



# Terror Management and Personality: Variations in the Psychological Defense Against the Awareness of Mortality

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## Abstract

Drawing on terror management theory (TMT), we discuss the psychological motivations that shape personality at two levels: the characteristically *human* personality common to us all and the *individual differences* that distinguish some people from others. TMT posits that the motivation to protect the self against deep-rooted fears about mortality drives people to maintain meaningful, reliable conceptions of reality and positive evaluations of themselves, two broad tendencies that form the foundation of every person's personality. We review studies showing that mortality reminders increase efforts to bolster cultural sources of meaning and self-esteem in similar ways across individuals and cultures. TMT also posits that individual differences in personality partly reflect the different sources of meaning and self-esteem that people invest in to assuage mortality fears. We review evidence that individual differences predict the degree and direction of people's defensive responses to mortality reminders. Directions for future research are discussed.

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Personality psychology is the scientific study of the whole person, and it aims to understand the person at three levels of analysis (McAdams & Pals, 2006). At the broadest level, it considers the psychological characteristics that the person shares with all other human beings. At a more specific level, it considers the characteristics that make a given person similar to and different from other groups of people. Most specifically, it considers the characteristics that make the person unique.

The purpose of this article is to show that personality is shaped in important ways by the individual's confrontation with life's one certainty: that it will inevitably end in death. Drawing on a social psychological theory called terror management theory (TMT), we propose that people's need to assuage fears about mortality provides the motivational impetus for their life-long quest to view themselves as valued members of a meaningful reality who will continue on in some fashion after physical death.

In the first section, we show how TMT can deepen our understanding of the person at the broadest level of human nature by explaining why mortality is a pressing psychological problem, and how it is 'solved' by all individuals along similar lines. In the next section, we propose that individual differences in personality traits partly reflect variations in the degree and direction of people's defensive efforts to cope with their mortality. The third section discusses future research directions, including the potential for TMT to enrich our understanding of individual uniqueness.

## The Psychological Foundation of Human Personality: Death, Culture, and Self-esteem

Terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004) is inspired by Ernest Becker's (1973) interdisciplinary analysis of why people universally seek out meaningful conceptions of reality and strive to view themselves as persons of lasting worth. Becker notes that humans are, like all living things, biologically predisposed to continue living, and yet, being symbolically aware of time and ourselves, we realize that we will inevitably die one day. The awareness of mortality in a creature striving to survive creates the potential to experience death-related anxiety, or *terror*. As John Cassavetes put it in the film *Shadows* (1959), 'Man in contrast to other animals is aware of his own existence, therefore conscious of the possibility of nonexistence. Ergo, he has anxiety.'

Drawing on psychoanalytic perspectives on defense mechanisms, Becker claimed that people avoid potential terror by denying that death represents absolute self-annihilation. Distilling Becker's rich analysis, TMT posits that people assuage mortality fears by sustaining faith in a *cultural worldview* and their own *self-esteem*. The cultural worldview is a personalized but largely culturally derived view of the world that imbues reality with structure, order, meaning, and the possibility of death-transcending significance to those individuals who subscribe to that worldview and fulfill its requirements for being valuable. Some cultural worldviews offer their members the opportunity to literally continue on in an afterlife (e.g., heaven, nirvana), while others provide opportunities to symbolically 'live on' through identification with valued groups (e.g., political parties, sports teams) and socially recognized achievements (e.g., a *Compass* publication). Self-esteem is an evaluation of oneself as meeting the worldview's standards of value and, consequently, qualifying for the lasting significance promised by the worldview to which one subscribes.

