

# Communication and Terrorism: A Terror Management Theory Perspective

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*As terrorism continues to raise the specter of death to levels of salience best measured on a global scale, terror management theory (TMT) offers valuable insights for communication theorists regarding the nature and psychology of terrorism. TMT provides a metatheoretic framework, which can help to unify a diverse range of communication theory perspectives. Following a review of TMT's analysis of certain socioemotional factors associated with the human potential for existential anxiety and intercultural conflict, this paper examines how TMT relates to and illuminates diverse communication theory orientations bearing on a range of issues related to the causes and costs of terrorism.*

*Keywords: Metatheory; Terrorism; Terror Management Theory*

Communication theory can offer important insights into many of the critical aspects of terrorism by helping us comprehend some of the proximal (i.e., close, specific, and direct) mechanisms involved in how people think about, feel about, and respond to terrorism. In this paper we will show how an empirically substantiated existential perspective known as terror management theory (TMT) can complement this understanding by providing a metatheoretic account of the distal (i.e., latent, indirect) motivational systems underlying key psychological structures central to the causes and consequences of terrorism. Specifically, we will attempt to show how TMT sheds light on the human need for culturally derived meaning and self-esteem (see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997 for a review), and can thereby provide communication theorists with valuable insights into the socioemotional environment within which terrorism operates.

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The role of communication has been implicit in prior terror management treatments of terrorism (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2002; Miller & Landau, *in press*). We believe making the role of communication theory more explicit is vital to extending the implications of this work. Thus, we begin by offering a brief review of TMT, followed by consideration of several important sociocognitive aspects of terrorism. We conclude by suggesting ways that TMT can work in tandem with communication theory to investigate the mechanics and motivations underlying the causes and costs of terrorism.

### **Terror Management Theory**

Terror management theory is an interdisciplinary perspective inspired by the work of Ernest Becker (1971, 1973, 1975), which offers a metatheoretical perspective on human behavior that highlights the motivational significance of our uniquely human awareness of mortality. According to Becker, in the absence of certain compelling psychological protective mechanisms, the knowledge that we are one day going to die creates the potential for severe dread. We respond to this prospective anxiety by subscribing to a cultural worldview (CWV)—a collectively held set of beliefs about the nature of reality—which provides convincing answers to universal cosmological questions about the nature of life. One's CWV stipulates appropriate social roles, requirements, and standards for valued conduct, while instilling one's life with meaning, order, and permanence. Moreover, CWVs provide some assurance that by meeting or exceeding the cultural standards of value, "we"—ourselves—will persist beyond our physical demise, either literally (e.g., by going to heaven, or paradise, or through reincarnation) or symbolically (e.g., through recognition of our works, fame, and celebrity). In this regard, one's CWV acts as a buffer against the potential for anxiety generated by awareness of the inevitability of one's own personal death.

Although the meaning derived from faith in a CWV is essential, it is insufficient to adequately deal with the threat posed by our own finitude. For that, individuals must also believe they serve a valuable and significant role within their own socially constructed reality. According to TMT, perceiving the self as a thing of value in a world of meaning provides the basis for self-esteem—the psychological mechanism by which culture exerts its anxiety-buffering, death-denying influence. What is more, despite differences found across disparate cultures, all CWVs serve a common defensive function by supplying meaning and value to people's lives. From this perspective, a wide range of human behaviors may be seen as efforts to preserve culturally derived meaning and personal significance in order to better manage the potential for existential anxiety associated with the inevitability of death.

The empirical assessments of TMT have largely focused on the mortality salience (MS) hypothesis: if self-esteem and the CWV function in part to protect people from concerns about death, then reminders of death (i.e., MS) should lead to increased efforts to bolster and defend these two vital psychological constructs. Support for this hypothesis has been obtained by numerous programs of research which have

established the convergent and discriminant validity of a variety of MS inductions (e.g., open-ended questions about death, fear of death scales, subliminal death primes), as well as their effects on diverse cognitive and behavioral efforts to strengthen and preserve central aspects of one's self-worth and/or CWV (Greenberg et al., 1997; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, in press). Furthermore, these effects cannot be obtained by making a variety of other negative thoughts (e.g., pain, failure, uncertainty, social exclusion, etc.) salient or accessible (Greenberg et al., 1997). The extant research strongly indicates that the critical condition for terror management defenses (i.e., MS effects) to occur is heightened accessibility of death-related thoughts outside of conscious awareness.

