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Waging Terror: Psychological Motivations in Cultural Violence and Peacemaking

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In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 the United States led the charge in a global war on terrorism using hard-line violent military actions to pursue terrorist groups in many nations. Thus far, this war has led to two armed conflicts in Afghanistan, where al Qaeda was known to reside and train potential future terrorists, and in nearby Iraq, where some leaders feared weapons of mass destruction would be given to terrorist groups. Some scholars have suggested that using strictly hard-line aggressive military action only serves to exacerbate the problem of terrorism because it fails to address the underlying motivations of terrorism.¹ Indeed, this aggressive military action targeting terrorists seems to have had the unintended effect of increasing the number of terrorist acts around the world. Terrorism scholars Bergen and Cruickshank report a sevenfold increase in instances of fatal terrorist attacks worldwide since the United States' President George W. Bush declared war on terrorism.² More specifically, the incidence of attacks has jumped from 28.3 attacks per annum to 199.8 per annum. We have also witnessed a drastic increase in the number of terrorism related deaths per year, from 501 in the years prior to 9/11 to 1,689 per year by 2007.

Alarming, this increase in the prevalence of terrorism is not confined simply to Iraq and Afghanistan. Other areas have also experienced this increase, albeit to a lesser degree. Consider the 2004 bombings in Madrid, 2005 bombings in London, and other conflicts that seemingly should have little to do with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, such as those in Kashmir and between the Chechen separatists and Russia.³ This chapter will examine the psychological factors that serve as catalysts to the cycle of terrorist and extreme counterterrorist violence from the perspective of terror management theory (TMT).⁴ After reviewing relevant to these ideas,

we then discuss potential ways to defuse the conflict and promote more peaceful intergroup relations.

Terror Management Theory

TMT is not specifically a theory of terrorism, but rather a theory of human motivation derived from the writings of the Pulitzer Prize-winning existential cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker.⁵ This theory begins with the proposition that human beings and most other living organisms have evolved mechanisms gearing living beings toward continued life and self-preservation. This orientation is problematic for humankind because humans are uniquely aware of the inevitability of death. In order to combat the existential anxiety that arises from this conflict, people devise and adhere to cultural worldviews which imbue life with meaning and create the possibility that its believers may transcend their worldly deaths either literally, through an afterlife of some type (e.g., Heaven, Nirvana), or symbolically, by being part of something greater and longer-lasting than oneself and being remembered by others for one's life accomplishments (e.g., authoring a bestselling book or winning a Nobel prize). The prospect of continued life motivates members of a society to adhere to the prescriptions of behavior set forth by a particular worldview, which garners them a sense of value and self-esteem and thereby buffers the anxiety that results from human awareness of the inevitability of death.

For many, this anxiety buffering system works well, but becomes problematic when believers in one worldview encounter adherents of another. The socially constructed nature of cultural worldviews renders them inherently fragile, requiring continuous validation to maintain their death-anxiety buffering efficacy. When others share one's beliefs and values, it implies that these beliefs and values are correct and reflect external reality rather than personal whim, bias, or delusion. Consistent with the idea that consensually validated worldviews provide protection

against existential anxiety, much research has demonstrated that when people are led to think about death they display increased preference for people who support their cultural beliefs and decreased liking for and aggression against people who threaten their cultural beliefs.⁶ Rosenblatt et al. also showed that death reminders make people more punitive towards people who engage in moral transgressions.⁷ Similarly, threatening someone's worldview increased the accessibility of death thoughts; that is, it brings such thoughts closer to consciousness (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, in press). These increases in thoughts of death resulting from threats to cultural belief systems and self-esteem are problematic because they often foster more aggressive intergroup interactions.

According to TMT, people have several common recourses when encountering challenges to their worldviews. They may attempt to convert others, thus bolstering support for their own way of life by increasing social support for their worldview. Successfully converting others to one's own ideology increases the number of followers of one's own ideology and with it, the ideology is consensually validated. In a similar vein, believers of one worldview will sometimes try to accommodate threatening aspects of another worldview into their own. If conversion and accommodation fail to defuse the worldview threat, believers of one worldview often simply derogate believers of alternative worldviews. This approach is not uncommon in the contemporary Western discussion of terrorism. Westerners often assume terrorists to be mentally ill or weak and brainwashed by wicked leaders.⁹ Religious terrorists appear to use this same approach in response to targets that threaten their worldview, declaring that non-believers are heretical infidel slaves to an evil empire.¹⁰ There is, however, another, more macabre response to particularly threatening outgroups. This response entails annihilating the adherents of the

threatening belief system and can be seen throughout history in genocides such as the Holocaust in Germany and the Rwandan conflict.

