

## The Terror of Pregnancy: The Origin of Ambivalent Attitudes

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**ABSTRACT.** Research on Terror Management Theory (TMT; Goldenberg, Goplen, Cox, & Arndt, 2007) has offered an explanation for the negative views toward uniquely feminine physical features, as well as the ambivalence and prejudice displayed toward pregnant women. Participants read an essay on either creatureliness, uniqueness, or no essay, and then they completed inventories assessing negative attitudes toward corporal attributes. Attitudes toward semen and menstrual blood were found to be undifferentiated,  $p = .95$ . Next, in a modification of Goldenberg et al., participants rated the offensiveness of a photograph of a pregnant or nonpregnant model, as well as her competence level and whether the image evoked anger. Prior findings of increased offensiveness and lower competence evaluations of a pregnant female model, as a product of priming the similarities of humans and animals, were not replicated. Participants who did not read an essay displayed increased anger toward the pregnant model ( $p = .04$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .07$ ), indicating that Ambivalent Sexism Theory may provide a strong conceptual framework for the explanation of ambivalent attitudes toward pregnant women.

*"A period is just the beginning of a lifelong sentence."*  
—Cathy Crimmins

Pregnant women are often viewed with ambivalence (Taylor & Langer, 1977; Walton et al., 1988). Although often engendering helping behavior from bystanders, they simultaneously face prejudice from the public for their new physique, as well as in the workplace (Corse, 1990; Cunningham & Macan, 2007; Halpert, Wilson, & Hickman, 1993). Barbie's married friend Midge, a pregnant doll, together with a nude and pregnant Demi Moore on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine, caused public outcry. Walmart eventually pulled the pregnant doll from its shelves (Pregnant doll, 2002), and opaque wrapping covered the *Vanity Fair* issue. In the workplace, pregnant women have consistently been shown to suffer prejudice. They are often considered less competent, are less likely to receive

job offers, and are more likely to receive lower evaluations (Corse, 1990; Cunningham & Macan, 2007; Halpert et al., 1993).

Several theories attempt to explain the eschewal of the pregnant physique. The first is Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), an existential perspective focusing on a person's fear of death. The second is Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001), a feminist theory that focuses on the objectification of women in light of long standing power inequities between men and women. Unlike traditional feminist theories, the objectification of women is only one of TMT's facets, rather than its crux.

TMT posits that people's conscious awareness of impending death is a continuous reminder that despite their advanced cognition, as all living creatures, they are nothing more than their physical bodies. The ensuing terror is controlled through

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the elevation of self-esteem, and adherence to cultural and religious beliefs that promise literal, or symbolic immortality. The feeling of control through immortality provides a psychological buffer, allowing people to believe that, unlike other animals, they are more than just their bodies. Therefore, anything that threatens that buffer by posing as a reminder that humans are glorified animals is shunned. As women have much in common with an animal lifestyle, including menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation, their association with these cycles arouses fear and disgust toward them. TMT claims that people quell their fear through the objectification of women. Although objectification reduces fear, as the woman is now an object rather than an animal, it has the ironic side effect of heightening prejudice toward her and the questioning of her competency and cognitive aptitude (Goldenberg, Heflick, Vaes, Motyl, & Greenberg, 2009).

A number of studies by TMT theorists support this point. Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, and Pyszczynski (2002) showed that female confederates who appeared to accidentally have a tampon, as opposed to a hairclip, fall out of their bags were socially and mentally devalued by participants of both sexes. Subjects physically distanced themselves from the confederate and rated her as less competent. Landau and colleagues (2006) found that men primed with mortality salience (MS) displayed decreased attraction when a woman was dressed provocatively, but not when she was dressed modestly. The findings were hypothesized to have occurred due to the threatening nature of animalistic sex in the face of mortality, versus the elevated idea of love as viewed through wholesomeness.