### **TMT, and the Causes of Terrorism**

With regard to terrorism, TMT's emphasis on the critical nature and function of the CWV can help us understand the propensity some extremists fundamentalist groups have for coldly wreaking death and destruction upon any number of innocents who may not share their particular religious or political beliefs. One's CWV consists of a set of common beliefs about the nature of reality, the somewhat arbitrary structure of which, although appearing substantial and absolute, can nevertheless be a rather fragile social construction requiring a robust social consensus to sustain.

TMT asserts that the mere existence of others endorsing a system of fundamentally differing beliefs destabilizes one's own worldview, not only making it a less efficient buffer against latent existential anxieties, but also promoting the apprehension and dread one's own CWV was constructed to avert. Therefore, entertaining the validity of—or merely encountering—alternative cultural conceptions of reality can undermine the confidence with which we subscribe to our own beliefs and values, thereby weakening the overall effectiveness of our CWV as a shield against death. Such exposure instigates a host of compensatory psychological mechanisms (i.e., terror management defenses) designed to bolster the faith with which we hold our existing beliefs. TMT suggests that only by such reinforcement (e.g., increased tolerance for similar others holding compatible worldviews, and/or increased intolerance for dissimilar others holding alternative worldviews) may our own relatively delicate CWV succeed in restoring and maintaining psychological equanimity.

A second relevant dynamic of terror management, stemming from our psychological inability to tolerate strangers who fail to share our special, death-denying vision of reality (i.e., our CWV), involves the pacifying need we have for scapegoating. When death is made salient, our unconscious reflex is to instinctively and spontaneously project the resultant potential for anxiety onto dissimilar others, designating them as the repositories of evil—as the ones who should suffer or perish in our place. Were we all of the same mind, without any “real” dissimilar others to focus upon, we would lack an alien enemy sufficiently worthy of such a fate. In the face of our own mortality, when we directly encounter others holding alternative worldviews, we can diminish the challenge they pose by condemning them as infidels,

deserving of the doom we must avoid for ourselves. Should we find such derogation unsettling or unsatisfying, an alternative solution involves persuading them to adopt our own version of reality. If one is chronically unsuccessful at convincing one's self of the inferior nature of the competing CWV, a more grim, final solution, as so many terrorist fascists have concluded, is simply to obliterate the offending presence.

In short, we can understand the motivation to engage in terrorism as stemming in part from the needs to bolster and defend one's cultural conception of reality, as well as to perceive oneself as fulfilling its standards of value—needs vital for serving psychologically critical defensive functions.

### **TMT, Communication, and Reactions to Terrorism**

Although the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) were responsible for a small fraction of the human casualties one might expect from a moderately severe earthquake or typhoon [1], their persisting psychological impact has been considerably more powerful and far-reaching. To this day, many of our most vital responses to 9/11 have been concerned with reestablishing feelings of security, meaning, and justice. From a TMT perspective, these symbolic defenses follow from the double-edged threat 9/11 has presented to the anxiety buffering function of our destabilized worldview. Not only did the attacks provide a vivid image of mass death and devastation, they undermined or destroyed several universally recognized symbols of American military might and economic power. The Pentagon and World Trade Centers were potent symbols situated at the very core of our newly vulnerable CWV.

Cultures dictate the frames or schemata people use to organize and interpret experience as well as regulate how people respond when such knowledge structures are threatened. While communication theory can do an effective job of explaining how the various contextual frames are constructed and transmitted, TMT can complement this effort by giving a compelling account of why these frameworks of understanding are psychologically significant. When we encounter the threat terrorism poses to our CWV, we do not simply rely on our cultural sensibilities to help us comprehend the experience; rather, we energetically cling to our worldview, defensively reacting with great vigor against those who would violate it, or in favor of those who would support it. In some cases, we may find the event so overwhelming that we seek to dissociate from it by distracting ourselves from its full significance.

An integration of TMT analysis into certain prevailing themes within communication theory might first begin by considering some of the more symbolic behaviors people have embraced in response to terrorism.

#### *Symbolism*

One of the most conspicuous reactions to 9/11 was witnessed in the upsurge of nationalistic pride, as expressed, for example, through the inundation of patriotic

songs, images, and narratives in the media. Following the attacks, US-Americans expressed unprecedented support for the government, demonstrating both more willingness to embrace increased security measures and less demand for many of the privacy rights formerly considered sacrosanct (Morin & Deane, 2001). From a communication perspective, patriotic symbols comprise the central elements and shared meanings Americans use to understand and experience the world. From an early age, people are encultured to associate such symbols with American strength, pride, permanence, power and freedom. Even the words, “freedom,” “liberty,” and “justice” have come to hold a special symbolism uniquely applicable to US values. For many Americans such words have a quasi-sacred quality—not to be sullied or profaned. From a TMT perspective, these terms and symbols evocatively populate a meaningful cultural worldview, lending an enduring structure to our lives capable of shielding off the specter of death. Support for this view comes from research demonstrating how MS inductions increase people’s investment in their core religious and national symbols, increasing their preference for those who validate their CWV by declining to use such symbols inappropriately (Greenberg, Simon, Porteus, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995).