In essence, TMT posits that many central aspects of people's personality, including their interpersonal and group identifications, personal goals, and systems of beliefs and attitudes, function to assuage the universal fear of death. In this way, TMT accords with Sigmund Freud's (1923/1960) insight that personality is rooted in the defense mechanisms people employ to repress unconscious anxiety; but whereas Freud viewed anxiety as stemming from explicitly sexual conflicts, TMT considers fear of mortality the core psychic threat. TMT shares with phenomenological, humanistic, and existential perspectives the premise that an individual's personality is shaped by the interpretative structures he or she uses to impose meaning and significance onto existence and shares with cultural perspectives (e.g., Church, 2008; Triandis, 1989) the notion that these interpretive structures are heavily influenced by and filtered through the lens of the cultural milieu in which the individual was raised. But TMT uniquely adds that people are *internally motivated* to bring their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors more in line with their cultural worldview as a means of maintaining psychological equanimity in the face of death.

Empirical support for TMT comes largely from experimental studies showing that reminding people of their own mortality (i.e., inducing *mortality salience*; MS) increases their need for the psychological protection provided by the worldview and self-esteem, and instigates a wide range of cognitive and behavioral efforts to bolster those structures and defend them against threats (for a review of empirical support for TMT, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008). In one such set of studies, Greenberg et al. (1990) tested the effects of MS on Christian students' evaluations of fellow Christians and Jews. In the laboratory, Christian participants were asked to fill out some personality questionnaires and indicate their attitudes toward other participants. For half the participants, one of the

questionnaires asked them to respond to two items about their own mortality: *Describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you* and *Describe what will happen to you physically as you die and once you are dead*. All participants then received information about two other students, including their religious background: one appeared to be Jewish, the other a fellow Christian. The Christian participants who were not reminded of their own death showed no preference between the Jewish and the Christian student; but those reminded of mortality were especially favorable to the fellow Christian and especially negative toward the Jewish student.

Of course, from a TMT perspective there are many aspects of culture besides religion that provide terror-assuaging meaning. Accordingly, over 400 studies show that MS intensifies bolstering and defense of secular aspects of one's local culture. Importantly, these effects have been found in over twenty countries, including the US, Canada, Japan, Germany, China, Israel, and Australia. To mention a few examples, following MS: Hispanic individuals affiliate more with their ethnic group when that group is framed positively, and Dutch students favor their local soccer team and university (Castano & Dechesne, 2005); Italians view fellow Italians as constituting an entitative and enduring group (Sani, Herrera, & Bowe, 2009); Austrians prefer traditional Austrian art (Jodlbauer, Jonas, & Sullivan, 2009); Chinese participants show bias in resource allocation toward people from their native city and country (Tam, Chiu, & Lau, 2007); and Israelis show greater motivation to serve in the national military and endure hardships for the sake of their country (Taubman-Ben-Ari & Findler, 2006).

Research also shows that, across cultures and individuals, MS arouses various forms of self-esteem striving and defense (for review, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). In one relevant set of studies, Dechesne, Janssen, and van Knippenberg (2000) found that MS led Dutch individuals to view bogus feedback about their personality as more valid when it was positive, but not neutral, in valence. Across the Atlantic Ocean, Landau, Greenberg, Sullivan, Routledge, and Arndt (2009) found that MS heightened American students' tendency to write autobiographies that portrayed themselves as improving with time.

Research also makes a strong case that these effects are in fact defensive responses to heightened concerns with *mortality*, and not with some specific aspect of mortality (e.g., uncertainty) or any aversive ideation (see Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004, for further discussion). A substantial number of studies have found converging evidence for hypotheses derived from TMT utilizing diverse methods to increase the accessibility of death-related thought (e.g., subliminal death primes; proximity to funeral parlors; gory accident footage). Also, many studies have differentiated the effects of death primes from those of other potentially threatening primes, including pain, worries after college, social exclusion, meaninglessness, expectancy violation, and uncertainty.

To sum up so far, TMT posits that the foundation of personality for all persons lies in universal human strivings for meaning and self-worth. Evidence supporting this claim comes from studies showing that individuals representing diverse cultural backgrounds respond to MS with similar defensive tendencies to cling to aspects of their cultural worldview and bolster self-esteem. But within this seemingly universalist view of personality, how does TMT account for differences in people's characteristic modes of thought and action?

