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The Never-Ending Story *A Terror Management Perspective on the Psychological Function of Self Continuity*

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In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment. (Thoreau, 1854/1997, p. 12)

After the Enlightenment, the ancient Greek conception of *self* as an autonomous essence lost some appeal as scholars discovered that the self develops and operates in a rich ecology of contextual influences, including internal conflicts (Freud, 1917/1966), material possessions (James, 1890), social relations and the appraisals we receive from others (Sullivan, 1953), and the broader cultural and historical milieu (Geertz, 1984). Additionally, William James's (1890) observation that the self is situated in *time* challenged earlier notions that self exists in the immediate present (Descartes, 1641/1984) or evaporates in the flux of passing sensations (Hume, 1739/1988). For James, although we do not experience ourselves as exactly the same person over time, subjective experience does unfold in a cumulative and systematic fashion. The self is thus *temporally extended*—symbolically reaching backward and forward in time—and maintains unity and continuity by linking past with present experiences in the anticipation of future states.

Contemporary psychologists have offered interesting and diverse views of how self continuity persists despite the unrelenting mutability of experience (Erikson, 1968; Neisser, 1988). One useful perspective posits that people maintain self continuity by constructing a meaningful and coherent narrative over time—a life story—in which they are the protagonists in the continuously unfolding drama of

life, complete with characters, setting, plot, motivation, conflicts, and their resolutions (Bruner, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; McAdams, 1993). As an organization of knowledge about the self in time, the life story confers a continuous identity by integrating the temporally disparate aspects of an individual's personal history, everyday experience, current roles and proclivities, and envisioned future into a unified and purposeful whole: *This is what I was, how I've come to be, and what I am becoming* (Erikson, 1968; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1993). The narrative can depict one's life as generally progressing or regressing in overall value (Gergen & Gergen, 1988), and can be punctuated by scenes of contamination (good things turned bad) and redemption (bad things turned good; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001); overall, however, people prefer to perceive themselves as improving over time (Wilson & Ross, 2001).

Although life stories are unique, they are shaped by a variety of social and cultural influences. Developmental psychologists have shown, for example, how early parent-child conversations about previous experience form the scaffolding for the child's increasingly abstract temporal self-awareness, moving from recollections of isolated past events to an integrated autobiographical representation of "my" experience over time (Nelson & Fivush, 2000). Adolescence begins the task of carving out a personalized niche within society's ideological (e.g., political, religious, and economic) and vocational options (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 1985). Throughout the lifespan, cultures provide a host of narrative possibilities based on their prevailing myths, social roles, and moral values (Rosenwald, 1992). Simultaneously, cultures constrain which types of narratives—and for which types of people—are appropriate (and even conceivable!) and collectively verify their legitimacy and attainment (Bruner, 1986).

THE THRUST OF THE STORY

What we find especially interesting is that people are typically motivated, even obsessed, with articulating and refining an integrative and self-defining life story. They write in journals, compose autobiographies, track their genealogy, struggle to make sense of painful or unresolved memories of past events, find life purpose in a distant dream, and are thrilled to find that, 10 years later, their ardor-inspired tree carvings remain visible. A sense of narrative continuity seems to be a vital need, and people who maintain it are healthier both mentally and physically (Borden, 1992; McAdams et al., 2001; Pennebaker, 2003). Conversely, people become distressed when prevented from meaningfully organizing experiences over time, as occurs in Korsakoff's syndrome (Sacks, 1987, pp. 109–110), in which the individual cannot recall any new experiences after a few seconds have passed.

Although we may never experience such a profoundly disorienting loss of continuity between one experience and the next that occurs, many of us have become anxious when unable to make sense of a particularly salient event, despaired at the thought that life is a mere succession of disparate episodes with no global structure, and saddened or outraged when significant elements of our personal narrative—a childhood landmark, an ancestor's reputation, the dream of becoming a successful

scientist—are undermined or destroyed. These considerations led us to wonder: Why are people so invested in imputing story-like order, direction, and purpose to the unfolding drama of what they have become and what they are becoming in time? Below we briefly consider two particularly influential broad answers before presenting our own account.

Practical Functions

In every culture, people trade stories and myths to recount past events, exchange practical knowledge, and make collective plans and decisions (Mithen, 1996). Analogously, personal narratives may aid the individual in goal-directed activity and other forms of adaptive self-regulation over time. For example, an overarching story-like perspective on events separated in time may help the individual detect recurring maladaptive themes that were not otherwise obvious (e.g., "I'm always playing the 'mentor' role in my relationships") and devise alternative strategies for responding to new people and situations. Narratives also provide direction and purpose, focusing attention on specific long-term intentions and strivings, or "possible selves," that fulfill a story line and situate the person in a functioning social niche (Bruner, 1990; Markus & Nurius, 1986; McAdams, 1993).