AST theorizes that the relational interdependence of men and women, in the face of inequitable allocation of power across genders, is the basis for both hostile and positive but patronizing attitudes toward women. By virtue of their reproductive and infant nourishment abilities, women were traditionally relegated to the home, while men seized the opportunity to run the world as they saw fit. This led society, almost worldwide, to develop as a patriarchy, in which men were the dominant gender. As men wish to keep this status quo of power, any female challengers are met with hostile sexism (HS). However, as men are dependent on women in the household, they reward domesticated women with a patronizing sexist attitude, known as benevolent sexism (BS; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Both types of sexism

are equally oppressive and an attempt to maintain the subordination of women and the disparity between sexes.

Cross-cultural research has found that the phenomenon of ambivalent sexism is not restricted to the United States, and its existence has been demonstrated in 18 other nations. Men across cultures embrace HS far more often than women, but women are more likely to endorse BS in countries in which men rate higher on a HS measure (Glick et al., 2000). The conceptual framework of Jost and Banaji's (1994) system-justification theory might provide an explanation for this phenomenon. As members of the subordinate group, the most rational way for women to justify their current inferior status is to embrace BS as the lesser evil of the two accepted commonplace ideologies. Although HS is viewed as a threat, BS, though a form of prejudice, may appear as a safe haven (Cikara, Lee, Fiske, & Glick, 2009).

Although TMT theorists appear to question the validity of feminist theories due to what they perceive as an incongruence of female self-objectification (Goldenberg et al., 2009), feminist theorists do not address the validity of TMT. Perhaps both are a cause in the corporal eschewal of feminine attributes of fertility. Goldenberg et al. (2007) demonstrated that participants who read an essay detailing the similarities between humans and animals were more likely to describe pregnant women as offensive and less competent, compared to those who read an essay outlining the uniqueness of humans compared to other creatures. However these findings may have resulted both from sexist attitudes as well as from fear of the animalistic properties of the body, as the authors themselves admit that reactions toward pregnancy are ambivalent. The prevalence of ambivalent feelings toward pregnancy, more so than other feminine fertility related cycles such as lactation and menstruation, may indicate the salience of the significance of the new life that pregnancy promises, more so than the animalistic physique, rendering TMT less of a factor in the objectification of pregnant women than in other situations.

*"Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman has one solution—that is pregnancy... You are going to women? Do not forget the whip!"* (Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Little Old and Young Women*, 1954, p. 178–179)

### The Present Research

TMT postulates that feminine bodily functions

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that women have in common with other animals, such as pregnancy, menstruation, and lactation, dehumanize them in the eyes of the men and women around them to compensate for the arousal of fear and disgust. A significant ramification is a perception of the woman's incompetence (e.g. Goldenberg et al., 2007, 2009; Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000; Roberts et al., 2002). According to this rationale, the objectification of pregnant women should not arouse anger, as anger is an emotion relegated for offenders who display control over the acts they have committed (Ellsworth, 1994); anger cannot be directed at harmless objects. AST, which emphasizes hostility toward women challenging socially acceptable gender norms, should predict anger toward pregnant women publically straying from the acceptable good mother model. Our present research investigates the role of anger within a previously established TMT experiment through the replication and adaptation of the work of Goldenberg et al. (2007).

An additional line of inquiry is the availability of TMT effects even in the absence of MS priming. To further real world generalization we incorporate a third condition to Goldenberg et al.'s (2007) design that included priming in the form of articles extolling the uniqueness of the human race and the similarities of humans and other animals, in which no essay is given to participants before exposing them to a photograph of a pregnant, or non pregnant model.

Contrary to the majority of TMT experiments conducted in the United States, with the work of Goldenberg et al. (2007) among them, in which participants are largely White American and occasionally Asian, or their ethnicity is not mentioned (e.g., Cox, Goldenberg, Arndt, & Pyszczynski, 2007; Grabe, Routledge, Cook, Andersen, & Arndt, 2005; Martin & Kamins, 2010), participants in the present research were predominantly Hispanic and African American. Although a meta-analysis of TMT research (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010) previously hypothesized that culture plays an important role in participants' reactions to MS priming, it concentrated on research conducted around the globe, and not on responses of subcultures within the U.S. population. To our knowledge, no prior experiments have examined objectification in light of TMT, within subcultures within the larger U.S. population.

