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This is from a WIKIPEDIA article based on the encyclopedic history and application of TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY.

Excerpted and edited by Douglas K. Poor

Terror Management Theory (TMT) is both a social and evolutionary psychology theory. It proposes that a basic psychological conflict results from having a self-preservation instinct. This, all the while, realizing that death is inevitable and to some extent unpredictable. This conflict produces terror, which is managed through a combination, of escapism and cultural beliefs, that act to counter biological reality, with more significant and enduring forms of meaning and value. TMT was originally proposed by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski and codified in their book *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (2015). (all sources listed on last page)

EXAMPLES

The most obvious examples of cultural values that assuage death anxiety are those that purport to offer literal immortality (e.g., belief in afterlife, in religion). TMT also argues that other cultural values including those that are seemingly unrelated to death offer symbolic immortality.

The examples include: values of national identity, posterity, cultural perspectives on sex, and human superiority over animals, all have been linked to death concerns. In many cases these values are thought to offer symbolic immortality either:

- a) by providing the sense that one is part of something greater that will ultimately outlive the individual (e.g., country, lineage, species),
- b) by making one's symbolic identity superior to biological nature (i.e. you are a personality, which makes you more than just cells).

Because cultural values determine that which is meaningful, they are also the foundation for self-esteem. TMT describes self-esteem as being the personal, subjective measure of how well an individual is living up to their cultural values.

TMT is derived from anthropologist Ernest Becker's 1973 Pulitzer Prize-winning work of nonfiction *The Denial of Death*, in which Becker argues most human

action is taken to ignore or avoid the inevitability of death. The terror of absolute annihilation creates such a profound albeit subconscious anxiety in people that they spend their lives attempting to make sense of it.

On large scales, societies build symbols: laws, religious meaning systems, cultures, and belief systems, to explain the significance of life, define what makes certain characteristics, skills, and talents extraordinary, reward others whom they find exemplify certain attributes, and punish or kill others, who do not adhere to their cultural world-view.

Adherence to these created "symbols" aids in relieving stresses associated with the reality of mortality. On an individual level, self-esteem provides a buffer against death-related anxiety.

BACKGROUND

The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.

Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker asserted in his book *The Denial of Death*, that humans, as intelligent animals, are able to grasp the inevitability of death. They therefore spend their lives building and believing in cultural elements, that illustrate how to make themselves, stand out as individuals, and give their lives significance and meaning.

Death creates an anxiety in humans; it strikes at unexpected and random moments, and its nature is essentially unknowable, causing people to spend most of their time and energy to explain, forestall, and avoid it.

Becker expounded upon the previous writings of Sigmund Freud, Søren Kierkegaard, Norma O. Brown, and Otto Rank. According to clinical psychiatrist Morton Levitt, Becker replaces the Freudian preoccupation with sexuality, with the fear of death as the primary motivation in human behavior.

People desire to think of themselves as beings of value and worth, with a feeling of permanence, a concept in psychology known as self-esteem. This feeling counters the cognitive dissonance created by an individual's realization, that they may be no more important than any other living thing.

THE THREE PART MODEL OF THE AWARENESS OF DEATH

The rationale behind decisions regarding one's own health can be explored through a terror management model. A 2008 research article in *Psychological Review* proposes a three-part model for understanding how awareness of death can ironically subvert health-promoting behaviors by redirecting one's

focus towards behaviors that build self-esteem instead:

Part 1) suggests that conscious thoughts about death can instigate health-oriented responses aimed at removing death-related thoughts from current focal attention.

Part 2) suggests that the unconscious resonance of death-related cognition promotes self-oriented defenses, directed toward maintaining, not one's health, but a sense of meaning and self-esteem.

Part 3) suggests that confrontations with the physical body may undermine symbolic defenses and thus present a previously unrecognized barrier to health promotion activities.

EVOLUTIONARY BACKDROP

Terror management theorists consider TMT to be compatible with the theory of evolution: Valid fears of dangerous things have an adaptive function that helped facilitate the survival of our ancestors' genes.

