3

A Terror Management Perspective on the Quiet Ego and the Loud Ego: Implications of Ego Volume Control for Personal and Social Well-Being

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In this chapter, we examine the metaphors of quiet ego and loud ego from the perspective of terror management theory (TMT; see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). TMT offers an empirically substantiated framework for understanding the psychological functions of these ego orientations and their potential to manifest in ways that promote or undermine personal growth and social harmony. We begin by considering what the ego is and what it means for an ego to be quiet or loud. Then we present a TMT analysis of the quiet ego and loud ego and the research supporting it. We conclude by considering the implications of TMT and research for understanding how to best promote ways of flexibly adjusting the ego's "volume" in the interest of reaping the growth and prosocial benefits of quietness and loudness.

The Quiet Ego and the Loud Ego: Neither on Its Own Is Sufficient for Personal and Social Well-Being

Two important functions of the ego—the mind's central decision-making apparatus—are (a) to mediate between the interests of the individual and the interests of others (Becker, 1973; Freud, 1957) and (b) to strike a balance between assimilating experiences into familiar knowledge structures and forging novel conceptions of the world (Piaget, 1955). Regarding these functions, we can conceptualize a spectrum: At one end is the loud ego, which orients the individual toward seeking personal benefit, asserting his or her uniqueness and value, and sharing that value or imposing it on others; at the other end is the quiet ego, which orients the individual toward transcending personal concerns to integrate social knowledge and experience with existing self-structures.

As discussed in chapter 1, a number of perspectives have been proffered as to where the optimal level of human functioning lies along this spectrum, and although each is unique, most equate the ideal personality with a quiet temper-

ing of egoism and self-aggrandizement in favor of interrelatedness, tolerance, and openness to experience (reviewed in Coan, 1977). Consistent with these views is evidence that a characteristically loud preoccupation with sustaining a high level of self-regard can have negative personal and social consequences. For example, a heightened motivation to assert and gain validation for one's claim to a self-defining identity can interfere with personal improvement by blocking openness to others' perspectives and preventing acknowledgment of one's personal shortcomings (Wicklund & Steins, 1996). Furthermore, individuals with high but unstable self-esteem are particularly derogatory and aggressive toward others who criticize them (see chap. 8, this volume).

Although this research highlights some downsides to ego loudness, the truth regarding optimal selfhood may not be so unidimensional. First, the effects of aggressive self-promotion and the uncompromising expression of a unique vision are not necessarily problematic. In almost every reach of cultural life—politics, sports, art, science—a readiness to pursue and preserve personal significance and potency often aids the creative and enthusiastic realization of both one's own goals and those of society. A loud ego can ensure that one's authentic gifts are used to the benefit of everyone. Indeed, in a comparative study of several creative individuals who helped shape the modern era—ranging from artists, such as Picasso, and thinkers, such as Einstein; to activists, such as Gandhi—Gardner (1993) found each creator to be characterized by strong egoism and a propensity to alienate others. These figures demonstrate that, although a loud ego orientation has the potential to yield a rigid and static mentality characterized by narcissistic self-interest, loudness may also provoke powerful embracing of possibilities and a socially beneficial will to innovate and lead (see chap. 2, this volume).

Second, the quiet ego may not be unequivocally beneficial. The loss of individual identity has been shown to have startlingly negative consequences. Milgram's (1974) obedience studies demonstrated the extent of the inhumanity of which people are capable when, at the command of an authority figure, they turn down the inner protests of their conscience. Research also shows that certain social contexts that diminish self-awareness render the individual more likely to become sadistically authoritative or, conversely, sheepishly submissive (e.g., Haney & Zimbardo, 1998). Arthur Koestler (1978) recognized the real world significance of these findings: "Throughout human history, the ravages caused by excesses of individual self-assertion are quantitatively negligible compared to the numbers slain ad majorem gloriam out of a self-transcending devotion to a flag, a leader, a religious faith" (p. 78). The quiet ego was much in evidence during the My Lai massacre, when men who, under normal circumstances, conceived of themselves as moral individuals silenced inner qualms about slaughtering civilians in the interest of their company or the ideal of a U.S. victory. Indeed, we have learned from tragedies such as Jonestown, Waco, Heaven's Gate, and 9/11 that the urge toward immersive self-transcendence can result in the most extreme expression of the quiet ego—turning down the volume completely through self-termination.