Finally, by investigating perceptions of semen versus those of menstrual blood, we remedy a

deficiency in current TMT research concerning research into uniquely male animalistic attributes. Previously uniquely feminine animalistic attributes, such as lactation (Cox et al. 2007), pregnancy (Goldenberg et al. 2007), and menstruation (Roberts et al. 2002) have been studied, as well as asexual animalistic attributes, such as defecation and sex (Cox, Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, & Weise, 2007; Goldenberg, Cox, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2002). In one study (Roberts & MacLane, 2002) perceptions of male and female researchers who needed to either use a restroom, or to retrieve papers, were compared. Although only the women researchers stating a need to use the restroom were viewed more negatively than women who did not, here too the investigated attribute is not gender specific. To our knowledge, the effect of actual masculine animalistic attributes, such as semen, have yet to be investigated. TMT theorists hypothesize that a biological attribute uniquely male may engender stereotypical thoughts of strength and competence (Roberts et al., 2002), but this is an idea from within the traditionally feminist conceptual framework. Logically TMT should dictate that any animalistic corporal feature should be treated with the same objectification and disdain as a pregnant woman's abdomen, or a mother's lactating breast.

## Method

### Participants

The 118 participants (90 women, 25 men, and 3 individuals who did not specify) were all undergraduates at Lehman College who participated in the experiment in exchange for course credit in their General Psychology course. The sample was comprised of predominantly Hispanic (43%) and African American (26%) participants, and also included Asian American (8%), White American (6%), Biracial (4%), Caribbean (3%), and other (10%) participants. Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 59 ( $M = 23.2$ ,  $SD = 8.22$ ). The study was approved by the college's Institutional Review Board.

### Materials

**Essays.** Participants read one of two essays: The creatureliness essay detailed similarities between humans and animals by including sentences such as: "The boundary between humans and animals is not as great as most people think ... We're all driven by needs for food, water, sex, and comfort ... Although some people like to claim that we humans

are vastly more intelligent than other animals, this doesn't really seem to be true." The uniqueness essay extolled the uniqueness of humans among living creatures, claiming: "Unlike animals, humans live in a world of ideas and concepts, morals and values... Although we certainly have some things in common with simple animals, we humans are truly special." Attached to each essay was the following instruction:

On the following page you will receive an essay randomly selected from a pool of essays written by honor students at the University of Tampa. Please read the essay at your own pace. At the end of the study there will be a couple of questions about the essay. The questions will be looking for your first natural gut impression of the essay. The following short essay was by a senior honors student at the University of Tampa. Students were asked to write on the topic: The most important things I have learned about human nature.

**Corporal attributes.** In an attempt to remedy the deficiency of TMT research into male-specific animalistic attributes, we created an 8-item inventory assessing attitudes toward semen, menstrual blood, and blood, which served as a control for the menstrual blood questionnaire. Using a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) participants rated their opinions of the following statements: unflushed menstrual blood/blood/semen leaves me sick, releasing an extraordinarily large amount of menstrual blood/blood/semen is boast worthy, hearing people talk about menstrual blood/blood/semen would anger me, seeing menstrual blood/blood/semen in a movie would anger me, the bleeding/release of semen of humans and animals is similar, the sight of a blood soaked bandage/tampon/semen-filled condom would anger me, and wearing menstrual blood/blood/semen-stained pants should arouse shame.

