

Proximal and Distal Defense: A New Perspective on Unconscious Motivation

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Abstract

Death-related thoughts produce different effects on thought and behavior when they are in current focal attention and when they are on the fringes of consciousness. When such thoughts are conscious, people attempt to either remove them from consciousness or push death into the distant future by distorting their beliefs to logically imply that they have many remaining years to live. When such thoughts are highly accessible but outside current focal attention, people increase efforts to view themselves as persons of value living in a meaningful universe. In this way, awareness of the inevitability of death produces diverse effects

on human thought and behavior that bear little obvious resemblance to the problem of death.

Keywords

unconscious processes; defense mechanisms; terror management; self-deception

One of the least controversial propositions in all psychology is that people are not always aware why they do the things they do. If people did understand the causes of their behavior, there would be little need for a scientific psychology. However, the idea that human behavior is driven by powerful forces that bear little resemblance to the behaviors they affect is far more controversial. Recent research suggests that diverse hu-

man behaviors, ranging from altruism to aggression, from striving to conform to striving to be unique, are affected by a need to protect oneself from the potential for anxiety associated with awareness of the inevitability of one's own death. The evidence also suggests that death-related thoughts have dramatically different effects on behavior depending on whether they are in current focal attention or on the fringes of consciousness. This article explores the cognitive processes through which conscious and nonconscious death-related thoughts differentially affect human behavior.

TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY

Terror management theory (TMT; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) posits that people need self-esteem and faith in their cultural worldviews because these two psychological entities provide protection against a deeply rooted fear of death inherent in the human condition. Moreover, TMT suggests that these needs affect virtually all forms of human behavior. According to the theory, awareness of the inevitabil-

ity of death in an animal biologically programmed for self-preservation creates the potential for paralyzing terror. People avoid this fear by maintaining faith in a cultural worldview that provides an explanation for existence, a set of standards for what is valuable, and the promise of either literal or symbolic immortality to those who live up to these standards. Believing in and living up to the culture's standards produces self-esteem, which functions to protect individuals from the anxiety that awareness of their mortality would otherwise produce. Literal immortality is provided by aspects of the cultural worldview that directly address the problem of death and promise heaven, reincarnation, or nirvana to those who believe in the cultural worldview and live up to its standards. Symbolic immortality is provided by connections and contributions to entities greater, more powerful, and longer lasting than their individual selves, such as families, nations, churches, or other groups and institutions, such as science or the arts.

To date, more than 90 separate experiments conducted in seven different countries have supported TMT hypotheses. Research has shown that increasing people's self-esteem or faith in their cultural worldview makes them less prone to anxiety in response to threat. It has also shown that reminding people of the inevitability of death leads to greater striving to maintain both self-esteem and faith in the cultural worldview. (For a review of this research, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997.) People are generally unaware of the role that concerns about death play in their everyday behavior. Indeed, research has shown that thoughts of death produce distinctly different effects when they are conscious and when they are on the fringes of consciousness (for a review, see Pysz-

zynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

PROXIMAL DEFENSE

When people are consciously aware of their mortality, they defend against this problem with defenses that are logically related to the problem of death. They exaggerate their health and hardiness, distort information to imply that they are invulnerable to accident or disease, or promise themselves to quit smoking, go on a diet, and get more exercise. More often, they simply avoid such thoughts and work to suppress them when they arise.

Consistent with this latter notion, research has shown that having people contemplate their own death does not immediately produce an increase in the accessibility of death-related thoughts, but does produce such an increase after a delay and distraction. The fact that thoughts of death do not lead to immediate increases in the accessibility of other death-related thoughts suggests that participants may be suppressing such thoughts while they are in focal consciousness. Evidence supporting this conclusion comes from a series of studies in which participants were reminded of either death or a control topic while mentally rehearsing an 11-digit number. Rehearsing a number requires continual mental effort. Research by Wegner (1994) had shown that such cognitive loads interfere with thought suppression, so we expected that participants who were led to think about death while under high cognitive load would not be able to suppress the primed thoughts and would therefore exhibit an immediate increase in the accessibility of death-related thoughts. This is exactly what we found (for a review of this research, see Pyszczynski et al., 1999).

