A Terror Management Theory of Social Behavior: The Psychological Functions of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews

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Chapter 10

The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory

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True dignity abides with him alone
Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,
Can still suspect, and still revere himself,
In lowliness of heart.
William Wordsworth

Throughout the past few thousand years, historical accounts, philosophical treatises, and works of fiction and poetry have often depicted humans as having a need to perceive themselves as good, and their actions as moral and justified. Within the last hundred years, a number of important figures in the development of modern psychology have also embraced this notion that people need self-esteem (e.g., Adler, 1930; Allport, 1937; Horney, 1937; James, 1890; Maslow, 1970; Murphy, 1947; Rank, 1959; Rogers, 1959; Sullivan, 1953). Of these, Karen Horney most thoroughly discussed the ways people try to attain and maintain a favorable self-image. The clinical writings of Horney, and other psychotherapists as well, document the ways in which people attempt to defend and enhance self-esteem; they also suggest that difficulty maintaining self-esteem, and maladaptive efforts to do so, may be central to a variety of mental health problems. In this chapter, we will first review the research supporting the existence of a need for self-esteem. Then we will present a theory that accounts for this need and specifies the role it plays in a variety of phenomena including self-presentation.

Empirical Support for a Need for Self-Esteem

It was not until the early 1950s that researchers began to obtain quantitative evidence concerning the need for self-esteem. Since then, research on psychopathology has shown low self-esteem to be associated with a variety of psychological problems, including alcoholism, anxiety, depression, neuroticism, and schizophrenia (see Wylie, 1979, for a review). Such findings suggest that people do need self-esteem for healthy psychological functioning; however, this research is correlational and there-

fore subject to a number of alternative explanations. For example, it may be that psychological difficulties lead to low self-esteem, or that whatever factors contribute to such difficulties also cause low self-esteem.

The Self-Serving Bias in Causal Attribution

Clearer support for the existence of a self-esteem need has been found in experimental research, beginning with studies demonstrating a self-serving bias in individuals' causal attributions for their own successes and failures. These studies typically entail randomly assigning subjects to experience either a favorable or unfavorable outcome on a test and then obtaining their estimates of the extent to which potential causal factors such as ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty were responsible for their particular outcomes. The one highly consistent finding has been that individuals who experience success assign greater responsibility to factors within themselves (e.g., internal factors, such as ability) and less responsibility to factors outside themselves (e.g., external factors, such as luck) than do individuals who experience failure (e.g., Johnson, Feigenbaum, & Welby, 1964; Miller, 1976; Stephan, Rosenfield, & Stephan, 1976; also see Bradley, 1978, and Zuckerman, 1979, for reviews). Thus, as would be expected if people do indeed have a need for self-esteem, individuals seem to take credit for success but deny responsibility for failure.

Eliminating cognitive alternative explanations. In the last 10 years, however, a set of alternative explanations for this self-serving bias has received considerable attention. Miller and Ross (1975) proposed a number of cognitive mechanisms that could lead to a self-serving attributional bias in the absence of a self-esteem motive. Despite the fact that the notion of a need for self-esteem was the basis for all of the research on the self-serving bias up to that point in time, it was argued that such cognitive explanations are preferable because they rely only on the widely accepted information-processing framework for understanding human behavior (see also Nisbett & Ross, 1980). The most compelling of these cognitive explanations is that if individuals believe they are generally competent, they are likely to infer that when they perform competently it is because of their abilities, and when they perform poorly it is because of external factors.

However, since 1975, a number of studies have provided support for the self-esteem explanation of the self-serving bias. McFarland and Ross (1982) conducted a study in which subjects were led to attribute success or failure to either their level of ability or the characteristics of the test. Success-internal subjects reported more positive affect, less negative affect, and higher self-esteem than did success-external subjects; failure-internals, on the other hand, reported less positive affect, more negative affect, and lower self-esteem than did failure-external subjects. Correlational research (e.g., Arkin & Maryuma, 1979; Feather, 1969) and research using hypothetical outcomes (e.g., Nicholls, 1976; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978, 1979) have found similar effects. These studies show that the self-serving pattern of attributions does indeed increase the favorability of the consequences of outcomes for affective experience and self-esteem. If people are motivated to maximize positive affect and minimize negative affect, a motivational influence on attributions for performance outcomes is likely. Furthermore, self-serving attributions do seem to help the individual maintain self-esteem.

Other research provides more direct support for the self-esteem explanation by demonstrating that the intensity of the affective consequences of an outcome alters the extent to which people's attributions are self-serving. Stephan and Gollwitzer (1981) found that subjects led to believe a placebo pill they had taken would produce autonomic arousal were less prone to make self-serving attributions for a prior success or failure than were no placebo subjects. In a similar vein, Fries and Frey (1980) found that subjects were less likely to derogate a test after failure if they could attribute arousal caused by the failure to a nonthreatening source.

In another study, Stephan and Gollwitzer (1981) provided subjects with false feedback concerning their level of physiological arousal after a success or failure experience. Subjects led to believe they were highly aroused were more self-serving in their performance attributions than were low-arousal feedback subjects. Finally, Gollwitzer, Earle, and Stephan (1982) demonstrated that unlabeled residual arousal from physical exercise also increased the self-serving nature of subjects' attributions. Presumably, this residual arousal intensified subjects' perceptions of outcome-related affect, thus motivating them to become more self-serving in their attributions. To the extent that such affective consequences are attributed to the implications of the outcome for self-esteem, these studies show that the self-serving bias is mediated by self-esteem concerns.