**Pregnancy manipulation.** Participants received one version of a photograph from the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition depicting a nude model, either pregnant or not pregnant, with a bikini painted on her. We created these photographs to eliminate extraneous variables. Goldenberg et al. (2007) used four different photographs: two photographs of a clothed Gwyneth Paltrow and two photographs of a nude Demi Moore. The photographs of Moore were both from *Vanity Fair* magazine: One was from August 1991 and showed

her nude and pregnant, covering herself with her hands. The other was from 1992 and showed her nude, not pregnant, and covered in body paint. The photographs of Paltrow, both pregnant and not pregnant, showed her clothed in a black dress. Although a pilot test was used to ascertain that both images were considered equally provocative, we preferred to keep all variables as constant as possible, because the difference between the photographs, especially those of Moore, is great. We opted to standardize by using one photograph and digitally manipulating it to appear pregnant. Using a photograph of an unknown model, rather than a famous celebrity, also allowed us to avoid the possibility of preconceived notions regarding the actresses affecting the outcome. Additionally Goldenberg et al. (2007) asked questions pertaining to the competence of Paltrow and the offensiveness of Moore. In an effort to further standardize the procedure, we choose to investigate both sets of questions on a single photograph. All participants received the same written instructions:

We are interested in people's reactions to images in the media. You have been randomly assigned one magazine image to review. Please examine it and then answer the questions that follow. You have been randomly assigned a picture of a (pregnant) nude model with body paint.

A 15-item questionnaire following the photograph served as the dependent measure. The first eight questions were taken from Goldenberg et al. (2007) and asked participants to rate the photograph on dimensions of offensiveness, pleasantness, disgust, beauty, and positive and negative tastefulness. Additionally, participants rated their reaction to the photograph in terms of favorableness, as well as disapproval. Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*). The next three questions, also from Goldenberg et al. (2007), asked participants to rate, on a 7-point scale (1 = *not very*, 7 = *extremely*) whether they thought the model was intelligent, serious, and competent. To measure hostility as a product of sexism we added three questions intended to measure anger toward the depicted image. These items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much so*) and asked whether participants found the photograph to be angering, disrespecting, and irritating. Finally, participants were asked to report whether they believed modeling to be a feminine occupation.

**Sexism measures.** Next, participants completed

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Glick and Fiske's (1996) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. Over the six experiments reported by Glick and Fiske, the alphas ranged from .83 to .92. This inventory consists of 22 items that measure both HS (alphas ranged from .80 to .92) and BS (alphas ranged from .73 to .85). An example of an item measuring HS is: "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men," and items such as: "A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man" measure BS.

**Demographic information.** Lastly, participants reported demographic information including age, sex, race, and ethnicity.

### Results

A one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to compare negative attitudes to the gender-specific corporal attributes of semen, menstrual blood, and blood. Negativity means of all three attributes are presented in Figure 1 and the ANOVA was only marginally significant,  $F(2, 114) = 2.85, p = .06, \eta^2 = .05$ . Tukey HSD post hoc analysis revealed the main difference was between semen ( $M = 3.87, SD = 0.83$ ) and blood ( $M = 3.48, SD = 0.77$ ),  $p = .07$ . There was no difference between semen and menstrual blood ( $M = 3.81, SD = 0.75$ ),  $p = .95$ , and only a trend for a difference between blood and menstrual blood,  $p = .15$ .