TMT posits that humankind used the same intellectual capacities, that gave rise to this problem, to fashion cultural beliefs and values, that provided protection against this potential anxiety.

Hunter-gatherers used their emerging cognitive abilities, to facilitate solving practical problems, such as basic needs for nutrition, mating, and tool-making. As these abilities evolved, an explicit awareness of death also emerged. But once this awareness materialized, the potential for terror that it created, put pressure on emerging conceptions of reality.

Any conceptual formation that was to be widely accepted by the group, needed to provide a means of managing this terror. Originally, the emergence of morality evolved to facilitate co-existence within groups. Together with language, morality served pragmatic functions that extended survival. Evolutionary history also indicates, that "the costs of ignoring threats, have outweighed the costs, of ignoring opportunities for self-development.

SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem lies at the heart of TMT and is a fundamental aspect of its core paradigms. TMT fundamentally seeks to elucidate the causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem. One explanation is that self-esteem is used as a coping mechanism for anxiety. It helps people control their sense of terror, and nullify the realization, that humans are just animals, trying to manage the world around them. According to TMT, self-esteem is a sense of personal value, that is created by beliefs in the validity of one's cultural world-view.

TMT proposes that the individual's suppression of death anxiety, may arise from

their overall need to increase their self-esteem in a positive manner. Research has demonstrated that self-esteem can play an important role in physical health. In some cases, people may be so concerned with their physical appearance, and boosting their self-esteem, that they ignore problems or concerns with their own physical health.

SELF-ESTEEM AS ANXIETY BUFFER

An individual's level of self-consciousness, can affect their views on life and death. To a point, increasing self-consciousness is adaptive, in that it helps prevent awareness of danger. Individuals with higher levels of self-consciousness, sometimes have increased death awareness, and a more negative outlook on life, than those with reduced self-consciousness.

MORTALITY SALIENCE (Awareness/Importance)

The mortality salience hypothesis (MS) states that if indeed one's cultural worldview, or one's self-esteem, serves a death-denying function. Then threatening these constructs, should produce defenses, aimed at restoring psychological equanimity, (i.e., returning the individual to a state of feeling invulnerable). Mortality awareness has an influence on individuals, and their decisions regarding their health and welfare. Like the other TMT hypotheses, the literature supporting the MS hypothesis is vast and diverse.

Experimentally, the MS hypothesis has been tested in close to 200 empirical articles. Peer reviewed studies have shown that mortality and self-esteem are important factors, of the terror management theory. Mortality and self-esteem influence people's behaviors, and decision-making regarding their health. Self-esteem is important when mortality awareness is considered. It can allow people a coping mechanism, one that can cushion individuals' fears, and thus, impacting one's attitudes towards a given behavior. Individuals who have higher levels of self-esteem regarding their behavior(s) are less likely to have their attitudes, and thus their behaviors changed.

SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Many people are more motivated by social pressures, rather than health risks. Specifically for younger people, mortality awareness is stronger in eliciting changes of one's behavior, when it brings awareness to the immediate loss of social status or position, rather than a loss, such as death that one can not imagine, and feels far off.

DEATH ANXIETY ON HEALTH PROMOTION

The more an individual is presented with their death awareness, the more fear and anxiety one may have; therefore, to combat said anxiety one may implement anxiety buffers.

Due to a change in people's lifestyles, in the direction of more unhealthy behaviors, the leading causes of death now, being (1) heart disease, (2) cancer and most definitely are related to individuals' unhealthy behaviors. Age undoubtedly plays a role in people's health-promoting behaviors.

TERROR MANAGEMENT HEALTH MODEL

The terror management health model (TMHM) proposes the idea that death, despite its threatening nature, is in fact instrumental and purposeful in the conditioning of one's behavior, towards the direction of a longer life. Thoughts of death can serve as a way of empowering the self and taking actions to prolong one's life. Mortality awareness and self-esteem are important factors in individuals' decision making, and behaviors relating to improving their health.

