COMMENTARIES

Hutton, 1989), and recent work suggests that it is centrally concerned with interpersonal belongingness (Leary, Tambor, Teldar, & Downs, 1995). One does not need death to explain these things.

Undoubtedly there is a place in motivation theory for self-preservation, and Pyszczynski et al. have been among the most creative and important contributors of empirical findings about it. Its place is not, however, the one that Pyszczynski et al. wish to assign it—namely, being the master motive from which all other motivations are derived. It is only one among several motivations. Frankly, we concur with Freud that there is no such place at all: The pervasiveness of motivational conflict discards any view that all motivations are derived from the same root.

Note

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References


Terror Management Theory: Extended or Overextended?

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Whosoever believeth in him shall not perish from the earth but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

Over the last decade, the terror management theory (TMT) trio of Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon have developed a theory of monumental scope, trenchant explicatory power, and scintillating creativity. Although it borrows central elements from psychoanalysis, TMT is more open to empirical scrutiny. Although empirically rooted like behaviorism, TMT probes behavior at many more levels. Even the once-missing
humanistic element—personal growth—is linked to TMT in the target article.

The article significantly extends TMT in two directions. It embeds TMT in the broader tendency toward self-preservation. In addition, it demonstrates how the two major components of TMT map onto two frequent themes in social psychology: the propensity toward self-enhancement and the preference for stable world perceptions. Even readers who do not accept TMT must appreciate the authors’ contribution in exposing the ubiquity of these two major themes. Of course, the fact that these two themes of social psychology happen to be the two central components of TMT could be an amazing coincidence.

Are we toadying to the trio? Heck, no. In fact, via the critical tone below, we aspire to the attribution of “brilliant, but cruel” (Amabile, 1983).

Too Many Promises?

In some respects, the target article is disappointing. By introducing the tripartite system, the article promises to spell out how the tripartite system applies to human behavior. Yet only one component (defensive) is applied, and only to one domain (social motives). Glaring in their absence are applications to political attitudes, personal adjustment, and work performance. Of course, this is a criticism only in the sense of “Give us more.”

Evolution of What?

We take issue with the way evolution is incorporated. Self-preservation cannot be a unified instinct or “superordinate goal.” It is simply an analyst’s category for the set of proximal mechanisms that serve self-preservation—a motley collection of appetites and aversions that have been selected. These would include the liking of vegetables and the fear of heights. In one sense, the collection must include all of human nature, thereby making vacuous the term preservation instinct. That is, by this definition, all human traits represent a force for preservation. Pyszczynski et al. could restrict this instinct for self-preservation to a finite number of aver-

1 Other parallels that come to mind are Greenwald’s (1980) two themes of the totalitarian self (beneficence and cognitive conservatism), and Weiner’s (1970) two dimensions of attribution (evaluation and stability).

2 This problem is similar to the ubiquitous “sociobiological fallacy” described by Buss (1991).

3 As Gould (1977) and others have argued, however, certain human traits may have been selected fortuitously by being linked to a selected trait.

sions—for example, vigilance for threats (Pratto & John, 1992), our preparedness for taste aversions (e.g., Rozin, 1987), and for specific phobias (heights, snakes, confinement, etc.). More important, the authors should admit that the term self-preservation instinct can be nothing more than an ad hoc category of proximal mechanisms.

Note that our complaint is not with the postulate that evolution is the likely origin of such mechanisms; we heartily agree. We complain only that the presentation seems unnecessarily naive. It is possible, of course, that Pyszczynski et al. actively chose their terminology with a full recognition of these issues. If so, we recommend that future explications spell out the value of such categories as self-preservation instinct.

The Role of Defense

Pyszczynski et al. seem to waffle on the role of the second category of the tripartite system of motives. At some points, it is described as “defensive motives,” and elsewhere as “symbolic self-preservation.” Yes, the mechanism involves symbols, but these symbols are not proxies for self-preservation; they are part of the mechanism. It seems to us that TMT is not a symbolic self-preservation, but a real, albeit indirect, advantage. Again, this may be a semantic quibble given that the authors later describe the category as we prefer: “Defensive motives ameliorate the emotional distress produced by human awareness of the inevitability of death.” Instead of stopping there, however, we would have spelled out the distinct advantage of this coping. Effective copers will not perform (and therefore not survive) as well as ineffective copers.

The Vanishing Staircase

We also find problematic the argument that social motives operate in a hierarchy, with avoidance of death anxiety at the top. To us, this idea conflates the notion of a goal hierarchy with the notion of a conscious–preconscious–unconscious hierarchy. We understand the utility of a goal-hierarchy notion in terms of goals that are accessible. And perhaps unconscious goals may be hierarchically arrayed. But slipping to the unconscious level at the top of the hierarchy seems problematic to us. How would such a model deal with the case of conflict between conscious and unconscious levels? Pyszczynski et al. argue that changing focus from one level of abstraction to another can change behavior, and they cite Vallacher and Wegner (1985) in support. The cited authors, however, were clear in stating that such effects derived from a shift in conscious awareness.
In short, we cannot accept the idea that people (other than a few intellectuals) have some superordinate representation of a goal of self-preservation. Perhaps humans have a semantic category “death” that has accumulated negative affect. But we also have difficulty conceiving of an innate fear of death: The nearest notion we are familiar with is the Jungian archetype of death passed on through the collective unconscious. Somewhat easier for us to believe is the notion that we are born with a sensitivity for certain equivalence classes, including one for death. However, rather than assume that death anxiety is innate, we prefer the idea that the equivalence class takes on negative affect as various personal experiences with death are lumped into it.