Intrapsychic Defense

In addition to practical utility, stories about personal experience may also serve a defensive psychological function, protecting the individual from unacceptable or anxiety-provoking realizations. Freud, in his theory of dreams (1900/1965) and case studies (1917/1966) posited that people's manifest narration of dreams and everyday experiences serve to conceal threatening unconscious material in part through complex temporal distortions. For example, Freud proposed that the ego avoids the threatening implications of multiple incidences associated with an unacceptable wish or fantasy by condensing them into a single, seemingly trivial episode.

Another defensive account comes from existential and humanistically oriented thinkers like Rollo May, Victor Frankl, Carl Rogers, and Irving Yalom, who converged on the notion that people strive to make sense of the world and existence and defend against the unbearable realization of life's ultimate meaninglessness. More specifically, existential theory describes two threats to meaning inherent in the experience of time. One is when time's passage appears as a disjointed and arbitrary series of isolated "nows" with no subjective order (too much "possibility" in Kierkegaard's sense). Another threat is when our everyday experience in time appears overly regimented, routine, or futile, leading the person to lament, "Is this all there is?" (Kierkegaard's "necessity" [1843/1941]; Sartre, 1966). In between a bewildering collage of moments and the heavy hand of convention and routine, the authentic self takes responsibility for constructing a meaningful and dynamic story that provides compelling answers to the "big questions": How did I get here, What am I doing, and What will I become?

This is clearly not an exhaustive review, and narrative self continuity probably serves a variety of functions for different people and at different points in the life

course. That said, we agree with the existentialists (and others, e.g., Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1993) that personal narratives are especially suited to bridging temporally distant experiences in a way that lends global meaning and significance to life. But we inquire one step further: Why are people so concerned with securing meaning and value in their lives? Out of what concern with things-as-they-are does the motive for temporally extended meaning spring? Based on an experimental existential psychological perspective known as terror management theory (TMT), we propose that a sense of meaningful narrative continuity functions ultimately to quell deeply rooted concerns about death.

A TERROR MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

TMT (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) is based on the writings of Ernest Becker (1971, 1973), who synthesized insights from anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and sociology into a comprehensive framework for understanding the motivational underpinnings of people's need to perceive themselves as leading significant lives in the context of a meaningful and enduring reality. According to Becker, humans share with all living species a fundamental impulse to continue living, but they face a unique paradox. On the one hand, their sophisticated abilities to understand the world and reflect on themselves in highly symbolic, temporally extended terms enable them to anticipate and control their surroundings in elaborate ways and surmount diverse obstacles. On the other hand, these same cognitive capacities produce the awareness of an insurmountable obstacle: the undeniable fact of their inevitable death. As humans we know that we live in a world that is indifferent and even hostile to any individual's life and that we are fated, like all living things, to come to an end. Given a biological proclivity for survival, the awareness that death is always potentially imminent and ultimately inevitable engenders a uniquely human capacity for experiencing potentially debilitating terror.

According to TMT, people manage the potential for terror engendered by the awareness of their own mortality by (a) investing in a culturally shared meaning system (a temporally extended mythical account of reality) and (b) maintaining a conviction of personal worth and significance by fashioning from the surrounding culture and their individual endowments some form of personal heroism; an image of who they are that confers literal and/or symbolic immortality (Lifton, 1983). By inhabiting a world of absolute meaning and enduring value, people can obscure the possibility that they are really just transient animals in a purposeless universe destined only to absolute annihilation upon death.

The primary line of empirical support for TMT has been obtained by tests of the mortality salience hypothesis: Insofar as meaning and personal value serve to allay mortality concerns, then heightening the salience of mortality (mortality salience, MS) should intensify efforts to bolster those meaning and value providing structures and defend them against threats. A growing body of research, to date consisting of over 300 separate studies, confirms this broad hypothesis (for an overview of empirical support for TMT, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). For example, MS (e.g., induced by asking participants to ponder their

own demise, exposure to subliminal reminders of death, or interviews in front of a funeral home) leads to polarized attitudes toward those who uphold or violate cultural values, an increased preference for believing that the world is a just and orderly place, and a decreased attraction to behaviorally inconsistent others and apparently meaningless art (Landau, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Martens, 2006). MS has also been shown to increase various forms of self-esteem striving, including riskier driving among those who base their self-worth on driving ability, increased identification with valued groups, and decreased identification with negatively framed groups.