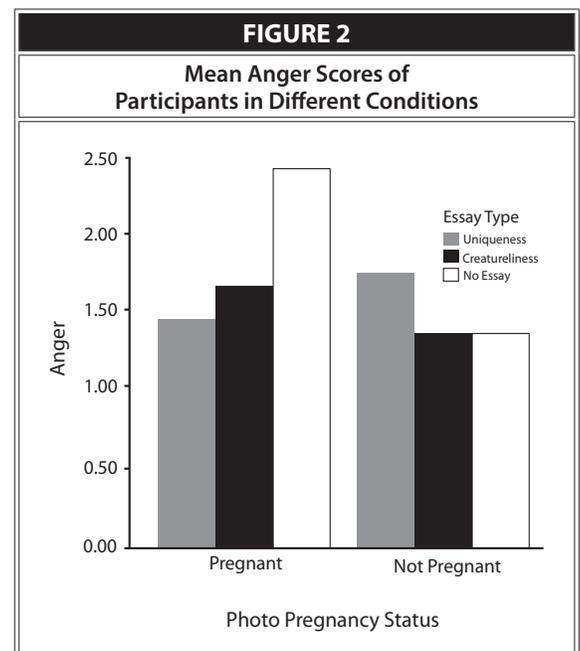
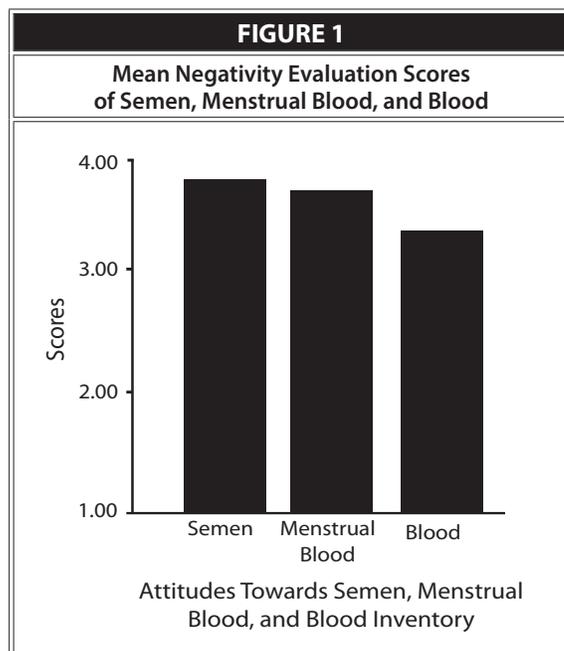
The corporal attributes survey was administered before participants rated the photographs, therefore completing it might have affected participants' offensiveness, competence, and anger

ratings of the photographs. To test this possibility and to evaluate participants' ratings of the images, 2 (pregnancy status) x 3 (essay type) x 3 (corporal attributes) ANOVAs were performed. A significant main effect was found only for the interaction of pregnancy status by essay type, and only for anger scores,  $F(2, 115) = 3.42, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .07$ . Further analysis discovered that only within the no essay condition did the essay type have a significant impact on scores across the pregnancy status variable  $t(34) = 2.40, p = .03, d = .80$ . As illustrated in Figure 2, the pregnant photograph elicited greater anger ratings in the no essay condition ( $M = 2.42, SD = 1.81$ ) as compared to the not pregnant photograph ( $M = 1.35, SD = 0.58$ ). A one way ANOVA with posthoc testing within the pregnant condition revealed a significant difference between anger scores of participants in the uniqueness ( $M = 1.45, SD = 0.73$ ) condition which were lower compared to the no essay ( $M = 2.42, SD = 1.81$ ) condition,  $F(2, 58) = 3.17, p = .05, \eta^2 = .10$ .

Modeling was not considered a feminine occupation ( $M = 2.34, SD = 1.86$ ). In addition, ASI scores ( $M = 2.64, SD = .677, \alpha = .785$ ) did not significantly correlate with offensiveness, competence, or anger scores.

### Discussion

In line with the TMT conceptual framework, we found that participants considered all corporal attributes equally negative regardless of gender, although the marginally significant difference was



observed due to a higher negative rating for semen. Perhaps the larger number of women among our participants explains this somewhat more negative view of semen. According to TMT, humans eschew all corporal attributes that are shared with other living creatures, and that are not uniquely human. Therefore, although TMT does not directly discuss perceptions of biologically unique male and female attributes, it should predict that female and male attributes will be perceived as equally offensive.