Both the quiet and the loud ego orientations can manifest in personally and socially maladaptive forms. The loud ego can be defensively rigid in assert-

ing the superior validity of certain limited conceptions of the world and defending an inflated sense of personal value; conversely, the quiet ego can permit the mindless adoption and defense of group norms and beliefs, resulting in a muted expression of personal potential. These considerations lead us to believe that individuals (and, ultimately, society at large) may be best served by sustaining a flexible, situationally appropriate balance between the two orientations: Turn down the ego volume when it means expanding the self to incorporate new experiences, celebrating others, and acknowledging personal limitations in a reasoned and constructive manner, but turn up the volume when it means offering personal gifts, advocating creative solutions, and rallying against malevolent voices. To better understand how the individual might attain an optimal balance between the self-assertive loud ego and the self-transcendent quiet ego, we believe it is important to consider the psychological functions served by both of these orientations.

The Interplay of Quiet Egos and Loud Egos: The Contributions of Otto Rank

Otto Rank (1941/1958) proposed that the ego arbitrates primarily between desires for individual value and connectedness to others and that these desires stem from a central motivational source that lies at the heart of the human existential condition. The core problem, he wrote, is that we are at least implicitly aware of the fact that death is always potentially imminent and an inevitable termination of our selves. Rank proposed that because consciously ruminating on this existential reality could trigger severe anxiety, we are motivated to repress death concerns by perceiving ourselves as playing valuable and enduring roles in a meaningful cultural drama.

Rank's (1941/1958) pertinent insight was that the underlying motivation to deny the reality of death lies at the root of the complementary impulses of the ego to assert its unique value and to immerse itself in the security of a greater whole that transcends the self. These ideas were further explored by Rank's intellectual disciple, Ernest Becker (1973), who argued that individuals respond to the fact of death with a craving to be remembered for one's uniqueness, a desire to know that one's life has counted for something special in the staggering cavalcade of all human lives. Faced with the devastating possibility of obliteration, the ego must be capable of orienting the individual toward demonstrating unique self-worth, to stand out from the masses. If the ego fails in this capacity for loudness, then the person faces the risk of losing all that is unique in the self, of being swallowed up by the crowd and by history and reduced to one among billions of merely mortal creatures destined to die and be forgotten.

Yet by the same token, people also deny death by transcending the self—merging with some larger and more enduring whole. Many people are profoundly comforted by the belief that their lives are ensconced in an all-encompassing scheme (e.g., God's plan or the progression of history) and unfold according to its logic and ultimate purpose. Others derive a symbolic sense of

immortality through their identification with enduring social groups, leaders, or ideologies (e.g., a nation, a sports team) that have the potential to exist in perpetuity. This line of defense against death concerns requires the ego to quiet its individual strivings to profit from the psychological protection afforded by complete immersion in the collective entity or worshipped other. When the individual copes with death through self-transcendence, opportunities to embrace freedom or individuate oneself in a way that forces separation from the larger whole can be psychologically threatening.

Rank (1941/1958) clarified that people rarely adopt one or the other ego orientation in coping with death concerns; instead, these tendencies usually operate in tandem, because in most cases efforts to secure self-worth function simultaneously to bolster the perceived meaning and significance of the cultural systems on which one's self-esteem is based. However, there may be cases in which these tendencies conflict. In their ambitions to improve themselves, boast of their accomplishments, and get ahead, people may symbolically stand apart from a meaningful cultural order. We can imagine, for example, a scientist (e.g., Galileo) on the verge of a breakthrough discovery, or a young Chinese woman from a strongly collectivist background considering severing familial and traditional ties to pursue a lucrative career in the American business realm. Both of these individuals stand to distinguish themselves with a special achievement that affirms their creativity and competence, yet if they were to do so, they would undermine their own faith and participation in the symbolic structures (paradigms, values, traditions) that give life meaning. Attaining a balance between the quiet ego and the loud ego—alternately stressing either orientation in the service of optimal functioning—is rendered difficult by the fact that, in some situations, emphasizing one of those ego orientations may undermine the death-denying bases of meaning and value provided by the other.