TMT AND THE SELF IN TIME

Time is the school in which we learn. Time is the fire in which we burn.
(Schwartz, 1938/1976, p. 32)

Focusing on a TMT perspective on the self-in-time, we would first note that humans, unlike other animals immersed in the perpetual present, live within highly abstract and elaborate conceptions of how experiences relate to one another, to past and future conditions, and to their personal significance (Donald, 1991). But with these capacities for abstract and temporal thought comes the realization of what *must* be; namely, the inevitable termination of the self. A self situated in time knows that one day its "time will be up"; this is a potentially terrifying realization because it conflicts with an instinctual desire for continued survival. So the fundamental threat of time is that it is passing moment by moment toward one's own inevitable extinction upon death.

Humans assuage this threat in two ways. First, humans view time as coherent, with structure and meaning. Our cultural worldviews portray and label time as cyclical, cumulative, and recordable, so that people can view their lives as permanent parts of a never-ending story. Because we can refer to specific times in the past (e.g., Aug. 12, 1844), it is as if the past exists permanently, and the present and the future will also. In this way, time is fixed metaphorically in place, serving as an orderly scaffolding for the meaningful events in our own personal and cultural histories. We and others can know when we were born, when we lived, and others, at least, also can know when we died. When temporal experience lacks such coherence, for example, when time seems disjointed, fleeting, or unrecorded, we must reinstate the cultural trappings of temporal coherence or face the terrifying realizations that once experienced, each unique moment disappears, never to be experienced again, and that our life is running out with each such passing moment.

Second, we not only lived during a specific time, but that time was dynamic, involving changes and developments. During our lives, we are not just biding our time, we are accomplishing significant things that have a permanent, marked impact on the world. If we were to lose the sense that we are participating in a dynamic, meaningful existence, for example, if our lives were too chaotic or overly routinized, we would be left with the terrifying view of existence as an experience of insignificant moments leading up to an inevitable descent into an indifferent

cosmos. So we must maintain the sense that our life is a significant story that unfolds over time.

In sum, we are proposing that the construction and maintenance of integrative and culturally meaningful narratives about the self function in part to manage terror by minimizing the existential threat of passing time. Using the same cognitive capacities for symbolic and temporally extended thought that engendered the awareness of death, people form coherent relations among events separated in time, construct dynamic images of themselves, and link personal characteristics, shared cultural influences, and broader perceptions of reality into new, fantastical fictions that transcend the contingencies and thus the limitations of time. In short, people deny death by “getting a life”—by creating out of themselves something larger, more significant, and longer lasting than their physical existence. Culture plays a critical role in constituting the individual as an object of primary value in a world of meaning (Becker, 1971). Our personal stories “create” us, in a sense, by infusing our lives with purpose and significance, but that meaning effectively manages terror only if it is embedded within the context of the culture’s symbolic hero systems. Next we will specify how people manage mortality concerns by projecting themselves into a heroic past and a victorious future within a nexus of cultural meaning.

ONCE UPON A TIME: RETROSPECTIVE NARRATIVE CONTINUITY

Narrative continuity serves a terror management function in part by integrating *who we are* with *how we got here* and *who we were* into a temporally organized whole. In reality, the particular geographic and cultural-historical contingencies of one’s birth are ultimately arbitrary, and the myriad roles and events that comprise one’s past and present experience are loosely connected and often completely serendipitous. These are disturbing realizations that the individual seeks to avoid by transforming the particulars of his or her birth and lived experience into a coherent narrative account with pattern and purpose. As Erikson (1958, p. 111) put it, the individual “selectively reconstruct[s] his past in such a way that, step by step, it seems to have planned him, or better he seems to have planned it.”

Here Erikson points out that although narratives may seem like intrinsically meaningful accounts of who we are, they are generally not realistic pictures of ourselves or veridical reports of experience. Rather, narratives selectively revise and reshape both past and present experiences, embellishing those that meaningfully relate to enduring themes, conflicts, goals, and self-images, and discounting those that are irrelevant or potentially threatening (Bluck & Levine, 1998). For example, the person may summarily represent 3 years of day-to-day work experiences as “the next step in my career,” symbolically transforming a series of countless disparate moments into a thematically continuous and integral part of a meaningful journey. Put simply, our stories become ourselves, and since our stories transcend the contingencies of time, we transcend the grimly finite fact of our individual existence.