Our prediction and finding seemingly contradicts Roberts et al.'s (2002) musing within TMT that male attributes may "lead to negative perceptions of men and increased tendencies to view men in a stereotyped way, perhaps emphasizing their strength and competence." (p. 137). Although we believe the logic of TMT must dictate that both attributes should be rated with the same level of offensiveness, as both should elicit cognitions of humans' animalistic nature, our idea does not necessarily contradict that of Roberts et al. Although we found that all corporal attributes were perceived as equally negative, we did not measure the ramifications of these perceptions. Therefore we cannot rule out the possibility that a man's association with semen will heighten his perceived competence, although we find such a scenario unlikely, given our finding that semen is perceived negatively. Instead, it is possible that even though both gender's biological features are considered equally distasteful, men are still considered superior to women when associated with their unique attributes. Roberts et al.'s integration of feminist theories explains how this may be. Although both men and women have terror-arousing, gender-unique, animalistic features, the historical inequity of power due to women's maternal duties may predispose women to be viewed, as a whole, more negatively than men. To this, we add the idea that the sheer number of uniquely feminine characteristics (such as lactation, pregnancy, and menstruation) outweighs that of men (of which we can only think of semen), which may add to a more generally negative perception of women.

Theoretically, all corporal functions should elicit the same amounts of fear and disgust, rendering our findings of a slight but almost significant difference for attitudes toward regular blood, in which blood was considered the least offensive. Perhaps this discrepancy could be explained with the aid of the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968). The mere exposure effect states that the more an organism is exposed to a stimulus, the greater the

stimulus' appeal will become. As blood is the most commonplace of the three functions, perhaps it elicits the least objection.

A shortcoming in our investigation is the examination of the negativity construct as a whole. Further research is needed to determine whether negative perceptions toward feminine and masculine attributes are equal across varying domains of negativity, such as shame, disgust, and anger, or whether different aspects of negativity are uniquely gender specific. Additionally, there are some key differences between semen and menstrual blood that could affect perception of them: menstruation causes discomfort, whereas ejaculation usually does not; the release of semen can be somewhat controlled; the duration menstruation is far longer than that of seminal ejaculation. We hope further research will continue to investigate the effect of gender specific biological attributes, to examine whether alternate attributes that are more equal across the board evoke similar patterns.

#### **Attitudes toward pregnancy**

We obtained a trend partially replicating the findings of Goldenberg et al. (2007), in which participants reading the creatureliness essay found the pregnant photograph more offensive than the nonpregnant photograph. However, we failed to find a difference between the uniqueness and creatureliness conditions when the model appeared pregnant, and most importantly we failed to find any significant results in our replications.

A number of viable alternatives may explain the discrepancy between the findings. One is that there has been a decrease in prejudice toward pregnant women over the past four years. We consider this alternative unlikely considering the finding that in absence of an essay, the condition most readily associated with real world findings, a significant interaction was found between pregnancy status and anger ratings. It is also possible that the difference in photographs in the two experiments contributed to the differences. However, as our photographs were identical with the exception of the pregnancy status, we believe that our results were valid. In regards to competence scores, we believe the fundamentally different nature of the photographs used in this experiment, where the model is nude, as compared to the clothed photograph provided in the original experiment, is a significant part of the explanation. However in an effort to standardize the procedure we believe it was necessary to examine all attitudes on the

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same photograph. Finally, our photograph was of a relatively unknown woman, rather than famous celebrities. Again, we feel this might make our results more valid because we were able to eliminate contamination from participants' positive or negative feelings about the celebrity portrayed.