### *Stereotyping*

Beyond cultural icons, in the wake of 9/11, many people were especially spirited in their use of intercultural stereotypes. In times of conflict, such simplified conceptions of other have the effect of dehumanizing those perceived as the enemy. TMT offers one account for why some people may find comfort in their biased application of stereotypes. The theory claims that maintaining stable conceptions of others serves a terror management function by making the social world seem more predictable, meaningful, and orderly. That is, stereotypes provide us with simple and coherent ways of thinking about dissimilar others—knowledge useful in lending meanings (however erroneous) to a confusing social world. Thus, stereotyping is both an instrument of economy (as it frees us from having to think too carefully), as well as a defense against fear (as it reassures us that all is predictably unsurprising). In support of this claim, Schimel et al. (1999) have demonstrated that heightened death thought accessibility increases people’s preferences for others who behave in stereotypic ways. In a series of studies, participants completed MS or control primes and then evaluated Blacks, Germans, women, and homosexual men who either did or did not conform to the appropriate cultural stereotype. Although participants in the control condition expressed more favorable evaluations for the counter-stereotypical target, terror management defense resulted in increased preference for stereotypic targets. These and other findings suggest that thinking about others in ways that confirm conceptions of social reality has the effect of holding thoughts of death at bay, thus stereotyping may actually anticipate and/or prevent existential anxiety (see Landau et al., 2003).

Recognizing there is a threat and knowing why—i.e., determining its cause—is vital for human survival and the avoidance of pain and suffering. Stereotyping may immediately allow us to at least perceive that we have identified our potential advisories. Uncertainty reduction theory (URT—Berger & Calabrese, 1975) asserts that people have a basic need to reduce uncertainty about others with whom they are likely to interact. Based in part on the essential survival value of holding accurate information about the world, URT posits that uncertainty predicts communication behaviors such as verbal interaction, nonverbal warmth, information seeking, self-disclosure, similarity, and liking. According to URT, dissimilarity between persons increases uncertainty, with a consequent tendency to reduce affinity. Thus, the use of stereotypes may aggravate an already tense and existentially uncomfortable condition by generating increased distance between those identified as holding differing—hence more threatening—world views. Further research is necessary to determine whether MS may exacerbate other uncertainty-reducing behaviors outlined by URT.

### *Hostility*

The coordinated management of meaning (CMM), as articulated by Pearce & Cronen (1980), takes place when people interacting socially are able to create meaning through exchanges facilitated by cultural and interpersonal systems, which provide explanations for actions and reactions. CMM employs the concept of “deontic logic,” using terms of “oughtness” to express the way social intercourse may/should/must/must not be conducted. CMM is performative, thus, what is done to, for, or against someone is an inherent function of a communication act. Such acts construct the events and objects of the social world through the exchange of coherent stories defining individuals and collective identities. Pearce (2004) has identified a category of conflict “between incommensurate social worlds,” for which the cultural resources of the participants differ so much that neither provides a sufficient basis upon which the parties can cooperatively deal with the conflict (p. 45).

CMM asserts that powerful deontic logics provide the primary instantiating force behind intercultural violence. Research utilizing TMT has affirmed this formulation by repeatedly demonstrating that MS results in sharpened negative reactions toward those who belittle or violate esteemed cultural imperatives. For example, Greenberg, Solomon & Pyszczynski (1990) led Christian participants to contemplate death or a control topic and then rate Christian and Jewish targets. Although the targets were evaluated equally by the control group, those in the MS condition expressed exaggerated hostility toward the Jewish targets. Subsequent research has demonstrated how MS influences behavioral consequences of outgroup hostility and exaggerates people’s active attempts to aggress against others who do not share their political orientation (McGregor et al., 1998).