These central tenets of TMT have been empirically examined in over 400 experiments conducted in 21 countries using a diverse array of methodological approaches.¹¹ Reminders of death have been shown to affect a host of other attitudes and behaviors ranging from close relationships, nationalism, religiosity and self-esteem striving, political preferences, prejudice, risk-taking, sports-team preferences, time spent sunbathing, and sexual attitudes.¹² Together, these findings suggest that cultural belief systems and self-esteem do serve to protect us from our existential fear of death.

The Cycle of Terrorist and Counterterrorist Violence

In recent years, TMT researchers have more directly examined factors related to the cycle of terrorist and counterterrorist violence. Pyszczynski et al. conducted parallel studies on American and Iranian college students looking at their support for the usage of extreme military tactics and terrorist tactics, respectively.¹³ American participants led to think about death displayed increased support for using extreme military tactics including the use of nuclear and chemical weapons even at the expense of killing tens of thousands of innocent Middle Eastern civilians. Iranian participants were led to think about death or a negative control topic and then, instead of being asked about support for using military tactics in the Middle East, they were asked to evaluate two students, one who espoused a pro-martyrdom attitude and one who espoused an anti-martyrdom attitude. In the control condition, Iranian participants significantly preferred the anti-martyrdom student over the pro-martyrdom student. But when led to contemplate death, Iranian participants shifted their preference to the pro-martyrdom student who was willing to sacrifice his life to defend the Iranian way of life. Hirschberger and Ein-Dor

replicated this same basic pattern among conservative Israeli settlers in the Gaza strip.¹⁴ Death reminders led these settlers to view the use of violence as justified. These findings suggest that death reminders appear to enhance people's support for violence in an effort to defend one's cultural beliefs and buffer existential anxiety.

Other research supports the old adage that violence begets more violence.¹⁵ Landau et al. found that this may even occur outside conscious awareness.¹⁶ Landau et al. subliminally primed the September 11, 2001 attacks and found that this subliminal prime, consciously undetectable by participants, led to increased accessibility of death-related thoughts. Extending this finding, Gillespie and Jessop found this same basic effect among Europeans by exposing them to media coverage of the 9/11 United States attacks or 7/7 London bombings.¹⁷ Vail, Motyl, and Pyszczynski took this one step further by demonstrating heightened death thought accessibility among people who viewed a series of pictures of buildings being blown up or struck with airplanes.¹⁸ Importantly, these researchers also found heightened death thought among participants who viewed pictures of buildings that had been previously partially reduced to rubble by bombing attacks or missiles, suggesting that the aftermath of violent terrorist attacks or bombing campaigns produce lasting effects that may serve as day-to-day death reminders. However, this study also found that viewing images of similarly distraught buildings that are under (re)construction do not elicit these heightened thoughts of death. These findings may be particularly relevant to the urban landscapes of the war-torn countries of Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Tamil Eelam, and others around the world, where we see perpetually high levels of intergroup violence and hostility. Thus, such findings would suggest that regions plagued with violence and killing would be especially conducive to the development of intensified intergroup animosity and violence.

This is evident when considering the fact that in the three years following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, that country bore witness to more suicide bombings than the entire world had in the previous 22 years.¹⁹ Similarly, Mogahed reported that from 2004 to 2006, there was a threefold increase in the number of acts of terrorism in the Middle East compared to the previous two years.²⁰ Bergen and Cruickshank noted that there were a record number of terrorist attacks in 2007.²¹

Interestingly, TMT also helps explain the curious phenomenon in which the drive to survive pushes some people to end their own existences through acts of suicide terrorism. The cultures that produce many suicide bombers tend to describe their act not as one of the finality of their life, but rather as a courageous act that grants them both literal and symbolic immortality. For instance, some Middle Eastern countries have annual “Martyrs Days” that closely resemble the American holidays of “Memorial Day” and “Veterans Day.”²² To supplement this symbolic immortality, many Islamic terrorists are promised an idyllic afterlife complete with 72 beautiful virgins. These immortality assurances assuage believers of their death-related fear and encourage them to commit egregious atrocities in defense of their group.

Stern conducted a series of ethnographic interviews with terrorists from around the world with myriad belief systems and found that terrorists all seem to be driven to violence by very similar factors.²³ Specifically, she found that members of terrorist organizations all shared feelings of alienation and humiliation, and all felt that injustices had been committed against them. The experience of any of these emotions need not be direct and personal, although it may sometimes be; the experience must be something that has affected the culture to which the people belong or the fellow members of that culture, with whom they identify. For example, Hamas terrorists often indicate that Palestinians are humiliated on a daily basis due to their

relative deprivation compared to the Israelis and the many Israeli checkpoints and security outposts that have been erected on the Palestinian territories. On the other side of the conflict, Israelis may be humiliated by the occurrence of fatal suicide bombings claiming the lives of many innocent Israelis and this humiliation may motivate the Israelis to adopt strict, defensive postures with respect to the neighboring Palestinian areas.

