was used. Participants filled in 25-word stems with the first word that came to their mind, six of which served as the dependent variable. The death-related words were summed into a composite DTA score.

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory

Participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), which measures benevolent and hostile sexism through 11 items each. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert style measure (1= Disagree strongly, 6= Agree strongly). An example item for the Benevolent Sexism ($\alpha = .80$) is “A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.” while an example item for the Hostile Sexism ($\alpha = .88$) is “Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist.”

Demographic Questions

Demographic questions included participants’ age, racial and ethnic identity (African American/Black, American Indian/Native Alaskan, Asian, Caucasian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, Other), approximate annual income (options ranged from \$0 to \$125,000+ with \$25,000 increments, and ‘Prefer not to answer’), if English was their native language, their sexual identity (Heterosexual, Homosexual, Bisexual, Asexual, Pansexual, Sapiosexual, with the explanations for each category in parentheses, Other, and ‘Prefer not to say’), religious identity (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Spiritual, Atheist, Agnostic, Shaman, ‘Prefer not to say’, Other), and the importance of their religious beliefs on their identity on a sliding scale (sliding scale from 0 to 100).

Participants were also asked about their political orientation and affiliation through several questions regarding party preference (1= Strong Democrat, 7= Strong Republican), political orientation on economic and social issues (1= very liberal, 7= very conservative), voting history in the last presidential elections (Donald Trump, Kamala Harris, someone else, “I didn’t vote”), and their political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Green Party, Independent, None of the above). Finally, participants reported their gender identity, and if they had a transgender individual their social circle.

Manipulation Check

To assess whether the participants paid attention to the content of the press release, they were asked to choose the correct topic of the article from four options: Geographic mobility; Changes in rates of gender expression; Changes in rates of mortgage for new homeowners; Historical records of transgender identity. Participants were excluded if they responded to this incorrectly ($n = 42$). Because this study employs a between subjects’ design, and participants do not know what other press release topics were, if participants in either experimental condition selected an article topic about gender (options 2 or 4), they were coded as correctly choosing the topic of the press release.

Results

Primary Analysis

A one-way ANOVA tested whether DTA scores differed by condition. A significant main effect of condition was detected, $F(2, 419) = 4.020, p = .019, \eta^2 = .019$. This result remained significant when utilizing an ANCOVA and controlling for the SDO subscales and the

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, $p = .017$.

For the condition means, those in the control condition reported the lowest DTA ($M = .99$, $SD = .80$), followed by those in the condition with the original manipulation ($M = 1.20$, $SD = .88$). Participants who read the new manipulation reported the highest DTA scores ($M = 1.29$, $SD = .89$). A simple contrast analysis indicated that mean DTA in experimental condition with the original manipulation and the control condition were marginally significantly different. Because Levene's test was significant, I used Walsch's adjusted t-test results; $t(255.564) = -1.938$, $p = .054$.

Importantly, when analyzing DTA scores for Republicans who read the new manipulation, there was a significant difference from the control condition, $t(259.016) = -2.883$, $p = .004$, 95% C.I. = $[-.50, -.09]$. However, there were no significant differences between the two experimental conditions, $p = .32$. These results remained consistent even after controlling for the SDO subscales and Ambivalent Sexism Inventory scores as covariates. Bivariate correlations between study variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Bivariate correlations between variables in Study 2.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Benevolent Sexism	--								
2. Hostile Sexism	.12**	--							
3. Pro-Trait Anti-Egalitarianism (Dominance)	-.055	.38**	--						
4. Con-Trait Anti-Egalitarianism (Egalitarianism)	-.014	-.42**	-.79**	--					
5. Economic Political Orientation	.07	.23**	.32**	-.35**	--				
6. Social Political Orientation	.18**	.34**	.34**	-.37**	.61**	--			
7. Income	.055	-.005	.034	-.002	.06	.018	--		
8. Religiosity	.19**	.01	-.01	.009	.18**	.28**	-.04	--	
9. Age	-.08*	-.18**	.06	-.14**	.19**	.11**	-.15**	.11**	--
10. DTA	.017	.06	.008	.012	-.041	-.02	-.002	-.09*	-.04

Note. * Correlation is significant at the level of .05 level (2-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the level of .001 (2-tailed). Higher values in Pro-trait Anti-Egalitarianism represent higher endorsement of social hierarchies, and higher values in Con-trait Anti-Egalitarianism represent higher endorsement of egalitarian values. Higher values in Economic and Social Political Orientation represent higher endorsement of conservatism.