### **Individual Differences in Terror Management**

TMT was initially proposed to explain the role of mortality fears in motivating the characteristically human tendencies to pursue meaningful conceptions of reality and

positive evaluations of the self. Yet, since its inception, the theory has acknowledged that people differ in their capacity to sustain terror-assuaging meaning and self-esteem, and they also derive meaning and self-esteem from different types of ideas, activities, and experiences. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (1991) proposed that these individual differences in the degree and direction of terror management defenses could be characterized in terms of the traits that have been identified by personality psychologists. This analysis suggests how TMT and personality psychology can enrich each other: TMT can explain the underlying motivations behind personality traits, and the study of personality traits can offer novel predictions about which strategies different people characteristically use to manage mortality fears. Indeed, many lines of research have shown that individual differences predict the degree and direction of the defensive strategies people employ in response to mortality reminders.

### *Individual differences in defensive capacity*

If individualized sources of meaning and self-esteem defend against death thoughts, then variations in level of self-esteem or of estrangement from conventional meaning sources can be understood as differences in degree of defensive capacity. Understanding such individual difference variables as self-esteem, depression, and neuroticism in this way yields hypotheses concerning the extent to which different individuals should exhibit defensive reactions to mortality reminders. Accordingly, research has shown that individuals low in self-esteem, or high in depression or neuroticism, exhibit elevated levels of defensiveness after death reminders. In addition, studies suggest that anxiety disorders may develop partly because of a heightened susceptibility to experiencing terror in connection with death reminders. Research on attachment style and terror management extends this work by offering a developmental argument for how differences in defensive capacity arise in early life.

*Self-esteem.* TMT posits that self-esteem is the individual's primary psychological defense against the awareness of mortality. From this perspective, we can understand chronically high levels of self-esteem as indicating the presence of a strong psychological buffer against anxiety, and a relatively high threshold of susceptibility to death-related concerns. Conversely, low dispositional self-esteem indicates the absence of a strong anxiety buffer; people who do not feel like successful cultural contributors should be especially susceptible to the threat associated with thoughts of death and should respond to death reminders with strong defensiveness.

In support of this claim, Harmon-Jones et al. (1997) found that dispositionally low self-esteem predicted higher levels of worldview defense in response to mortality reminders. Specifically, whereas participants with moderate to low levels of dispositional self-esteem responded to MS with increased worldview defense, those with high levels of dispositional self-esteem did not. Schmeichel et al. (2009) recently extended this effect to implicit self-evaluations, showing that only Americans low in implicit self-esteem demonstrated pro-American bias following MS.

*Depression.* Depressed individuals are often characterized by a relative lack of faith in the meaningfulness of life and the world around them, or in their own capacity to meet the standards of value set by their culture (e.g., Beck, 1967). From a TMT perspective, high levels of depression indicate a tenuous attachment to the cultural worldview, which, like low self-esteem, can also heighten defensive tendencies in response to reminders of

mortality. Indeed, Simon, Greenberg, Harmon-Jones, Solomon, and Pyszczynski (1996) found that mildly depressed individuals exhibited exaggerated worldview defense after MS compared to nondepressed persons.

*Neuroticism.* Neuroticism, a key aspect of the five factor model of personality (McCrae & Sutin, 2007), refers to individual differences in negative affect and emotional reactivity. Individuals high (vs. low) in neuroticism report lower levels of purpose and meaning in life (Addad, 1987; Bond & Feather, 1988) and higher levels of death anxiety (Loo, 1984) and are more likely to ruminate about death and mortality (Abdel-Khalek, 1998). Thus, from a TMT perspective, high levels of neuroticism represent a heightened potential to experience mortality-related anxiety and predispose the individual to pronounced rigidity in their defenses against death fears (e.g., Goldenberg, Heflick, & Cooper, 2008).