Cultural Content

Cultures supply a good deal of the content for self-narratives. First, cultures situate one’s existence on a grand scale by offering compelling answers to cosmological questions about why and how the universe and life came to be. More locally, they transmit elaborate knowledge about tradition, ancestry, nationality, kinship, place of origin, and the significant events that have gone on before one’s own individual existence. For example, traditional cultures such as that of the Hindus and the Aztecs conceptualized their members’ current lives from birth to death as just one phase of an existence that stretches far into the past before birth and far into the future beyond death. Cultures also define a moral code and value system through laws, traditions, taboos, myths, and fairy tales. It is in this context of cultural mythology and history that people situate their personal narratives, identifying with significant groups (New Yorkers or Englishmen) and causes removed in place and time. These identities allow individuals to perceive themselves as temporal representatives of a triumphant cultural legacy that extends before their biological birth; without this context, they come from nowhere and are no one.

Personal Narrative Structure

Narratives are fundamentally cultural in that they are structured around the culture’s conceptions and measures of time (e.g., time as agricultural cycles; time as a waystation en route to timeless eternity). More proximally, through socialization, each person learns a set of dominant or conventionalized narrative models or “scripts” for how a life should proceed (i.e., when conventional phases of the life story—e.g., education, love, career—are supposed to begin and end; Miller et al., 1994) and what it should ultimately amount to (which scripts are valued and appropriate for a given individual will be constrained by sociocultural factors like their gender, class, and race). From a TMT perspective, people subscribe and conform to culturally prescribed narrative structure in order to maintain the conviction that they are on a significant journey unfolding in a systematic and meaningful progression that the culture deems appropriate and worthy.

External Validation

Building on the work of Erving Goffman, Becker (1971) noted that it is only in a context of shared meaning that a person can create and validate claims to a certain identity. To this end, cultures prescribe face-saving ritual formulas for social encounters, rites of passage, and ceremonies that serve to designate and publicly recognize major life transitions, achievements, and the possession of certain identities (e.g., doctor, Bohemian). According to Becker, people are fundamentally dependent on culture for fashioning a heroic identity and thereby managing mortality concerns:

First we discover who society says we are: then we build our identity on performance in that part. If we uphold our part in the performance, we are rewarded

with social affirmation of our identity. It is hardly an exaggeration, then, to say that we are *created* in the performance. If we bungle the performance, show that we do not merit the part, we are destroyed—not figuratively, but literally. (Becker, 1971, p. 99, emphasis in original)

In sum, culture shapes and facilitates retrospective narrative continuity by providing the individual with (a) the conviction that the historic “macro-narrative” of the individual’s existence—his or her ethnic, ideological, and phylogenetic “roots,” so to speak—is uniquely special; and (b) the narrative structure, contents, and devices needed to interpret his or her personal past as following an appropriate trajectory of communally recognized transitions and accomplishments.

LIVING HAPPILY FOREVER AFTER: PROSPECTIVE NARRATIVE CONTINUITY

The person sustains retrospective narrative continuity by integrating his or her personal history and temporally extending it to encompass what preceded the person’s biological birth. Similarly, individuals sustain *prospective* continuity by perceiving the present self as meaningfully leading up to or setting the stage for significant future outcomes, and extending the self from the limits of a finite existence to something enduring. The present passage of time can appear as a chaotic succession of fleeting moments or a monotonously trivial, static routine that we endure indefinitely until we are struck by an automobile, collapse from a brain aneurism, or simply succumb to the ravages of time: “To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time” (Shakespeare, 1623/2000, p. 92). To avoid this realization, the person links his or her current self and activities to a predictable yet dynamic meaningful progression of long-term goals and stages, thereby transforming time from a medium for dreaded *nonbecoming* into a medium for a heroic *becoming* that transcends time.

These anticipated personal legacies are often quite literal. The person who believes that his or her life has been a dramatic service to a deity, for example, believes that he or she will literally continue on through the brief transition of death into eternal bliss. Some devout individuals (e.g., suicide bombers) are willing to sacrifice their lives in the present world in the faith that a better life awaits them. Narratives can also provide prospective meaning and significance in the context of less literal (but no less arbitrary) cultural hero systems (Lifton, 1983). People often picture themselves as symbolically immortalized through their identification with enduring collectives and causes (e.g., the nation, the corporation), inheritances, memorials, and many forms of cultural achievements in the sciences and arts (e.g., having one’s name engraved on a Hollywood sidewalk). Another major source of symbolic immortality is the sense of continuing on through one’s offspring.