We use the term *proximal* to describe defenses that directly address the presenting problem of death thoughts in consciousness. One proximal defense is to remove such thoughts from consciousness. Another is to deny one's vulnerability through biased use of the rules of logic. Proximal defenses emerge when thoughts of death are in current focal consciousness, and fade rapidly as such thoughts fade from awareness. They "make sense." The problem with such defenses is that although they push the problem into the distant future, they do nothing to deal with the ultimate inevitability of death. For this more elusive problem, people need to embed themselves in something eternal.

DISTAL DEFENSE

TMT suggests that people solve this more elusive problem by believing in a cultural worldview and attaining self-esteem by living up to its standards. Being a person of value in a world of meaning provides the hope of literal immortality to those people whose worldview promises some form of afterlife and provides the hope of symbolic immortality to even those whose worldview eschews an afterlife. The capacity of self-esteem and the cultural worldview to provide such security is rooted in early socialization experiences, in which the helpless infant's fears are assuaged by the love, approval, and protection provided by the parents or other primary caregivers. Although this approval and affection is initially given unconditionally, as the child's capacities develop, the parents begin to provide more approval and affection when the child behaves in accord with the standards of the cultural worldview. Once the child acquires language, the parents provide verbal

rules that correspond to the culture's standards and use the cultural worldview to answer the child's emerging questions about how the world works. As socialization progresses, the protection that the parents provide is increasingly tied to the child's accepting the cultural worldview and behaving in accord with its dictates.

Gradually, children come to realize that their parents are mortal creatures with flaws and that there are things from which even their parents cannot protect them. At this point, they come to require protection from something larger and more powerful than their parents, and this protection is provided by the culture at large in the form of deities, group identifications, and social roles and institutions. Very gradually, children's own perceptions, evaluations, and beliefs, strengthened by the consensual validation provided by significant others and society at large, take on the ability to provide the protection formerly provided by parents. People are confident that their beliefs are correct and that they are indeed living up to the culture's standards when others agree with their beliefs and self-evaluations; as a consequence, they feel relatively free from anxiety. This confidence is threatened, however, when others disagree with them or criticize their behavior, thus leaving them susceptible to anxiety.

The process through which the cultural worldview and self-esteem acquire their anxiety-buffering properties begins long before the child is capable of understanding death. Although adults realize that death is inevitable even if their conception of the world is absolutely correct and they perfectly live up to all the standards of that worldview, they nonetheless continue to feel comforted when their self-esteem and cultural worldview are intact because the protection that

these psychological structures provide has little to do with rationality or logic. Rather, it is the early experiential connection between these structures and security that provides the feeling of safety. Research supporting the view that terror management is an experiential rather than rational process has shown that thoughts of death lead to increased defense of the cultural worldview when people are in a gut-level, intuitive mode of thinking but not when they are in a highly rational mode of thinking. Research has also shown that distal terror management defense emerges when thoughts of death are on the fringes of consciousness, but not when they are in current focal attention. This implies that the pursuit of self-esteem and faith in the cultural worldview are driven by unconscious death-related thoughts.

Our first hint that thoughts of death might affect behavior differently when they are unconscious than when they are conscious came from studies showing that the more subtle the reminder of death, the greater its effect on defense of the cultural worldview. To determine whether this difference arose because subtle death reminders produce less conscious consideration of the problem of death, we distracted some participants from their death-related thoughts and induced other participants to continue focusing on these thoughts before assessing defense of the cultural worldview in both groups and in a third group that was exposed to aversive control topics (pain or giving a public speech). All participants then read one essay praising the United States and one essay criticizing the United States and were asked to evaluate the essays and their authors. The size of the preference for the pro-U.S. essay over the anti-U.S. essay was used as the index of defense of the worldview. We found that

whereas distracted participants exhibited exaggerated levels of defense in response to individuals who threatened their worldview, those participants who continued thinking about death did not differ from the control group in their degree of defense of the cultural worldview. Thus, thoughts of death increase need for the cultural worldview primarily when they are on the fringes of consciousness.