Evidence for this claim comes from research showing that neuroticism predicts especially strong negative reactions to stimuli that TMT has linked to mortality concerns. For example, studies have demonstrated that MS heightens negative reactions to aspects of the human body that imply animal nature (e.g., excrement, reproduction), because these stimuli remind people that they are mortal animals (for review, see Goldenberg, 2005). If neuroticism represents a chronic vulnerability to mortality-related concerns, then we would expect that, among individuals high in neuroticism, reminders of one's animal nature should be especially likely to bring death-related thoughts to the forefront of consciousness. In support of this idea, Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenberg, and Solomon (1999) showed that individuals with high (but not low) neuroticism who were asked to contemplate the physical aspects of sex exhibited increased cognitive accessibility of death-related thought (as measured by a word-stem completion task). In addition, after MS, people high in neuroticism inhibit behaviors (like exercise) that encourage body awareness (Goldenberg et al., 2008) and avoid even pleasurable experiences that focus attention on the body (Goldenberg et al., 2006). These findings suggest that aversive reactions to stimuli linked to mortality, such as one's body, are not always universal and can be moderated by personality dispositions such as neuroticism.

*Anxiety disorders.* Drawing on these findings that individual differences moderate sensitivity to death-related stimuli and corresponding defensiveness, Strachan, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon (2001) reasoned that certain anxiety disorders might represent idiosyncratic attempts to cope with heightened susceptibility to death anxiety. People who have chronic difficulty keeping death-related ideation at bay may try to focalize their fear of death by displacing it onto objects, that are relatively easier to cope with (phobias), or by engaging in ritualistic behaviors as a means of establishing clear meaning and control (obsessive-compulsive behavior). Supporting this idea, MS increases phobic reactions to spiders and obsessive hand-washing in individuals predisposed to such behaviors (Strachan et al., 2007).

*Attachment style.* The psychodynamic roots of TMT point to the development of attachment style in childhood as another important factor in predicting differences in the capacity to defend against death thoughts (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). Children first look to their parents (and later other powerful social figures) as models of proper routes to pursuing worth and meaning, and also for validation that they (the children) are valuable players in a meaningful world. Insecurely attached children will have difficulty establishing an effective anxiety buffer in this formative stage, making terror management more

difficult later in life. Accordingly, Mikulincer and Florian (2000) found that while MS heightened belief in one's symbolic immortality among securely attached persons – a reaction indicative of effective terror management – avoidant and anxious-ambivalent individuals did not show this reaction. The researchers also showed that, compared to secure and avoidant individuals, people with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style showed heightened accessibility of death-related thought, suggesting that they have particular difficulty suppressing mortality concerns from consciousness.

Beyond predicting different thresholds of susceptibility to death-related anxiety, differences in attachment style also moderate which protective sources of meaning individuals draw on. For example, Cox et al. (2008) found that securely attached participants were more likely to turn to romantic relationship partners for emotional support after MS, while insecurely attached participants were instead more likely to rely on relationships with their parents to reinforce a sense of meaning after a death prime. Thus, we can conceptualize attachment styles as explaining differences in both degree and characteristic type of terror management defense. Research on another individual difference, personal need for structure (PNS), demonstrates further how individual differences in preferred sources of meaning can direct defensive responses to MS.

#### *Individual differences in sources of meaning*

Solomon et al.'s (1991) analysis suggests that individual differences in personality traits predict not only the individual's capacity to cope with mortality-related fears, but also the different sources of culturally derived meaning and self-esteem that individuals characteristically rely on to buffer mortality fears. Accordingly, multiple studies show that MS-induced defense of specific meaning systems is moderated by a host of theoretically specified individual difference variables, including authoritarianism and political orientation (see Greenberg et al., 2008).