Because there is typically little objective evidence that these heroic strivings in the present will reliably earn one literal or symbolic immortality in the future, the person turns to his or her culture for consensual validation that he or she is

participating in something enduring that will “live on” indefinitely within a continuing ideology.

EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT: CONTINUITY IN THE FACE OF DEATH

We have conducted a series of studies (summarized below) that provides converging support for the terror management function of a coherent and temporally continuous self-concept (for details, see Landau & Greenberg, 2006). In some of these experiments, MS effects are specific to individuals high in personal need for structure (PNS), a general tendency to seek and prefer clear, consistent, and definite knowledge (Nueberg & Newsome, 1993). Although we feel that terror-assuaging meaning and value are universal needs, these results suggest that there are individual differences in the degree to which clear and temporally integrated self-structure satisfies those needs.

Coherence of the Self-Concept

A prerequisite for a sense of significant and enduring self continuity is a coherent sense of self. If self-concept coherence serves a terror management function, we should find that MS increases the perceived clarity and simplicity of the self-concept. Accordingly, using a Q-sort method whereby participants organize self-descriptive characteristics into personally meaningful groupings, we found that MS led high PNS participants to organize self-relevant information in a clearer, simpler fashion.

Keeping Track of Time

Another prerequisite for self continuity is a clear sense of the flow of time. Recent studies suggest that MS intensifies the tendency to impose a clear structure on the flow of time. In one study, MS decreased participants’ attraction to a person who belittled the practice of keeping track of time. In another study, participants were asked to imagine a hypothetical vacation and schedule a number of events using either definitive or vague units of time. MS led high PNS participants to favor a sharply delineated parsing of time.

Continuity with the Past

In a recent test of terror management and retrospective meaning, participants generated 20 autobiographical memories, were primed with death or another aversive topic, and then organized their memories in either a personally meaningful (chronological or thematic) or a personally arbitrary organization (alphabetical); the alphabetical organization was intended to undermine the perceived meaningfulness of the past. Finally, participants rated the overall meaningfulness of their

pasts. The alphabetic memory organization decreased perceptions of the past's overall meaning in the control-prime condition, but led to a compensatory boost in the perceived meaningfulness of the past in the MS condition. These results suggest that mortality concerns heighten the need to defend a meaningful organization of the separate elements of one's past against threats of incoherence.

Another study examined the tendency to organize the past in a causally coherent way. Mortality and control primed participants wrote short autobiographies—stories of their lives—which were coded for causal language (e.g., because) as an index of causal coherence. Mortality-salient participants spontaneously used more causal words in describing their pasts, suggesting they were more concerned with establishing causal links between aspects of their personal histories.

In another test, participants generated 15 autobiographical memories, contemplated death or extreme pain, and were then asked to indicate, by drawing lines from boxes representing those memories to a box representing the current self, which of their memories had had a significant influence on how they see themselves today. MS led high PNS participants to draw more connections, indicating that when reminded of mortality, people high in need for structure were more concerned with establishing meaningful continuity between the past and present self.

Continuity into the Future

In a recent test of the role of terror management in prospective narrative continuity, people participated in an alleged advertising study and were told about the opportunity to have a star permanently named after them. They were also told about a top-of-the-line massaging chair, an attractive but not especially personal or enduring product. MS increased interest in the star-naming service but not for the chair. In addition, a recent series of studies conducted by Wisman and Goldenberg (2005) shows that MS increases the desire for offspring: Male and female participants responded to MS with an increased number of desired children except if the women were concerned that having children would interfere with successful career pursuits. Taken together, these results support the notion that mortality concerns increase people's desire to extend themselves indefinitely into the future.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONAL, INTERPERSONAL, AND GROUP WELL-BEING

Personal Growth and Well-Being

Research on coping (Pennebaker, 2003), identity (Marcia, 2002), and psychotherapy (Spence, 1982) reveals that different styles of narrating experience can have important repercussions for health and well-being. For example, Marcia has shown that those who prematurely commit to certain ideological and occupational roles can later regret not having explored other options, whereas those with a fragmented or diffuse identity that lacks long-term structure can feel estranged from others and the world.