EMOTION

People with low self-esteem, have more negative emotions when reminded of death. This is believed to be because, these individuals lack the very defenses, that TMT argues, protect people from mortality concerns, such as adopting solid world-views. In contrast, positive mood states are not impacted by death thoughts.

LEADERSHIP

Cultures on earth, provide meaning, organization, and a coherent world-view, that diminishes the psychological terror, caused by the knowledge of eventual death. The terror management theory can help to explain why a leader's popularity can grow substantially, during times of crisis. When a follower's mortality is made prominent, they will tend to show a strong preference for iconic leaders. An example of this occurred when George W. Bush's approval rating jumped almost 50 percent, following the September 11 attacks. This tragedy made U.S. citizens aware of their mortality, and Bush provided an antidote to these existential concerns, by promising to bring justice, to the terrorist group responsible for the attacks.

TMT scientists studied the preferences for different types of leaders, while reminding people of their mortality. Three different candidates were presented to participants.

- a) Task-Oriented Leader, emphasized setting goals, strategic planning, and structure.
- b) Relationship-Oriented Leader emphasized compassion, trust, and confidence in others.
- c) Charismatic Leader

The results of the study were that the charismatic leader, was favored more, and the relationship-oriented leader, was favored less, in the mortality-aware condition. Further research has shown that mortality salient individuals, also prefer leaders, who are members of the same group, as well as men rather than

women. This has links to social role theory.

RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY

TMT posits that religion and spirituality were adopted, as a means for humans, to cope with their own mortality. Also to support arguments, that favor life after death, and by being religious and spiritual, to reduce the effects of mortality awareness, on world-view defenses. Thoughts of death have also been found to increase religious and spiritual beliefs. At an implicit, subconscious level, this is the case even for people who claim to be nonreligious.

CONCLUSION

IN RELATION TO OUR MODERN DIVISIONS

(by Douglas K. Poor editor of the article)

The concept of Terror Management Theory has developed since 1973. It states that a psychological conflict results, from having a self-preservation instinct. Humans have the realization that death is inevitable and unpredictable. This awareness causes subconscious terror. The fear of death is the primary motivation in human behavior. Compensations are made in the unconscious mind, by escapism and cultural beliefs.

Examples include thoughts of symbolic immortality, through an afterlife espoused by religion, ethics, rules, culture, values of national identity, self-esteem, fear of mortality, avoidance, anxiety, ego manic acts of separation, joining groups which create division, thoughts of superiority, adherence to opposing world-views.

Thoughts of mortality and self-esteem influence people's behaviors, and decision-making regarding their health and welfare. Thoughts of death can serve as a way of empowering the self and taking actions to prolong one's life.

The fear of death is compensated unconsciously, by using self-esteem as a coping mechanism for anxiety. The individual's cultural world-view, or one's self-esteem, serves a death-denying function. Therefore threatening these constructs, produces defenses, aimed at restoring psychological equanimity.

Challenging someone else's internal reality can cause great divisions among people, with different world-views. This can account for our vast disunity in America. In times of crisis the popularity of divisive leaders rise with the general public.

Clashing world-views have been the source of great discord among people, nations, races, sexes and groups. Discussion of world-views with people with seemingly opposing views can be a catharsis that can begin to heal the great division.

THERE IS A SPIRITUALLY CENTERED SOLUTION TO HUMAN STRIFE

First is to recognize the diversity of world-views, races, religions, sexes, nationalities and cultures, and begin our own process of learning to understand our differences.

Second is to let go of our own unconsciousness & misunderstanding of others.

Third is to forgive, understand, embrace and love all people.

Fourth is to adopt mindfulness and consciousness, through prayer and meditation, with an effort to identify and unify lovingly with all people.

Fifth a humble beginning can be made by living a spiritually centered life.

Sixth is through Practical Spirituality which is to live a spiritually centered life at all times, to work with Love, Wisdom and Action for the betterment of all people, by teaching love in all of our interactions with others, and always
Working for the Common Good.

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