The most widely researched personality trait in the TMT literature is personal need for structure (Thompson, Naccarato, Parker, & Moskowitz, 2001) – a dispositional preference for clear, coherent knowledge, and a corresponding aversion to ambiguity and disorder (a construct with roots in influential investigations of authoritarianism and 'closed mindedness'; Rokeach, 1960). Landau et al. (2004) reasoned that high-PNS individuals seek simple structure in their interpretation of the social world as a characteristic means of managing mortality fears, whereas low-PNS individuals are more tolerant of ambiguity and novelty. Accordingly, a series of studies showed that MS increased high-PNS participants' tendencies to seek out simple and consistent interpretations of other people, interpersonal relations, and social events, whereas MS did not prompt these structuring tendencies among low-PNS individuals.

One study in this series tested the hypothesis that high-PNS individuals are especially likely to derive terror-assuaging meaning from the belief that social events 'happen for a reason' – that is, that they follow a just and benevolent order whereby people generally get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). Participants read about a senseless tragedy and then had the chance to select which pieces of additional information about the tragedy they would read about. Critically, some pieces of information cast the victim of the tragedy in a positive light, others in a negative light. As predicted, among high-PNS participants, MS increased preference for negative information about the victim, presumably because viewing the victim negatively helps restore the belief in a benevolent order (see also Hirschberger, 2006). A follow-up study showed



that directly threatening just world beliefs by presenting participants with positive (vs. negative) information about a tragedy victim increased the salience of death-related thoughts, but only among high-PNS participants.

Other studies show that MS prompts high-PNS individuals to seek out well-structured interpretations of their own characteristics and experiences (Landau et al., 2009). For example, MS increased high-PNS participants' tendencies to organize their personal characteristics in a simple (vs. complex) fashion, and to seek continuity in their experience by drawing meaningful connections between past events and their current self-concept. Importantly, these studies also showed that PNS did not moderate MS effects on varied measures of self-enhancement, suggesting that PNS reflects people's tendency to invest in clear and confident knowledge as a source of *meaning*, and not primarily as a source of self-esteem.

Critically, recent research by Vess, Routledge, Landau, and Arndt (2009) demonstrates that low-PNS individuals are not simply less defensive overall; rather, they derive protective meaning from exploratory engagement with novel information, rather than from unambiguous structure. In one study, Vess et al. showed that low-PNS participants under MS exhibited increased interest in documentaries presenting novel perspectives on culturally relevant topics. Furthermore, after contemplating death, low-PNS individuals who imagined exploring an unfamiliar topic reported higher levels of meaning in life than those who imagined exploring a familiar topic (and high-PNS individuals considering either topic).

In sum, unlike the work on self-esteem, depression, and neuroticism reviewed earlier, research shows that individual differences in PNS do not reflect differences in the degree of terror management; rather, they reflect whether people derive terror-assuaging meaning from highly structured conceptions of the world versus novelty and exploration. This work supports the broader claim that individual differences in personality characteristics can reflect the different sources of meaning that people within the same culture rely on to assuage mortality fears.

#### *Individual differences in sources of self-esteem*

In addition to individualized sources of meaning, people invest in different bases for maintaining positive self-evaluations (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). The terror management research on sources of self-esteem has tended to focus on people's investment in specific types of activities or goals, rather than broad personality traits as we have been discussing so far. For example, Routledge, Arndt, and Goldenberg (2006) recruited participants for whom tanning was important to their self-esteem. They manipulated MS and, either immediately afterward or following a short delay, asked participants to rate their likelihood of purchasing a variety of commercially available sun lotion products. Immediately after being explicitly reminded of their mortality (relative to pain), participants indicated higher intention to purchase products with higher sun protection factors, presumably reflecting practical concerns about health. However, when sun-screen preferences were assessed after a delay, when self-esteem defenses have been shown to occur, MS participants actually increased their health risk by decreasing their intention to purchase products that offered high sun protection. Other studies show that MS effects are moderated in theoretically specified ways by individual differences in the extent to which people stake their self-esteem on their physical appearance, risky behaviors, academic achievement, displays of physical strength, and compassion to others (see Pyszczynski et al., 2004).