Evidence That the Quiet Ego and the Loud Ego Serve a Terror Management Function

TMT (Greenberg et al., 1997) is a social psychological theory that builds on Rank's (1941/1958) and Becker's (1973) analyses of the motivational underpinnings of human behavior. The theory posits that the uniquely human awareness of death engenders a potential for terror that people manage through a dual-component anxiety buffer consisting of two things: (a) a cultural world-view—a humanly constructed set of beliefs about the nature of reality that imbues the world with meaning and offers the promise of protection and some form of immortality to those who fulfill prescriptions for valued conduct and (b) self-esteem—the belief that one is fulfilling the individually internalized standards of value, and social roles derived from the culture. By maintaining faith in the cultural worldview and perceiving oneself to be a valuable participant therein, people symbolically qualify for death transcendence and hence can maintain psychological equanimity despite their foreknowledge of mortality. Symbolic immortality can be obtained by perceiving oneself as part

of a culture that endures beyond one's lifetime or by creating enduring testaments to one's existence (e.g., great works of art or science). Literal immortality is procured by means of the various afterlives promised by almost all organized religions.

Insofar as belief in a cultural worldview and having self-esteem function to provide protection against death concerns, then reminders of death (mortality salience, or MS) should intensify reliance on and defense of these psychological structures. This broad hypothesis is supported by a large array of studies demonstrating the influence of MS (operationalized, e.g., as open-ended questions about death or subliminal death primes) on a wide range of cognitive and behavioral efforts to bolster important sources of meaning and personal value (for reviews, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2007; Greenberg et al., 1997).

Many of these studies have demonstrated that affectations associated with the loud ego—asserting personal worth and imposing one's cultural beliefs and identity—are exacerbated by MS. MS boosts efforts to live up to individual standards of value in a diverse array of behavioral domains, including risky driving behavior, fitness intentions, and displays of physical strength (Greenberg et al., 2007). Research also shows that MS motivates disidentification from one's ingroup when affiliation with that group is thought to have negative implications for self-esteem. Furthermore, MS increased physical aggression (assessed by the amount of painfully spicy hot sauce administered to a fellow participant) toward those who attacked participants' political orientation.

Research also shows that MS sometimes increases quiet ego tendencies. For example, one study (Pyszczynski et al., 1996) found that participants interviewed in front of a funeral home exaggerated the degree to which others agree with their opinions, suggesting that subtle intimations of mortality decreased willingness to deviate too far from internalized conventional beliefs. MS also increases identification with valued groups, including one's university, nationality, political party, and sports team, and it leads people to donate more money to charities that benefit one's ingroup (Greenberg et al., 2007). MS similarly engenders inflated regard for a wide range of people, concepts, and objects that represent the broader culture to which one subscribes, and it increases adherence to cultural norms (Greenberg et al., 1997, 2007). This work helps demonstrate the role of immersion in self-transcending collectives in providing symbolic immortality.

In addition to identifying with and defending a meaningful group, the quiet ego can orient the individual toward transferring power to and investing faith in an exalted other, such as a lover, mentor, or political figure. From a TMT perspective, these figures command affection and devotion in part because they promise the individual validation of the self's significance through unconditional affection, or a significant role in a grand cultural vision that transcends death. Supporting this analysis, Mikulincer, Florian, and Hirschberger (2003) showed that MS increases investment in romantic relationships. In the political realm, Landau et al. (2004) found that reminders of death and the 9/11 terrorist attacks increased support for President George W. Bush, a political leader who portrays himself as spearheading a divinely sponsored crusade intended to triumph over evil.

When Terror Management Needs Undermine the Benefits of the Quiet Ego and the Loud Ego: Implications for Personal Growth

By coupling Rank's (1941/1958) analysis with TMT research, we can gain a deeper understanding of why, in some situations, the quiet ego and the loud ego might conflict with each other. Rank's analysis suggests that individuals manage existential fears by maintaining an optimal balance between assert-ing individuality and immersing the self in the security of the crowd. Indeed, Simon et al. (1997) found that MS increased efforts to maintain such a balance. Specifically, they told some participants they were very similar to their peers and told other participants they were very different from their peers. After MS, participants who had been given feedback that they were conformists reported opinions very different from the average person, whereas participants who were told they were deviants reported opinions very similar to the average person.