To further explore the role of political orientation, I conducted an ANOVA to determine whether the two subtypes of political orientation (i.e., political and economic) interacted with condition to influence DTA scores. Neither economic nor social political orientation interacted with condition ($ps > .34$). Similarly, multiple analyses of ANOVAs indicated that ambivalent

sexism, hostile sexism, pro-trait Anti-egalitarianism and con-trait Anti-egalitarianism did not significantly moderate the effect of condition on DTA scores, $ps > .06$. This lack of moderation may be attributed to the restricted range of the sample, which was predominantly right-leaning.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 were partially consistent with the hypotheses. Specifically, Republicans reported higher DTA after reading a press release that directly challenged existing anti-trans rhetoric espoused by Republicans in the U.S. (i.e., the new threat condition). However, the results did not replicate the findings from Study 1. In Study 1, DTA in the original threat condition was lower than in the control condition. In contrast, in Study 2, the original threat condition led to higher DTA than the control condition, though the difference was approaching significance with a p-value of .054.

However, the finding that Republicans reported higher DTA in both threat manipulations supports the original hypothesis that transgender people may be perceived as an existential threat. Potential reasons for this difference are discussed further in the General Discussion section.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Two experimental studies were conducted to examine whether transgender people represent an existential threat to politically conservative Americans by enhancing participants' death thought accessibility (DTA). Contrary to the original hypothesis, Study 1 found that Republicans' DTA significantly decreased after reading about the increasing rates of transgender people in the U.S. compared to a control condition about geographic mobility. In contrast, Study 2 demonstrated that reading about either the increasing rates of transgender Americans or evidence supporting their societal belonging and natural occurrence in history led to an increase in Republicans' DTA relative to a control condition. While the results are contradictory because reading about transgender people had an impact on DTA, they provide general support for the original prediction that transgender people are perceived as an existential threat by Republicans in the U.S. However, the patterns of results differ by the study. The results contribute to a broader understanding of why some political ideologies are so focused on denigrating transgender people.

The manipulation in Study 1 may have led to a decrease in DTA for a few potential reasons. Information in the original manipulation included suggestions that the increasing rates of transgender people may be due to secular trends in culture and media. Secularism is a political doctrine that requires the separation of religion from the state (Beard et al., 2013), which may activate a more nuanced response among some participants who oppose such a requirement. However, reading that secular trends may explain these trends may have activated a response that functioned as a worldview confirmation for Republicans. Indeed, there is rhetorical evidence that some Republicans believe that the Democrat Party, which adopts a secular approach, along with

scientific institutions and secular media, had been aiming to increase transgender rates in the U.S. all along (e.g., House Republican Conference, 2024). If reading the information served as worldview confirming, we would expect to see a decrease in participants' worldviews, as found in Study 1. This explanation aligns with the distal defense hypothesis of the dual-process model in Terror Management Theory (TMT; Steinman & Updegraff, 2015).

Conversely, reading this information could have activated aversive emotions such as disgust or fear of destruction, and decreasing participants' DTA. This explanation is consistent with proximal defenses (Steinman & Updegraff, 2015).

In summary, both proximal and distal defense possibilities would predict lower DTA among Republicans who read the transgender-related message. While I initially did not predict a decrease in their DTA, Study 1 results suggest that the topic of the manipulation (i.e., rates of transgender people) is associated with existential concerns for Republican participants.