## Questions for Future Research

*What is the etiology of individual differences in terror management?*

Why do people differ in their characteristic strategies for coping with their existential fears? Why, for example, does David absorb the core values of his mainstream culture in a seemingly wholesale fashion with little questioning or conflict, while Sally endures a great deal of soul searching to creatively combine diverse cultural influences? Why does Jill derive psychological security primarily from well-structured knowledge, Lucas from moral 'purity,' and Melanie from achieving fame?

These differences are undoubtedly the result of many complex factors. Still, TMT provides a developmental analysis (see Solomon et al., 2004) that points to some speculations that could be fruitfully explored in future research. Returning to the integration of TMT and attachment theory, children learn that meeting parental standards of value leads to feelings of significance and security and that failing to do so leads to feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and anxiety. Parental standards of value ultimately reflect the parents' internalized version of the prevailing cultural worldview. Parents express approval and anxiety-quelling affection when the child acts in accordance with the worldview (e.g., conforming to social norms of conduct). In this way, the child's feelings of self-esteem and his or her acceptance of the parents' cultural worldview acquire their anxiety-buffering properties. Eventually, the developing individual becomes aware of the fragility of life and the inevitability of death, as well as the parents' limited ability to provide protection from this ultimate threat. Thus, the primary basis of security shifts from the parents to the culture at large as the person constructs an individualized version of the cultural worldview from the various elements of culture (e.g., authorities, institutions) to which he or she is exposed.

Like attachment theory, this analysis highlights the notion that the adult personality is organized around the childhood association between being 'good' and being 'safe,' but it goes further to claim that, as individuals become aware of their mortality, this association drives them to adhere to the local culture's prescriptions for being 'good.' One implication is that if the 'good = safe' association is poorly reinforced during childhood or fails to transfer over as the young adult negotiates a cultural identity, she may be chronically uncertain as to whether meeting the culture's standards for 'success' will qualify her for lasting significance.

What about the origins of individual differences in preferred sources of meaning and self-esteem? This analysis suggests that as young adults fashion a cultural identity from among the culture's ideological and occupational offerings, they will gravitate toward a cultural niche that allows them to gain socially validated value from exhibiting essentially the same behaviors that allowed them to secure the parents' affection during childhood. For example, a child raised in an environment in which being funny garnered affection (and thus security) might be predisposed, as an adult, to assuage mortality fears by being gregarious; whereas if during childhood 'cute = safe,' then physical appearance may become the preferred terror management strategy in adulthood.

Future work could profitably study whether variations in the person's ability to engage with cultural routes to meaning/value that are analogous to their childhood basis of security predict socially relevant outcomes (e.g., ideological rigidity) and global psychological functioning. Such work could shed light on the positive functioning of some individuals, but it might also further inform our understanding of problems like depression. For example, based on her upbringing, a person may come to view one domain as central for garnering death-denying self-worth, despite her not being particularly competent in that



area compared to others outside the family circle (such as a person who is encouraged by her parents to become an artist but is actually creatively stunted). This developmental account of the internalization of different terror management strategies explains why some individuals suffer from a paralyzing sense of worthlessness.

*How does TMT illuminate the unique individual?*

In this article, we have considered how TMT deepens our understanding of the person at the level of human universals and individual differences. But how might the theory help us understand the characteristics that make each person like no other? One way is by illuminating the psychological significance of each person's 'life story.' According to McAdams (1993), individuals are predisposed to construct autobiographical narratives that explain, to themselves and others, who they were in the past, who they have become, and who they are becoming in time. TMT suggests that the elements of a given person's life story – her goals, fears, ideological commitments, and so on – are given overarching meaning partly because they connect with an individualized but largely culturally derived conception of how to lead a life that will transcend death. That is, while the motivation to deny death is universal, each individual constructs a unique story that explains how she has made, or eventually will make, her lasting mark on the world.