It should also be pointed out that the power of humiliation is not limited to smaller nations or sub-national groups. Lifton suggests that people living in superpower countries can experience this same sense of humiliation just by recognizing that their country is not invulnerable to attacks.²⁴ Consider that very few Americans were actually directly affected by the attacks of 9/11. Rather, Americans identified with the symbolic nature of the attacks as being against the American people, the American government and economic policies, and ultimately, the American culture. This identification led many Americans to support using extreme military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. Lifton refers to this type of humiliation as the *superpower syndrome*. Landau et al. and Gillespie and Jessop both demonstrated that thinking of terrorist acts committed against their homelands leads people to experience heightened thoughts of death and presumably an increased willingness to use violence against threatening outgroups.²⁵ Other social psychological research supports this notion more generally and has shown that when people observe transgressions being committed against their group, they become willing to engage in extreme actions to defend their group, even at extreme expense to themselves.²⁶

An ABC News Poll, supporting these findings, shows that more than one in every three Iraqis feel humiliated rather than liberated.²⁷ Wessels examined the feelings and reactions of Afghans and Iraqis in response to the presence of the United States and some of its Western allies.²⁸ In interviews with people who opposed and supported the Taliban in Afghanistan, he

found that people in both groups viewed the U.S.-led war in Iraq as unjustified and as a major contributor to the rise in recruitment of terrorists in the region. Similar beliefs prevailed in Iraq. Among Iraqis who both supported and opposed Saddam Hussein, Iraqis viewed the overthrowing of his regime in a negative light because it permitted greater Western domination of the region. Furthermore, many of those interviewed blamed the increased lawlessness, violence, and rape in the region on the United States' led invasion. Many of the people interviewed also indicated that the invasion motivated them or people they knew to join violent jihadist groups. Similarly, Fontan indicated that more than 80% of Iraqis in both Sunni and Shi'ite parts of Baghdad view western forces as "occupiers" rather than "liberators."²⁹

On first blush, this evidence might lead one to think that violent challenges can only result in violent retaliation and that violence necessarily begets more violence. Luckily, it appears that increased hostility is not an inevitable response to bleak reminders of our existential predicament.

Promoting Peace

An emerging literature has recently begun to explore a variety of approaches derived from TMT to counteract the common negative responses to death reminders. From this perspective, people are driven to live in accordance with the behaviors prescribed to them by their worldviews in order to obtain a sense of meaning in the world. As we have seen thus far, encountering people with competing belief systems often evokes anger and hostility. These responses seem contrary to the values of beneficence, tolerance, and compassion that are inherent to most cultural belief systems. In justifying violence, people may selectively attend to specific aspects of a worldview. Consider the Bible's instructions to seek vengeance by taking "an eye for an eye," while loving your enemy and turning the other cheek. The Koran has

similarly conflicting passages instructing followers to take “an eye for an eye,” while doing “goodness to others.” Social psychological theory and past research has demonstrated that most belief systems have some conflicting aspects and that behavior can be steered by activating particular aspects of a belief system.³⁰

Compassionate values. Recognizing that most religious traditions have conflicting passages that could be interpreted as hostile or peaceful, Rothschild, Pyszczynski, and Abdollahi conducted a series of studies to test whether priming compassionate religious values might decrease support for violent policies and tactics death reminders.³¹ In the first two studies, Rothschild et al. asked participants to think about death, exposed them to compassionate Biblical values, compassionate non-Biblical values, neutral Biblical statements, or neutral non-Biblical statements, and then measured participants’ support for the war on terror. Participants scoring high on a measure of religious fundamentalism responded to the death reminders by becoming more supportive of the war on terror unless they were primed with compassionate Biblical values.³² This study was replicated among fundamentalist Shi’ite Muslims in Iran. Iranians were asked to think about death, read a set of compassionate values that were either labeled as Koranic or secular, and then were assessed on their attitudes toward the Western countries. Again, a death reminder led to increased anti-Western attitudes unless participants were first primed with compassionate Koranic values – under these conditions, the death reminder actually *decreased* anti-Western attitudes. These studies suggest that although religious fundamentalists are often among the most aggressive and most supportive of war, this aggression can be eliminated by emphasizing the compassionate aspects of their specific worldviews.³³

Common humanity. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often compassionately reminded people that we are “our brothers’ keeper.” In this way, Dr. King and many other activists throughout

history have suggested that if people could only recognize that all people share a common humanity with each other then conflict would be substantially reduced. Classic social psychological theories have also suggested that simply expanding the inclusiveness of our ingroups to include all of humanity can reduce intergroup conflict.³⁴ Motyl et al. conducted a series of studies exploring this possibility.³⁵ In the first study, American participants first wrote short essays about death or a negative control topic (e.g., physical pain), then evaluated one of three sets of pictures depicting American families, American individuals, or families from various countries engaging in typical human behaviors (e.g., eating dinner, playing games), and finally completed a measure of implicit anti-Arab prejudice. As expected, participants primed to think of death exhibited increased implicit anti-Arab prejudice when viewing pictures of Americans (the control conditions), but decreased implicit anti-Arab prejudice when viewing the pictures of international families. A second study observed similar effects on an explicit measure of attitudes toward immigrants.³⁶ These researchers found that death reminders led participants to express increased anti-immigrant attitudes after reading a set of common childhood memories purportedly penned by Americans, but not after reading the same childhood memories purportedly penned by various foreigners.