A further implication of this analysis is that, in their reluctance to chal-lenge protective meaning, people can muffle the beneficial expressions of their loud egos. For example, creative activity distinguishes the individual but can also thereby threaten social connections that provide protection from mortality concerns. In support of this idea, MS led participants who had displayed their creativity to experience increased guilt and make increased efforts to re-imbed themselves in a sense of collective validation through enhanced social projec-tion (Greenberg et al., 2007).

In a related line of research, Landau, Greenberg, and Sullivan (2006) examined how people respond to mortality primes when personal accom-plishments threaten to diminish the exalted status of others who provide symbolic protection. Consistent with prior research, MS increased efforts to self-enhance in important domains, but this effect was eliminated and even reversed when self-enhancement meant surpassing a valued political leader or the participant's parents. Another study assessed the possibility that con-flicting loud and quiet ego defenses contribute to the tendency for people to underperform when confronted with negative cultural stereotypes (i.e., stereo-type threat). MS was predicted to strengthen identification with one's group even if it meant squelching efforts to excel. Accordingly, mortality-primed women who were stereotyped to fare poorly on an academic test underper-formed even when the task was quite easy. These results suggest that people are often reluctant to loudly self-enhance or distinguish themselves with ex-cellence because doing so can cleave them from important sources of terror-as-suaging meaning.

TMT research shows that quiet and loud ego orientations can threaten to undermine concerns and that adopting either orientation can threaten to undermine the psychological protection afforded by the other. Although more research is needed, the findings so far indicate that people sometimes reduce this conflict by squelching their loud egos, even if it means taking a negative attitude to-ward their own creativity and competence.

Toward an Optimal Balance: Managing Terror While Benefiting From Both Ego Orientations

Given the potential for conflict between the quiet and loud egos, reaping the benefits of both orientations while assuaging death-related concerns seems quite challenging. Achieving such a balance may require a psychological con-text of flexibility, in which the individual expansively shares his or her talents yet also processes input from others in an open-minded and accommodating manner. TMT research points to aspects of the individual, situation, and cul-ture that may facilitate the emergence of such flexibility.

Dispositional Factors in Ego Flexibility

Existing research suggests that having a reliable basis of psychological secu-rity reduces defensive manifestations of the loud ego. For instance, individu-als with high self-esteem do not respond to MS with strengthened assertion of their cultural beliefs' superiority, whereas people with low self-esteem do (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Moreover, Taubman Ben-Ari, Florian, and Mi-kulincer (1999) observed that, although MS increased risky driving behavior (both in self-reports and on a driving simulator) among participants who valued their driving ability as a source of self-esteem, a boost to self-esteem eliminated this MS-induced need to demonstrate personal value.

Secure attachment style has been associated with similar attenuations of defense. For example, MS increased the severity of punishment for a moral transgressor among insecurely attached individuals but not among securely attached individuals (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Furthermore, securely attached individuals were found to be more creative after MS than insecurely attached individuals (Greenberg et al., 2007).

Research also supports the idea that dispositional features moderate the quiet ego's potential for uncritical adherence to ingrained brands of thinking. For instance, among individuals high in personal need for structure, MS in-creased preference for conventional structure over novel stimuli (Greenberg et al., 2007), yet individuals low in personal need for structure did not respond to MS with these structuring tendencies, suggesting that simplicity and famil-iarity may be less central to their protective worldview. In sum, individuals equipped with psychological defenses that permit a secure and flexible ego ori-entation are less likely to manage mortality concerns through rigidly defensive expressions of the loud ego and quiet ego.

Situational Factors in Ego Flexibility

Impending information about one's success in acquiring meaning and value may aid or hinder flexibility at either volume of the ego. Harmon-Jones et al. (1997) observed that receiving a self-esteem boost reduced MS-induced worldview defense. However, research also suggests that the nature of social

validation individuals receive may temper the extent of defensiveness they exhibit. For instance, Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (2001) found that receiving positive feedback for one's achievements did not alleviate participants' tendency to defensively distance themselves from a negatively portrayed other, whereas receiving positive feedback for intrinsic aspects of the self (i.e., "who one is") did alleviate this and other defensive responses, such as downward social comparison and conformity. This suggests that positive interpersonal feedback may maximize the benefits of the quiet ego and the loud ego when the feedback is a response to intrinsic self-characteristics, as opposed to contingent self-features rooted primarily in external efforts to garner others' approval.