According to TMT, cultural worldviews function to protect individuals from death awareness. If a topic modulates a person's DTA, it is, therefore, likely to be relevant to their anxiety buffer. In contrast, if reading about transgender people had no impact on participants' DTA, it would suggest that transgender people are unrelated to the target's worldview and, consequently, not associated with existential concerns. In both studies, however, transgender-related content affected DTA among Republicans, suggesting that transgender people are indeed existentially relevant to their worldview. In Study 1, the observed decrease in DTA may reflect a defense mechanism aimed at suppressing death-related thoughts in the face of a perceived existential threat. In contrast, Study 2 showed an increase in DTA after participants were exposed to affirming information about transgender people, providing more direct evidence of threat

activation. Taken together, the results support the hypothesis that transgender people are perceived as existentially threatening by individuals who endorse Republican worldviews.

Given that the direction of results in Study 1 was opposite to what was expected initially, Study 2 was conducted to determine if the unexpected findings would be replicated and to assess whether a more threatening manipulation would increase DTA. Results suggest that arguments promoting transgender equality, and the historical legitimacy of transgender people are indeed worldview-threatening, leading to a heightened DTA among Republicans. Even though DTA scores were not significantly different between the two experimental conditions, the original threat also produced an almost significant effect. This finding is consistent with previous research that observed an immediate increase in DTA among participants after reading passages containing worldview-threatening information (Schimel et al., 2007).

However, the threat manipulation in Study 1 led to lower DTA among Republicans in Study 1 and higher DTA in Study 2. One potential reason behind these inconsistent findings could be the timing of data collection. In Study 1, data collection occurred when U.S. President Joe Biden, a Democrat, was in office, and the 2024 presidential election was about eight months away. In Study 2, data collection occurred nearly two months after Donald Trump's inauguration, and during the immediate flurry of anti-trans executive orders, he signed (Saric, 2025). Since Donald Trump became president, the threat of a "woke agenda" systematically subsided. Thus, there is a possibility that transgender people represented a different type of threat for Republicans in Study 2. Specifically, the original manipulation may no longer have activated a fear of destruction (i.e., activating proximal defenses) or validated existing worldviews (i.e., activating distal defenses) but instead more straightforwardly represented a worldview threat.

While it is possible that the findings in Study 1 were spurious, the fact that the expected group (Republicans) exhibited a change in the expected outcome (DTA) makes it unlikely that the results were entirely due to chance.

Theoretical Implications

The current studies aimed to examine whether reading about transgender people activates politically conservative participants' unconscious death thoughts. The design of the studies was informed by Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1997), which posits that exposure to information inconsistent with cultural worldviews activates outgroup derogation, often by the mediation of activated death thoughts.

The effect of reading the manipulation on DTA suggests that reading trans-affirming message is relevant to activation of DTA. Importantly, this suggests that TMT processes can be activated by affirmations of marginalized identities, particularly if these identities are perceived as incompatible with their worldviews and values. Indeed, these results imply that solely reading transgender-affirming messages can be sufficient to activate participants' mortality-related thoughts. The increased DTA suggests that transgender people represent a meaningful context for participants in an existential, but not necessarily conscious, way. This then suggests that existential defenses may help explain social and political resistance to transgender rights or visibility.

By examining the existential motivations underlying prejudice, researchers may cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of social behaviors that, rather than fostering harmony and

cohesion, inadvertently give rise to division and disruption within society. Approaches that investigate the unconscious fear of those whose identities and worldviews diverge from one's own can offer critical insights into the psychological mechanisms that sustain intergroup tension.

In doing so, scholars may contribute to developing a more inclusive and socially sustainable world that affirms human uniqueness and authenticity rather than marginalizing it.

Future Directions

This thesis was an initial attempt to investigate existential motivations underlying transprejudice, and it aims to serve as a starting point for future research. By incorporating broader factors, such as the legal recognition, or lack thereof, of transgender individuals by a state, future longitudinal research can provide deeper insights into how perceptions of marginalized groups evolve, thereby enhancing the external validity of the current studies.

Future studies could explore alternative methods of manipulating exposure to transgender populations. For instance, rather than having participants read about various arguments connected to transgender people, researchers could have participants view images of transgender celebrities or non-celebrities who have consented to have their photos used for research purposes. Online resources such as The Gender Spectrum Collection and Trans Makeover offer valuable potential for future studies.