Common catastrophe. Recognizing that all people share a common humanity also suggests that, in many cases, a catastrophe that directly affects some people may actually indirectly affect all people. This notion is expressed through the philosophy of *ubuntu* that was preached extensively in South Africa in the wake of apartheid. This philosophy suggests that what happens to one person or group of people necessarily affects all people everywhere. Motyl, Rothschild, Pyszczynski, Vail, Greenberg, and Goldenberg tested this possibility by asking participants to think about death or a negative control topic, then to consider either how the

global climate crisis would affect people around the world or how an earthquake would affect people in a small region, and then complete a measure of support for peacemaking.^{37, 38} As hypothesized, participants led to think about death and a localized catastrophe displayed a decreased willingness to engage in peaceful diplomatic actions with other countries. However, when participants were led to think about death and the common catastrophe of global climate change, participants exhibited an increased willingness to peacefully engage in diplomatic talks with other countries. Taken together, these studies suggest that recognizing the humanity of other people may undermine our ability to engage in violent acts against them and even promote peaceful interaction.

Infra-humanizing violence. Related to the notion of encouraging people to recognize each other's shared humanity is the need to feel like uniquely human, symbolic beings.³⁹ Accordingly, one of the key psychological mechanisms that enables people to commit atrocities and engage in violent behaviors against other people who belong to other groups is *infracumanization*.⁴⁰ In intergroup conflicts we can more easily engage in violent acts against others if they are perceived as less than human because then they are seen as beyond the realm of moral consideration. Consider, for example, how the Bosnians in the Balkan wars, Jews in the Holocaust, and Tutsis in the Rwandan conflict were equated to vermin by their perpetrators.⁴¹ Motyl, Pyszczynski, and Hart questioned whether this mechanism could also be used to prevent people from engaging in violent acts.⁴² In this study, participants thought about death or a negative control topic, read a passage depicting violence as a behavior that is either uniquely human or very animalistic (effectively *infra-humanizing the behavior of violence*), and then completed a role-playing assessment of support for extreme military action against Iran. This study indicated that among right-wing authoritarian participants, death reminders and depictions of violence as a uniquely

human behavior led to increases in their support for military action. These same participants, however, became significantly *less* supportive of military action when they read about how violence was an animalistic, inhuman behavior. Together, with the previously discussed research on common humanity reminders, it appears that we have an existential need to feel that we are unique, symbolic beings and when we perceive others as being unique, symbolic beings much like we are, we can no longer endorse violence against others.

Some scholars have suggested that conflict is incited by fundamentalist thinking.⁴³ If this were true it seems that one could reduce hostilities by empowering moderates. Kruglanski recently reported that officials in Singapore and Saudi Arabia have implemented programs that may discourage terrorist violence and political extremism.⁴⁴ In Singapore, moderate religious clerics have been contracted to preach peaceful interpretations of the Koran to fundamentalist Muslims in prisons. In Saudi Arabia, peaceful activists have been recruited to preach a message of peace on internet discussion boards. It appears that each of these approaches is leading to a decrease in support for terroristic ideologies. It is still early to draw firm conclusions from these naturalistic experiments, but these preliminary findings are encouraging.

Conclusion

In this terror management analysis of the cycle of terrorist and counterterrorist violence, we provide an empirically-based psychological explanation for an incredibly complex issue that has cost millions of human lives over the span of thousands of years. Clearly, this is no simple issue and cannot be easily solved. Our hope, however, is to encourage a thorough, empirical, and interdisciplinary approach to the study of terrorism. Simply assuming that those who oppose us are evil, inferior, irrational, or subhuman misses the mark and will likely be ineffective in quelling the conflict. Rather, one should recognize that while others may have differing cultural

beliefs, they are still human beings motivated to obtain value in life and defend against the fears resulting from the human condition and the inevitability of death. Essential to any conflict resolution strategy is an acceptance of this idea and the notion that most conflicts concern far more than simply territory and resources. When considering the problem of terrorism, one must take into consideration the psychological factors that ignite intergroup conflict if there is any hope for laying the groundwork for a lasting intergroup harmony.

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