A situationally heightened sense of social connection may also decrease the negative outcomes associated with rigid ego orientations. Arndt, Routledge, Greenberg, and Sheldon (2005) showed that by first informing participants that they are quite similar to others, creative action after MS could transpire without generating guilt and that, when primed with tasks that enhanced attention to others, participants under MS actually increased reports of optimal psychological functioning (see Greenberg et al., 2007). Such findings support the notion that situations conducive to fulfilling needs in personally significant yet socially embedded ways can help individuals constructively mitigate concerns with mortality.

Cultural Factors

Although certain kinds of worldviews may predispose individuals to respond to MS with rigidity and conventionality, others may inspire increased openness to alternative ways of thinking and expressing. For example, whereas people with an authoritarian worldview responded to MS with intense derogation of dissimilar others, those with a politically liberal worldview (which strongly emphasizes tolerance) responded with more liking for dissimilar others (see Greenberg et al., 1997). These findings illustrate how positive and negative potentials of the loud ego and the quiet ego arise in different individuals' encultured views of reality. Whereas people rigorously committed to convention and authority may seek protection from existential fears in aversive social action, adhering to tolerance-based cultural conceptions may foster assertions expressing the righteousness of accepting different others.

Different religious worldviews prescribe different norms of ritual and propriety, which in turn may require more or less defensive forms of adherence. In line with this, Jonas and Fischer (2006) found that individuals high in intrinsic religiosity (i.e., those who have truly integrated spirituality into the self), when reminded of their religiosity, did not demonstrate worldview defense or elevated death thought accessibility after MS. In contrast, individuals high in extrinsic religiosity (i.e., those who use religion merely to fit in) reaped no such benefit from being reminded of their religiosity.

Summary and Conclusion

The theory and research we have examined in this chapter suggest that the human experience is a challenging balance between dual motivations to assert the self and its strengths, on the one hand, and to sustain mutually beneficial social bonds, on the other hand. The notion of transcending the self to attain a harmonious relation with one's surrounding social and natural environment is indeed an alluring ideal captured in many prominent and thoughtful views of human nature (e.g., see Coan, 1977; this volume), yet such a goal is not without its trade-offs. We believe that for individuals to fully actualize their potential they must address their needs not only to merge with others but also to emerge with the force of an active, creative agent in the world.

The ideas of Rank (1941/1958), Becker (1973), and TMT converge to suggest that human defensive needs are multifaceted and cannot be satisfied by an ego gauged to "mute" the self entirely, or to simply "shout" aggressively at the world. Although we could thus say that one optimal mode of selfhood would be to maintain a constant moderate volume, such an approach may preclude the important benefits of both the quiet and loud ego orientations for the individual and humanity at large. It seems, instead, that a readiness for productive oscillation between self-assertion and self-transcendence is essential if one is to avoid a static, inauthentic existence. In the words of Richard Coan (1977), "a flexibility that permits sequential expression of contrasting modes—and under some conditions, an integrative merging of them—is more consistent with our basic nature and permits something closer to a full realization of our developmental potentials" (p. 293).

We have reviewed research specifying a handful of resources that may contribute to such flexibility, including intrinsic self-esteem, secure attachment style, low need for structure, high valuing or salience of tolerance—each of which helps mitigate maladaptive quiet and loud ego responses to reminders of mortality. Several of the chapters in this volume also describe such resources. However, what we really do not know yet is whether such terror management resources can lead people to be appropriately quiet or loud as the situation requires. For example, if a person bearing some of these qualities was on a decision-making team, and was particularly knowledgeable regarding an issue, would she or he be particularly likely to pipe up and offer insights? If this same person was less knowledgeable than other team members, would he or she be particularly quiet and open to the insights of those others?

To assess such ideas, paradigms must be developed in which individuals are placed in two situations: (a) one in which being quiet is most beneficial and (b) one in which being loud is most beneficial. Although MS should lead people who are prone to a rigidly quiet ego to be quiet in both situations and those prone to a rigidly loud ego to be loud in both situations, people with intrinsically based self-worth or a low need for structure may instead react to MS with flexible adjustments of ego volume attuned to the situation at hand. Future research along these lines may help us more fully and directly assess what situational and dispositional factors facilitate assuagement of death concerns

while nurturing the ego's positive potentials for dynamic expression and social conscience.

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