To more directly assess this proposition, we (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997) compared the effects of reminders of death that were subliminal and supraliminal (i.e., below and above the threshold of consciousness, respectively). Some participants were presented with death-related or neutral words for 28 ms, too quickly to produce conscious recognition; other participants were induced to think consciously about their mortality. Extensive testing revealed that the participants who were exposed to the subliminal words were indeed unaware that they had been presented. Nonetheless, the subliminal death reminders increased both the accessibility of death-related words and defense of the cultural worldview (measured again by reaction to the essays about America). Unlike previous studies in which participants consciously contemplated their mortality, this study demonstrated an effect of subliminal death-related words immediately after stimulus presentation. Because participants never consciously perceived the death-related stimuli, delay was not required to produce increased defense of the cultural worldview—the death-related thoughts were already on the fringes of consciousness because they had never been consciously perceived.

Note that the subliminal death stimuli produced increases in both the accessibility of death-related thoughts and defense of the cul-

tural worldview. This correspondence has been found consistently across several different research paradigms: Experiential modes of thinking, delay and distraction, and low levels of self-esteem all increase both accessibility of death-related thoughts and defense of the cultural worldview. These results suggest that it is the heightened accessibility of death-related thought that stimulates the higher levels of defense of the cultural worldview. Moreover, following a reminder of mortality, participants given an opportunity to criticize a person who challenged their worldviews showed lower accessibility of death-related thoughts than did participants not given such an opportunity. This finding suggests that defense of the cultural worldview accomplishes its terror management function by reducing the accessibility of death-related thoughts.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that people cope with accessible but nonconscious death-related thoughts with increased defense of their cultural worldview. Such strivings increase as the accessibility of death-related thought increases and function to reduce the accessibility of death-related thoughts. When thoughts of death enter consciousness, proximal defenses that function to push such thoughts back out of consciousness are immediately activated. Once the thoughts are out of consciousness but still highly accessible (and therefore a threat to reenter consciousness), proximal defenses are no longer needed and bolstering of the worldview and self-esteem occur.

Recent research (Greenberg, Simon, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000) has supported this temporal sequence within a single study. We found that immediately after people are exposed to reminders of death, they rationally dismiss the personal relevance of a

threat to their longevity (proximal defense), but that after a delay, they do not do so. In contrast, after exposure to reminders of death, people defend the cultural worldview (distal defense) *only* after a delay. Because people report no conscious thoughts about death after such a delay, this study provides the most direct evidence to date for the notion that different types of defenses are activated by conscious and nonconscious threats.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING HUMAN MOTIVATION

TMT research documents that knowledge of the inevitability of death affects a diverse range of human behavior, including aggression, conformity, creativity, group affiliation, moral judgment, prejudice, risk taking, and stereotyping. This research also shows that the problem of death affects people in dramatically different ways when it is conscious and when it is on the fringes of consciousness. Whereas people cope with conscious thoughts of death in ways designed to directly address this problem, they cope with accessible but nonconscious thoughts of death by striving to be valuable contributors to a meaningful universe. An important question for future inquiry is whether other types of threats also produce differential effects depending on whether they are conscious or merely accessible. For example, do threats to self-esteem produce different types of defenses when one is dwelling on them than after they have faded from consciousness? Is it generally true that conscious threats of all types must be addressed directly and that compensatory defenses designed to bolster

other psychological structures emerge primarily when the threatening material is accessible but not in focal consciousness?

The idea that behavior is driven by powerful unconscious forces is not new. It is the foundation upon which all psychoanalytic theorizing is based. TMT developed out of this theoretical tradition; thus, it is not surprising that it shares this basic assumption. However, unlike classic Freudian theorizing, TMT does not assume that unconscious concerns are transformed into conscious thoughts and desires by a process that disguises semantic or superficial aspects of those concerns (e.g., substituting a pillar for a penis or a tunnel for a vagina). Rather, TMT suggests that people learn to assuage their fears by finding meaning in life and value in themselves. This meaning and value are provided by the culture into which people are socialized. Thus, the Rosetta stone for translating unconscious concerns into conscious goals and overt behavior lies in each culture's system of meaning and value. By seeking meaning in life and value in themselves, people avoid the deeply rooted fear that is the price the species pays for its intelligence and adaptability.

Recommended Reading

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Note

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Acknowledgments—This work was supported by National Science Foundation Grants SBR-9731626 and SBR-9729946.

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