Future studies should also expand the scope of dependent variables when examining social perceptions of transgender individuals. For instance, participants could engage in social scenarios involving transgender or non-transgender individuals to assess how they respond in

real-life situations. These studies could ask participants to evaluate how comfortable they would feel working with, living with, or hiring someone who identifies as transgender. Additionally, researchers could explore more nuanced behaviors, such as willingness to form friendships, engage in community activities, or assess comfort and safety levels in shared public or social spaces. These types of scenarios would provide more insight into how societal attitudes towards transgender people translate into tangible actions and interactions, offering valuable information for shaping inclusive policies and practices.

Another way future studies could investigate this issue is by informing participants that there is a high likelihood that someone they love will, at some point, identify as transgender. Drawing from Social Contact Theory (Pettigrew, 1998), building meaningful and positive social contact with outgroups is frequently associated with decreasing prejudice and increasing positive social outcomes (e.g., Pettigrew et al., 2011). By telling participants that someone they love may identify as transgender, future research can help normalize transgender identities and facilitate a more re-humanizing perspective for those who identify as transgender. Potentially, this approach can be assessed with a DTA measure before or after reading such information.

Alternatively, future research should investigate whether the effect could be eliminated by using a humanistic framework to explain the transgender experience. One potential experiment could involve including statements that highlight the day-to-day lives of transgender individuals, drawing parallels to the everyday experiences of non-transgender individuals, or illustrating how they are directly impacted by anti-trans legislation. After the manipulations used in these studies, researchers could then examine whether DTA scores decrease, which would suggest a reduction in transprejudice.

Incorporating Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) into future research may be particularly valuable in understanding the dynamics of in-group and outgroup perceptions of transgender individuals. For example, researchers could explore how strengthening individuals' identification with broader, more inclusive social groups, such as those who value equality and respect for all people, might reduce transprejudice. For example, interventions could emphasize shared values between anti-trans individuals and transgender people, highlighting everyday human experiences (e.g., struggles for acceptance, safety, dignity, and fundamental human rights). By focusing on similarities rather than differences, researchers can assess whether emphasizing these shared identities helps reduce the perceived divide between the groups, making transgender people less threatening to those who may harbor prejudice.

Similarly, future studies could investigate whether self-affirmation interventions would result in an elimination of DTA after viewing transgender-related content, similar to what was used in current studies. Self-affirmation theory posits that reflecting on core personal values reinforces self-integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), thereby reducing defensive responses to perceived threats. Harmon-Jones et al. (1997) demonstrated that increased self-esteem can reduce or nullify mortality salience effects, offering a theoretical framework for such an approach. Applying this framework, future studies could test whether engaging in self-affirmation prior to exposure to transgender-related stimuli prevents the activation of DTA among politically conservative participants. If successful, such findings would have significant implications for interventions to reduce existentially motivated bias and foster more inclusive intergroup attitudes.

Limitations

These studies have some limitations. First, these studies only included American participants, and the data analyzed in the two studies only represent participants whose first language is English. Even though the ideological background behind anti-trans sentiment may reflect a broader global conservative trend (Butler, 2024), these studies likely do not capture the cultural nuances that may explain anti-trans trends in other countries. Future studies should investigate whether the results from Study 2 would be replicated among individuals in countries with varying levels of legal and systemic acceptance of, and prejudice toward, gender diversity while also accounting for sociopolitical and economic subcultures.

Second, Study 2 only recruited self-reporting Republicans because the predicted effect in Study 1 only occurred for Republicans. However, self-identifying as Republican represents just one facet of the complex ideological landscape of political conservatism. Notably, not all Republicans endorse anti-trans rhetoric, and Republicans are not the only group to do so within the U.S. context. On the other hand, a continuous measure of political orientation did not significantly moderate the effect of the condition, suggesting there is something unique about the Republican political identity. However, political orientation was measured with a single item and thus may not fully capture ideological nuances. Therefore, future studies should explore more comprehensive measures of political ideology.

Third, while these studies are experimental, they do not capture how cultural norms evolve over time. Future research could address the same questions with a longitudinal design, examining how sociopolitical and cultural shifts, global concerns, and leadership changes

influence attitudes and perceptions of transgender individuals. This approach could help explain why Studies 1 and 2 yielded differing patterns of results.