One TMT perspective on narrative styles and well-being focuses on the balance between two basic motives: one that drives the person to "fit in" and establish security, the other that drives the person to "stand out" and seek personal growth (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003). On the one hand, people seek to break free from cultural constraints and forge a new, more empowering story for themselves (the message of many self-help books). However, from a TMT perspective, such a radically self-determined life story invites fear because it resists broad social validation, without which it is difficult to sustain faith that one's life originates from something meaningful and progresses toward something heroic. A person whose narrative deviates too far from the culture's conventional narrative structure may face the possibility that his or her life will end in anonymity, insignificance, and nothingness.

On the other hand, the person's narrative may conform in a seemingly wholesale fashion to conventional cultural scripts for an appropriate and worthy life (e.g., following the American Dream). This person has broad external validation for his or her narrative, but may still have difficulty allaying mortality concerns because these gains in security can come at the sacrifice of self-directed growth and exploration. Henry James (1883) referred to this as being ground up in the mill of the conventional. In this case, time poses a threat of routine: mindlessly executing a fixed series of preordained stages and accomplishments can expose the individual to the futility of life and the specter of death.

Thus, narratives that "stand out" or "fit in" too much will be less likely to furnish a sense of terror-assuaging meaning and significance. In order to allay fear while preserving freedom, the person must feel that he or she is exercising his or her capacities, seeking out optimal challenges, and integrating novel experience (Ryan & Deci, 2002), but all within a larger meaningful and socially validated context. To test the idea that there is an existential need for an optimal balance between fitting in and standing out, Simon et al. (1997) conducted a study showing that MS increases 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, those given feedback that they were conformists reported opinions very different from the average person; whereas those told they were deviants reported opinions very similar to the average person.

Interpersonal Harmony

The motivation to allay mortality concerns may lead people to cling to meaning-conferring narrative themes, despite their persistent negative impact on social relations—any coherent and continuous self-identity is better than none. For example, a person's narrative understanding of his or her romantic history may include recurring themes that justify his or her current involvement in an unhealthy or unsatisfying relationship—"Once again I'm the shoulder to cry on. ... Guess that's the story of my life!" The person may also be reluctant to engage openly with others because his or her narrative creates negative expectancies ("I'll be hurt again"). The person may also be motivated to embody particular personas

or *Imagoes* (McAdams, 1993) featured in his or her life story, despite the negative consequences for others' well-being (e.g., a "Don Juan" who glorifies infidelity).

Our analysis also has implications for intergenerational relations. Narratives provide the meaning that ties different generations together. Although some younger people may feel destined to follow in the older generation's steps, others feel alienated from or opposed to the occupational, interpersonal, and ideological offerings of society. Some young adults in this position create hybrid narratives that integrate traditional and contemporary elements; others renounce outright the "old ways" and adopt new narratives. From a TMT perspective, the youth's choice to renounce traditional narratives may disturb the elderly individual because the absolute validity of the cultural hero system is now undermined by the very individuals who are expected to carry the cultural torch.

Group Conflict

On a broader historical scale, the motivated tendencies to cling to and defend narratives have had destructive and tragic consequences. Throughout history, many of the barbaric and inhumane acts of dictators, terrorists, and mass murders are from their perspective the apogee of a fantastic cultural mythology (Tololyan, 1987). Also, when rival societies attempt to conquer other societies, they often impose their cultural folkways, ceremonies, and mythic accounts of reality on the conquered. Because narratives provide a collective history that binds the individual to centuries and ancestors past, the members of the endangered culture face cultural trauma: the horror of being stripped of their cosmic meaning and heroic purpose (Salzman & Holloran, 2004).

BEYOND NARRATIVE

In this chapter we proposed, based on TMT, that narrative continuity serves to lend meaning and significance to life, obscures the arbitrary and transient nature of existence, and thereby helps the individual manage deeply rooted concerns about death. Returning to our opening point about the contextualized self, Becker's work and TMT posit that a temporally extended self realizes its inevitable demise and thus operates in a context of potential anxiety; however, it also creatively transforms past and future in culturally valued ways and thus operates in a symbolic context of meaning and value. This meaning, however, can take personally and socially destructive forms. We therefore end by noting that a more satisfying mode of selfhood may be to transcend the need for a meaningful sense of *self-in-time* and its associated neuroses, and to foster, within the limits of what is practically feasible, a more expansive engagement with the present through intrinsically enjoyable activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Perhaps through an hour on a pottery wheel, a stimulating conversation, or a serene hike we can find pockets of what Lifton (1983) called *experiential transcendence*—a feeling state so intense that we are temporarily free of time and death.

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