Our posited answer is more complex, and it relates to the highly ambivalent nature of pregnancy. Although the pregnant physique may certainly cause a parallel to be drawn between the woman and the animalistic aspect of her current state, it also arouses a strong preoccupation with the unborn baby. As the first author recently experienced pregnancy for the second time, she can attest, although only anecdotally, to these popular sentiments across genders because she was congratulated several times for her wonderful news, was shared stories about babies, was inquired to her well-being from people who never asked before, and had her stomach physically touched by strangers. On the other hand, we know of no anecdotal tales concerning strangers asking to touch and examine nursing babies up close, or of women being congratulated by strangers for ample supplies of breast milk. We hypothesize that compared to women in other stages of their cycle, such as menstruation or lactation, in pregnant women the baby is more salient than the pregnant form, allocating pregnancy a special status so that TMT, which deals with fears of death, is not as applicable. While this postulation may explain why, although pregnant women were mostly the subject of physical assistance when accompanied by a friend or alone, but not in the presence of their husbands (Walton et al., 1988); this postulation is highly speculative and warrants further research.

We believe TMT to be a viable explanation for many phenomena in general. However, we think that perhaps AST provides a more relevant explanation in this situation, as indicated by the significant finding in the anger questionnaire. This idea fits with the findings of Hebl, King, Glick, Singletary, and Kazama (2007) that pregnant women are met with less hostility when applying for feminine jobs. As modeling was not judged to be feminine, a significant rating of anger, a measure of hostility, in the no essay condition, is not surprising. Our position would be strengthened if a correlation had been observed between anger scores to the pregnant photo and ASI scores (or even either BS or HS scores). However, no such correlations were observed.

We are not arguing with TMT's proposition

that humans devalue corporal attributes, such as pregnancy due to its association with animals. Within the pregnancy condition, we found that participants who read the uniqueness essay displayed lower levels of anger, suggesting that viewing humans as disparate from all other animals might reduce anger. Although TMT indicates that humankind shares a common primal fear that can be quelled through perceptions of superiority, it fails to paint a picture of what happens in daily life, for which the condition with no prime is the best indicator. Our only significant finding across pregnancy conditions was that of anger in the no-essay conditions. Given that anger is not an emotion displayed toward objects, we contend that, even though pregnant women flaunting themselves may arouse an existential fear, they are primarily viewed as agentic challengers of the existing, gender-inequitable system.

Additionally, a methodological shortcoming of our study was the exposure of participants to the corporal attributes of semen, blood, or menstrual blood prior to completing their evaluation of the photographs. It is possible that the inventories themselves served as a prime in addition to the essays. Future studies examining this topic should better control for this possibly confounding variable.

Finally, it is possible that our sample demographics affected the outcome as well. Compared to the original experiment, whose sample was predominantly Asian American and White American, our sample was largely Hispanic and African American. Perhaps ethnicity has an effect on the offensiveness and terror of pregnancy. We know of no prior TMT studies in which the majority of participants were non-White or non-Asian. Thus, we believe that the role of culture and ethnicity should be further examined in future TMT research. Unfortunately, given the small number of White American and Asian American participants in our sample, we could not analyze ethnic differences. Nonetheless, with the growth of diversification in America, it would be pertinent to examine substructures and their varying attitudes on a more regular basis; the investigation of cultural affiliations should not be exclusive to the realm of cultural psychology.

### Conclusions

Previous research found highly ambiguous attitudes toward pregnant women and postulated TMT as an explanation for the objectification. The present study, using a nonstandard ethnic sample,

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failed to replicate these findings, but located a trend in their direction. We suggest that further investigation into cultural differences are needed within TMT in general, and we postulate that AST plays a significant role, due to the findings of increased anger in the no essay condition. We believe general attitudes toward pregnant women are mediated by the prospect of a newborn, and that theories of hostile and benevolent sexism are better at describing prejudice in this case. We do not reject TMT as a conceptual framework in general, and we believe our results on the semen and menstrual blood inventories support it. Our hope is that future research into the mediating effects of the prospect of a newborn will help shed light onto the etiology of prejudice concerning pregnant women.

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This research was supported by a joint Psi Chi and Association for Psychological Science summer undergraduate research grant to Leah A. Fredman and was her undergraduate honors research project. We thank Dr. Suzanne Yates and the anonymous reviewers for their input and improvements.

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WINTER 2013

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