Finally, multiple layers contribute to understanding why transgender people are perceived as an existential threat. Existing societal gender dynamics, personal experiences with transgender individuals, and religious, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds all influence how people view transgender people (Greenburg & Gaia, 2019). Political conservatism likely represents just one potential facet in explaining negativity toward transgender people. On the other hand, other measures associated with anti-transgender attitudes (e.g., SDO, gender essentialism) did not significantly moderate the effect of condition on DTA in Study 1. Therefore, it is possible that political conservatism, and specifically Republican political party identification (at least in America), represents an underlying worldview that is particularly sensitive to transgender ideology. Nevertheless, future studies should explore alternative constructs such as right-wing authoritarianism, Big Five personality traits, and the need for cognition and examine how these constructs interact with political conservatism to shape perceptions of threat.

Implications for Contemporary Society

Contemporary political discourse in the United States has increasingly drawn upon existential themes to frame social issues, particularly those involving gender and identity. The rhetoric used in political campaigns, including that of President Donald Trump, may have strategically leveraged anti-transgender narratives to consolidate political support by the construction of a salient outgroup (e.g., Beauregard, 2025). From a Terror Management Theory (TMT) perspective, such messaging may resonate by symbolically threatening cultural

worldviews and social and identity structures that provide existential security for the non-transgender majority (Landau et al., 2004).

Importantly, anti-trans rhetoric among certain conservative factions in the United States extends beyond debates about the rights of transgender individuals. Rather, it reflects an ideological framework in which nonconformity to dominant cultural and political norms is systematically marginalized and punished (Walters, 2024). This broader framework, often aligned with White supremacy, patriarchal values, and Christian nationalism, may construct deviations from dominant sociocultural norms related to race, gender, sexuality, and religion as existential threats to the prevailing social order (Walters, 2024). Such perceptions can have devastating consequences for individuals with non-conforming social identities by reinforcing rigid boundaries around which identities are deemed acceptable and deserving of belonging (Osborne et al., 2023). Moreover, this ideological system shapes access to essential institutional resources, such as healthcare, legal recognition, and education, with disproportionately negative effects on structurally marginalized groups.

Furthermore, research suggests that members of socially dominant groups may perceive increasing diversity and demographic change as threatening their societal standing, which can heighten existential concerns and defensive responses (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Danbold & Huo, 2015). In this context, anti-transgender rhetoric may serve not solely as a stance on gender identity but as part of a broader reaction to perceived challenges to established hierarchies and cultural continuity (see also Archer & Lloyd, 1982; Unger, 1998).

As Butler (2024) argues, the denial of gender diversity functions rhetorically to reinforce traditional conceptions of social order, often implicitly anchored in White, cisnormative, and heteronormative standards. Such discourse positions transgender identities as symbolic threats to cultural cohesion and can be understood as part of a broader strategy to preserve existing power structures. Recognizing these dynamics and further investigating the psychological underpinnings of transphobia are critical to addressing how existential anxieties are channeled into policy decisions and public attitudes that impact transgender populations.

Conclusion

In two experimental studies, I examined whether transgender identity activates existential concerns among politically conservative individuals. The findings suggest that transgender related content increases death thought accessibility (DTA) for Republicans, indicating existential relevance. While effects differed in direction across studies, both show that transgender people are psychologically meaningful in ways that may not be consciously acknowledged. These results support the idea that anti-trans legislation and rhetoric may function as defenses against existential fear, rather than emerging solely from ideological beliefs. Understanding this process may be key to addressing the deeper psychological roots of transprejudice.

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APPENDIX

STUDY MATERIALS

SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION SCALE (PRATTO ET AL., 1994)

“On the following pages, you will be asked to first read a brief press release before answering questions about it. Please read the release carefully before moving onto the questions.”

1. Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.
2. In getting what you want, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups.
3. It's OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others.
4. To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups.
5. If certain groups stayed in their place, we would have fewer problems.
6. It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.
7. Inferior groups should stay in their place.
8. Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place.
9. It would be good if groups could be equal.
10. Group equality should be our ideal.
11. All groups should be given an equal chance in life.
12. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.
13. Increased social equality is beneficial to society.
14. We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally.
15. We should strive to make incomes as equal as possible.
16. No group should dominate in society.

CONTROL ARTICLE USED IN STUDY 1 (JIMENEZ, HELM & ARNDT, 2020)

U.S. CENSUS BUREAU REPORTS RESIDENTS NOW MOVE AT A HIGHER RATE

New U.S. Census Bureau data suggest that the rate of geographical mobility, or the number of individuals who have moved within the past year, is increasing. The national mover rate increased from 11.9 percent in 2008 (the lowest rate since the U.S. Census Bureau began tracking the data) to 12.5 percent in 2023.

According to the new data, 37.1 million people changed residences in the U.S. within the past year. 84.5 percent of all movers stayed within the same state. Renters were more than five times more likely to move than homeowners. The estimates also reveal that many of the nation's fastest-growing cities are suburbs. Specifically, principal cities within metropolitan areas experienced a net loss of 2.1 million movers, while the suburbs had a net gain of 2.4 million movers.

For those who moved to a different county or state, the reasons for moving varied considerably by the length of their move. The latest figures are predicated on current and historical trends, which can be thrown awry by several variables, including prospective overhauls of public policy.

EXPERIMENTAL MANIPULATION USED IN STUDY 1

GENDER SHIFTS IN THE U.S.

New data from the U.S. Census Bureau and National Institutes of Health (NIH) suggest that transgender will become a common gender identity in America much faster than once predicted. The nation's transgender population is steadily rising, advancing an unmistakable trend that could make transgender people commonplace by midcentury. The data show a declining number of adults identifying as traditional male or female, and a growing population of adults who plan to transition.

In 2006, about .15% of Americans identified as transgender. By 2023, the number of people identifying as transgender had increased by nearly 700%. Demographers calculate that by 2042, almost 1 in 10 Americans will identify as transgender. Future national surveys are likely to observe high numbers of transgender people.

The main reasons for the accelerating change are secular trends in culture and the media have created a somewhat more favorable environment for transgender people. The latest figures are predicted on current and historical trends, which may be more indicative for younger adults who represent high rates of respondents in recent national surveys.

EXPERIMENTAL MANIPULATION USED IN STUDY 2

TRANSGENDER PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS EXISTED

For centuries, people who identify as a gender different from their birth sex—known as transgender individuals—have existed in cultures around the world. Indeed, archeological records confirm that transgender people have existed for a very long time. For example, a 5,000-year-old “male” skeleton buried in a “female” way was discovered by an archaeological team just outside of modern-day Prague.

In fact, many societies throughout history have recognized and accepted gender diversity as part of human experience. Historical records confirm that being transgender is a natural human phenomenon, not a modern trend or political movement.

Therefore, it is logical that transgender individuals should have the same rights as people whose gender identity match their birth sex—known as cisgender individuals—including the ability to compete in sports and to use public restrooms that match their gender identity. Restricting trans women from these spaces contradicts the natural order of society and imposes unnecessary barriers on people who are simply living their lives.

DEATH THOUGHT ACCESSIBILITY SCALE (only the target words are listed below;
Greenberg & Arndt, 2012)

“We are simply pre-testing this questionnaire for future studies. Please complete the following by filling letters in the blanks to create words. Please fill in the blanks with the first word that comes to mind. Write one letter per blank. Some words may be plural.”

B U R _ _ D (BURIED)

D E _ _ (DEAD)

G R A _ _ (GRAVE)

K I _ _ E D (KILLED)

S K _ _ L (SKULL)

POLICY SUPPORT QUESTIONS IN STUDY 1 (ADAPTED FROM JIMENEZ ET AL., 2020)

“In this section, please indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements below, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree”

1. The government should work to reduce the health gap between transgender and cisgender people.
2. The government should work to reduce the health gap between transgender and cisgender people even if it means raising taxes.
3. The government should work to reduce the health gap between transgender and cisgender people even if it means shifting resources away from cisgender to transgender people.