*How do terror management motives interact with growth-oriented motives in personality?*

When considered in conceptual isolation, TMT provides an incomplete picture of personality. By itself, it is unable to explain the creative, growth-oriented, and self-expansive aspects of personality. Rather than emphasizing the person's defensive efforts to hide from his or her deepest fears, the humanistic perspective epitomized by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, as well as the more contemporary self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), emphasizes the person's potential to grow and change, to move toward a more fulfilling life. These theorists view the person as inherently motivated to cultivate her inner potentialities, seek out optimal challenges, and master and integrate new experiences. We believe a well-rounded understanding of the whole person must ultimately model the dynamic interplay between defensive terror management motivation and self-expansive growth motivation.

Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1995) and Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Goldenberg (2003) have attempted such a synthesis, drawing heavily on the insights of John Bowlby and especially Otto Rank (1932). They posit that throughout life there is a dialectical interplay between the motive for unique self-actualization and the desire to 'fit in' with a familiar, security-providing worldview. Starting from childhood, the individual is driven to gain a heightened sense of autonomy and incorporate new experiences into her sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 1995). However, creatively reinventing oneself in pursuit of greater autonomy (e.g., by befriending people with unfamiliar religious beliefs or ethnic backgrounds) means stepping outside of familiar systems of cultural beliefs that provide protection from existential fears. This can trigger aversive feelings of uncertainty, impelling the person to return to the security of her familiar cultural worldview, even if it means inhibiting her growth.

This analysis suggests that if the person has difficulty assuaging mortality-related fears, she will be inhibited from pursuing intrinsically motivated activities (Pyszczynski et al., 2003). If, as we proposed earlier, individual differences in trait self-esteem reflect variations in people's susceptibility to mortality fears, then we would expect low self-esteem

individuals to respond to MS by avoiding risky opportunities for creative self-expression that might expose their shortcomings, whereas high self-esteem individuals, who possess a stronger dispositional buffer against mortality concerns, should not hesitate from creative pursuits. Support for these hypotheses is reported by Landau and Greenberg (2006), who found that low self-esteem participants who thought about death (vs. an aversive control topic) opted to complete a relatively prescribed version of a creative task that offered little opportunity to show off their creativity or lack thereof. High self-esteem participants, however, did not show this cautious response. These results suggest that people avoid creative self-expression because it risks exposing their limitations and thus arousing anxiety, and trait self-esteem can provide individuals with the security they need to take risky creative ventures even when mortality is salient.

Additional research could profitably study how variations in other traits predict the person's balance between defensive terror management motives and intrinsically motivated tendencies for growth and self-expansion emphasized by humanistic perspectives.

## Conclusion

In this article, we used TMT to propose that a person's personality – the characteristic ways in which he or she makes meaningful sense of the world and strives for a sense of lasting personal value – is given motivational force from an underlying need to shield the self from the awareness of one's own mortality. We then argued that individual differences at various levels of analysis predict the strength of people's defensive responses, and direct which sources of meaning and self-esteem people cling to, when mortality is salient.

Although TMT was first proposed primarily as a social psychological approach to human motivation, the incorporation of individual differences into the theory has broadened its scope and provided a more detailed picture of the interplay of dispositions and situations in the common human struggle with mortality. Personality psychologists routinely examine the role of individual differences in predicting behavior, thought, emotion, health, and well-being. Placing such personality characteristics in the context of TMT further establishes the importance of human universals and individual variations in the person's life-long struggle with the grim realities of mortal existence.

## Short Biography

Mark J. Landau is an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at the University of Kansas. He currently pursues two lines of research. One draws on perspectives in existential psychology to study how people's concerns with mortality and other realities motivate them to construct meaningful conceptions of the social world and themselves. The other line of work uses perspectives on conceptual metaphor to study how people understand abstract social concepts in terms of dissimilar, typically more concrete concepts.

## Endnote

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