*Ingroup Solidarity and the Media*

In opposition to compulsions toward hostility, are the human needs for affiliation, belonging, and respect. TMT shares Cooley's (1902) and Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionist perspective, suggesting that others in our social environment provide the context for negotiating our collective worldview. In theorizing how the mass media can be used to address these needs, Blumler & Katz (1974) and others have adopted a uses and gratifications (U&G) approach which has inspired a considerable literature examining the utility of various mass mediated channels, particularly television. Similar in basis to TMT, U&G suggests that humans seek to collectively negotiate their CWV, as well as gain a sense of existential security. Thus, beyond a means of contact with relevant events and conditions in the world and in our immediate surroundings, we use the media to gain insights into ourselves by identifying with those we admire, using them to model our behavior and reinforce our personal values (McQuail, Blumler & Brown, 1972).

Blumler & Katz (1974) assert that audience needs have communal and emotional origins. Thus, like TMT, they take a functionalist-motivational approach, assessing the use of media in terms of the gratification of social and psychological needs. Accordingly, U&G theorists argue that psychological needs influence how people use and respond to a given medium; different needs are associated with individual personalities, stages of maturation, backgrounds and social roles (McQuail et al., 1972). Simply stated, U&G suggests that we attain a sense of self as we adopt the norms of our culture through our media consumption. The media provide a means for social integration and social empathy by allowing us to gain insight into the circumstances of others—identifying with them as we gain a sense of belonging.

A TMT analysis would suggest that by guiding their audiences as they attempt to re-establish a secure system of meaning and worth, the media—particularly television and the Internet—play a vital role in directly marshaling the distal defensive reactions people have to the threat of terrorism. Moreover, by diverting our collective attention from the reality of death, the media may have an even greater impact on our proximal defenses. TMT would characterize such uses of the media as instances of “avoidant coping,” or “psychic numbing,” for they divert our collective awareness away from the ever-present, psychologically draining specter of human tragedy.

When the salience of death is heightened in the aftermath of a terrorist episode, we should expect people to rely on the media, particularly television, to distract themselves from the malevolent existential implications that follow such exceptionally ugly events. During particularly stressful times, we might expect increased channel surfing away from news reports, toward more frivolous programming content for those most sensitive to heightened death thought accessibility. In support of the notion that such distraction may in part serve to obscure the awareness of death, a series of experiments conducted by Arndt and colleagues found that MS

leads subjects to avoid being in a state of objective self-awareness (Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004; Arndt, Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998).

By “tranquilizing oneself with the trivial,” as Kierkegaard (1954) once put it, people may attempt to circumvent the psychological impact of the reality of death. Television may also afford us a useful method of anxiety reduction by creating grounds for both affiliation and discrimination. From a U&G standpoint, the most significant function of the media might be found in the social use of television as it impacts key relational issues associated with CWV maintenance. By establishing common grounds for conversation and value clarification, by modeling family solidarity as well as physical and verbal contacts, a key function of media consumption may be manifest through role reinforcement, relationship modeling and intellectual validation. A fruitful research direction might be to explore if or to what extent, in the years since the 9/11 attacks, Americans have increased their reliance for validation on these cultural well springs of modern media.

## **Conclusion**

Space considerations have limited the scope of this analysis to the examination of only a few of the many dimensions of terrorism that could be potentially illuminated by the conjunction of communication theory perspectives and terror management theory. Clearly there is much empirical work to be done. The possibilities are particularly intriguing within the domains of politics and social influence. In this vein, Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg (2004) recently demonstrated that MS enhances the appeal of charismatic leaders over those portrayed as task- or relationship-oriented. On a similar note, Landau et al. (2004) found that MS increased support for President George W. Bush (although not for Senator John Kerry), and that terrorism salience (i.e., reminders of 9/11) operates with identical effect on the popularity of the President. In a related vein, research is presently underway examining the effects of subliminal death and terrorism primes on first- and third-person effects regarding media consumption (Miller et al., 2005), and on people’s receptivity to and evaluation of positive and negative political campaign ads (Hansen & Miller, 2005).

Certainly there is potential for many practical and vital TMT and communication theory-related applications in need of study. We hope our analysis inspires more applied research into the causes of and preventions of terrorism at a root level—e.g., exploring the possibilities of inoculating Islamic youth against the virulent attack of fundamentalist extremism, or finding ways to discourage terrorist recruitment by equipping would-be initiates with satisfying systems of cultural heroism that do not entail the destruction of life. Additionally, future research at the interface of communication and TMT might shed light on the various reactions we have to terrorism, such as avoidant coping and the media, worldview defense and nonverbal behavior, and information seeking as it relates to the public’s receptivity to terror alerts and other security-relevant public service announcements.



## Note

- [1] For example, over 43,000 people perished during the December 26, 2003 earthquake in Bam, Iran, and over 500,000 Bangladeshis died in flooding caused by a typhoon in 1970. More recently, well over 160,000 are known to have died from the December 26, 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

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