For example, looking down from the Empire State Building creates a fear reaction in many people who know it is irrational. Clearly that fear is an automatic affective reaction known from visual cliff experiments to be innate. We assume that the TMT trio would not term this experience death anxiety. But many such instances of anxiety could be triggered by the word death or some cue thereof. Admittedly, there is more to the emotional experience. People also experience a sense of isolation and abandonment in contemplating death. This experience may be the residue of feelings one experienced earlier at the death of others. Most likely, this is an empathic reaction, not a fear of non-existence. In sum, we find it easier to believe that negative affect associated with the concept of death is the accumulation of two types of conditioned negative experiences.

**Explorations in Personality**

To exercise our expansive motives, we wish to speculate about ways in which individual differences in personality might be explored in the context of TMT. Apart from the measurement of individual differences in self-esteem, which Pyszczynski et al. have already studied, we recommend several other dimensions worth pursuing.

**Agency and Communion**

Although people need to feel personal worth, the criteria may vary dramatically (Pelham, 1993; Paulhus, 1994). Among many possible criteria, two in particular stand out. Individuals differ within and between cultures in the value they place on agentic (competent, hardworking, brave, and autonomous) versus communal (proper, obedient, responsible, and compassionate) criteria for goodness. What implications might these individual and cultural differences have for TMT?

For one thing, self-esteem experiments typically manipulate agentic evaluation (e.g., success vs. failure feedback in intelligence tests). In contrast, worldview affirmations appear to address communal good (being a moral, good citizen). We wonder whether these associations are necessary. For example, mortality cues may induce agentic individuals to strengthen beliefs in institutions that specify agentic criteria: (e.g., sports and business). The same cues may induce communal individuals to strengthen their beliefs in the institutions that specify communal criteria for goodness (e.g., churches and families).

**Defensiveness**

Pyszczynski et al. note that subtle mortality-salience inductions produce stronger TMT effects than blatant ones, and suggest that “the problem of death must be activated and then removed from consciousness to affect interpersonal judgments and behavior.” Because some individuals may be more practiced or more efficient at removing such threatening thoughts than others (for a review, see Paulhus, Fridhandler, & Hayes, 1997), one would expect some moderation of TMT effects by some defensive styles.

**Individualism Versus Collectivism**

Interest is burgeoning in the collectivist–individualist distinction, the extremes of which are said to typify Japanese and American societies, respectively (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Collectivistic societies are more concerned with maintaining the current social structure than are individualistic societies. One might speculate that collectivism may arise in societies where fear of death is more pronounced. This speculation is supported by the finding that Japanese have a greater sense

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4 Central to TMT is the specificity of responses to mortality cues. As evidence of that specificity, Pyszczynski et al. cite evidence that various achievement or performance anxieties, and anxiety about physical pain, do not show effects similar to mortality salience. We agree with the authors that this is important evidence. Note, however, a distinction recently articulated by Wiggins and Trnopol (1996) between agentic anxieties and communal anxieties. All of the specificity evidence cited by Pyszczynski et al. appears to be of the agentic type: fears about personal competencies and fortitude in the face of pain. Death anxiety may, however, be more strongly associated with the broader class of communal anxieties (e.g., attachment concerns, fear of social exclusion, fear of social disapproval, etc.) than with agentic anxieties. If these stimuli were to show similar effects to mortality cues, TMT would lose plausibility.
of death anxiety than Westerners (Schumaker, Warren, & Gorsh-Marnat, 1991). If, in fact, the direction of causality is reversed (collectivism begets death anxiety), TMT cannot claim credit.

**Conservatism**

It is possible that the tendency to defend the worldview in the face of mortality cues is limited to conservatives. Perhaps conservatives fear both God and death. Thus the TMT conception and measure of "worldview" would be more accurately labelled "conservative worldview." Liberals may be less responsive to mortality cues or may even act to defend a liberal worldview. Such possibilities might be tested by separating individuals on a conservatism or authoritarianism scale (e.g., Altemeyer's, 1988, Right Wing Authoritarianism scale).

**Self-Concept Articulation**

TMT processes may be moderated by individual differences in strength or articulation of the self-concept (e.g., Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell et al., 1995). The valence of the relationship expected from TMT, however, is not obvious to us. According to Pyszczynski et al.'s arguments used on objective self-awareness, separateness of self promotes death anxiety. To experience anxiety over the certain prospect of a dead self, however, one must first have a clear representation of the self. To argue for a positive relation between death anxiety and self-concept clarity, one could assume that a clear self-concept is a central aspect of the clear worldview that helps stave off death anxiety.

**Coda**

To expose TMT to criticism in a venue such as Psychological Inquiry is an exercise in competing motives. Although Pyszczynski et al.'s self-esteem and worldview are put at risk if the commentators are critical, this exercise nourishes their self-expansive motive. We appreciate the opportunity to nourish ours. Parenthetically, readers of our commentary might well conclude that, critical comments notwithstanding, our obvious tendency to borrow the trio's terminology is the sincerest form of flattery.

**Note**

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