POTENTIAL DVS FOR TRANSPREJUDICE MEASURES (STUDY 1)

“Please answer the following questions with the scales provided.”

Safety: To what degree do you think transgender people are safe to be around children? 1=

Extremely unsafe, 4= Neither safe nor unsafe, 7= Extremely safe

Mental Stability: To what extent do you think transgender people are mentally stable?

1= Extremely unstable, 4= Neither unstable nor stable, 7= Extremely stable

Society Belonging: To what is the degree that you think transgender belong in society?

0= They do not belong at all, 100= They completely belong

THE HETERONORMATIVE ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS SCALE USED IN STUDY 1
(HABART, 2015)

“Below are some statements representing different attitudes and beliefs. You will probably find that you agree with some of the statements, and disagree with others, to varying extents. Please indicate your reaction to each statement by choosing the appropriate phrase beneath each statement.”

1. In healthy intimate relationships, women may sometimes take on stereotypical ‘male’ roles, and men may sometimes take on stereotypical ‘female’ roles. (R)
2. In intimate relationships, women and men take on roles according to gender for a reason; it’s really the best way to have a successful relationship.
3. *There are only two sexes: male and female.*
4. People should partner with whomever they choose, regardless of sex or gender. (R)
5. *Gender is the same thing as sex.*
6. *Femininity and masculinity are determined by biological factors, such as genes and hormones, before birth.*
7. *All people are either male or female.*
8. Things go better in intimate relationships if people act according to what is traditionally expected of their gender.
9. *Gender is a complicated issue, and it doesn’t always match up with biological sex.* (R)
10. It’s perfectly okay for people to have intimate relationships with people of the same sex. (R)
11. *People who say that there are only two legitimate genders are mistaken.* (R)

12. *Gender is something we learn from society.* (R)
13. There are particular ways that men should act and particular ways that women should act in relationships.
14. The best way to raise a child is to have a mother and a father raise the child together.
15. *Sex is complex; in fact, there might even be more than 2 sexes.* (R)
16. Women and men need not fall into stereotypical gender roles when in an intimate relationship. (R)

Response options below each item: Strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, exactly, neutral, slightly agree, agree, strongly agree

Scoring: Essential Sex and Gender subscale items are in italicized font; Normative Behavior subscale items are in regular font.

SHORT SDO (SDOS-7) SCALE USED IN STUDY 2 (HO ET AL., 2015)

Pro-trait Anti-Egalitarianism Subscale

1. People should not push for group equality.
2. People shouldn't try to guarantee that every group has the same quality of life.
3. It is unjust to make groups equal.
4. Group equality should not be a primary goal.

Con-trait Anti-Egalitarianism Subscale

1. People should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed.
2. People should do what they can to equalize conditions for different groups.
3. No matter how much effort it takes, people ought to strive to ensure that all groups have the same chance in life.
4. Group equality should be the ideal.

Measured with a 7-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 4= Neither agree nor disagree, 7= Strongly agree).

AMBIVALENT SEXISM SCALE (GLICK & FISKE, 1996)

“Below is a series of statements concerning men and women and their relationships in contemporary society. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement, using the following scale.

0 = Disagree strongly

1 = Disagree somewhat

2 = Disagree slightly

3 = Agree slightly

4 = Agree somewhat

5 = Agree strongly”

B 1. No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.

H 2. Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for “equality.”

B 3. In a disaster, women ought not necessarily be rescued before men. (R)

H 4. Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist.

H 5. Women are too easily offended.

B 6. People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the other sex. (R)

H 7. Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men. (R)

B 8. Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.

B 9. Women should be cherished and protected by men.

H 10. Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them.

H 11. Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.

B 12. Every man ought to have a woman he adores.

B 13. Men are complete without women. (R)

H 14. Women exaggerate problems they have at work.

H 15. Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.

H 16. When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.

B 17. A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.

H 18. There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances. (R)

B 19. Women, compared with men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.

B 20. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.

H 21. Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men. (R)

B 22. Women, as compared with men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.

H = Hostile Sexism, B = Benevolent Sexism