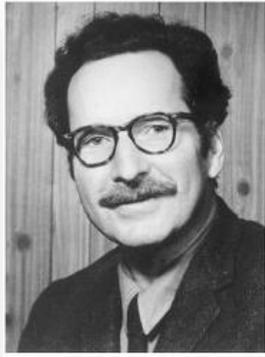


Terror Management Theory

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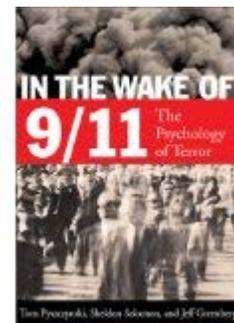
ERNEST BECKER

Strongly influenced by Ernest Becker's work, *Terror Management Theory* is the study of how humans cope not with the imminent threat of extermination but with the awareness that such threats are ubiquitous and will eventually succeed. It concerns the impact that the awareness of the inevitability of death has on how we live our lives. A vital role of culture and the institutions that support the culture is to protect us from this awareness, to assist us in constructing beliefs about the nature of reality that mitigate the horror and dread of what inevitably will confront us. All cultural worldviews serve an important anxiety-reducing function by providing shared meaning and purpose and a way of achieving symbolic or literal immortality. *"Psychologically, then, the*

function of culture is not to illuminate the truth but rather to obscure the horrifying possibility that death entails the permanent annihilation of the self" , wrote Becker (p.22)[1]. This helps us to understand why any disturbance in the culture – including the organizational culture – arouses anxiety that is not necessarily commensurate with the change that is being required.

Cultural reality – organizationally and socially - is a fragile construction that can be easily disturbed. We are repeatedly being confronted by the reality of our own mortality – called "mortality salience" in the research literature. Modern communication with twenty-four-hour-a-day news, instant communication around the world, and a deluge of information everywhere, bombards us with reminders that terrible things happen to people who are more-or-less like us. And cultural ideas and values are constantly being disturbed by the seemingly incompatible ideas and values arising from people representing different cultures, particularly in the melting pot that is the United States. As a result, the anxiety buffer that culture represents can be easily threatened by the diversity of ideas, opinions, worldviews, and lifestyles represented in a multicultural society.

Terror Management Theory hypothesizes that human awareness of the inevitability and possible finality of death creates the potential for existential terror, which is controlled largely in two ways: (a) faith in an internalized cultural worldview, and (b) self-esteem, which is attained by living up to the standards of value prescribed by one's worldview. Research has in fact demonstrated that when the fear of death – or mortality salience – are triggered, even outside of conscious awareness – people tend to become more fearful, intolerant of difference, more prejudiced, more socially conservative, more supportive of leaders who support their worldview, more fundamentalist, and more punitive towards those who are disrupting or who threatened to



disrupt their worldview [1]. To date, over 300 experiments, conducted in 15 different countries, have provided support for Terror Management Theory hypotheses [2].

References

1. Pyszczynski, T., S. Solomon, and J. Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*. 2003, Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
2. Pyszczynski, T., et al., *On the unique psychological import of the human awareness of mortality: Theme and variations*. *Psychological Inquiry*, 2006. **17**(4): p. 328-356.