Other Self-Esteem Maintenance Strategies

The resolution in favor of a motivational explanation for the self-serving bias is quite similar to the resolution of the earlier dissonance versus self-perception controversy. A number of studies have clearly shown that negative affect does play a role in attitude change after individuals feel responsible for engaging in behavior that has foreseeable negative consequences (see Fazio & Cooper, 1983, for a review). Interestingly, the findings of attitude change that have been attributed to a dissonance reduction process can be interpreted as resulting from a need to defend self-esteem (see Wicklund & Brehm, 1976, for a review of the dissonance literature). In virtually all of these studies, the attitude change can be viewed as a way for the individual to deny that he or she has done something that is either immoral or stupid (see Aronson, 1968; Bowerman, 1978; Schlenker, Forsyth, Leary, & Miller, 1980; Steele & Liu, 1983).

In recent years, a substantial number of other studies have also yielded findings supportive of the existence of a need for self-esteem. Phares and Lamiell (1974) and Berglas and Jones (1978) reasoned that if individuals try to protect self-esteem by attributing failures to external factors, when failures are anticipated, they may set up plausible external attributions by engaging in performance-inhibiting behavior prior to and during performance. Evidence for the use of this strategy, which Berglas and Jones (1978) have aptly labeled self-handicapping, has been obtained in a number of studies (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Frankel & Snyder, 1978; Kolditz & Arkin, 1982; Phares & Lamiell, 1974; Snyder, Smoller, Strenta, & Frankel, 1981; Tucker, Vuchinish, & Sobell, 1981). Such findings attest to the strength of self-esteem

needs, because they show that people will actually undermine their own chances for success to be sure that they have justification for a self-esteem-protecting external attribution should they subsequently fail.

Research has also demonstrated other types of efforts to establish self-esteem-protective attributions, by showing that individuals will report a variety of states and traits when they believe these factors could serve as excuses for subsequent failure (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Paisley, 1984; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1983; Smith, Snyder, & Handelsman, 1982; Smith, Snyder, & Perkins, 1983; Snyder, Smith, Angelli, & Ingram, in press). For example, Smith et al. (1982) and Greenberg et al. (1984) have shown that, for individuals who are highly concerned about possible failure on an upcoming test, reports of test anxiety are reduced if they are told that test anxiety does not affect performance on the particular test. Thus, individuals report more test anxiety when it can serve as an excuse for subsequent failure than when it cannot.

Studies have also shown that, under certain conditions, once a shortcoming on a specific dimension becomes salient, individuals compensate by overevaluating themselves on unrelated dimensions (e.g., Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Beck, 1986) or, if the dimension is very important to the individual, by engaging in positive self-descriptions regarding the threatened dimension (e.g., Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Thus, people alter their self-perceptions to maintain self-esteem when it is threatened.

Individuals also alter their perceptions of and comparisons with others to maintain self-esteem. Research on self-serving attributive projection has shown that people overestimate consensus for their poor performances and underestimate consensus for their good performances, especially when the performance is on an ability dimension of personal importance (Campbell, in press). In other words, when people perform poorly on an ego-involving task, they overestimate how many others would also perform poorly; when people perform well on an ego-involving task they underestimate how many others would also perform well. In addition to a self-serving bias in perceived consensus, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and LaPrelle (1985) have found a self-serving bias in information search such that, after receiving a performance outcome, individuals search more extensively for social comparison information if they expect to find that others performed poorly than if they expect to find that others performed well. It has also been found that when individuals are exposed to social comparison information, they prefer to compare themselves with others who have performed worse on a salient dimension than with others who have performed better (see Wills, 1981, for a review). Perhaps as a consequence of this downward comparison process, people believe they are better than average on a wide variety of dimensions (Felson, 1981).

Guided by a self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1980; Tesser & Campbell, 1983; Tesser & Moore, in this volume), Tesser and his colleagues have demonstrated a number of other ways in which individuals seem to adjust the nature of their social comparisons to protect self-esteem. This line of research has yielded some compelling support for the operation of self-esteem maintenance processes in social

behavior (see Tesser and Moore, Chapter 5, this volume, for a more complete account). Tesser and Campbell (1980) had subjects perform two different tasks with a confederate posing as another subject; on one of the tasks they performed equally but on the other task the confederate outperformed the subject. Subjects reduced the personal importance (i.e., relevance) of the dimension on which the confederate outperformed them, especially when the confederate had been described as similar to the subjects; thus, they minimized the threat to self-esteem of being outperformed by a similar other. Similarly, in a correlational study of high school students, Tesser and Campbell (1982) found that low performance in school relative to similar but not dissimilar classmates is associated with low ratings of the personal relevance of school performance. Further evidence that individuals deny the personal relevance of threatened attributes has been obtained by Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon (1982), Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) and Tesser and Paulhus (1983).

Tesser (1980) obtained evidence of a related process in male sibling relations. For males whose siblings were generally more competent than themselves, the closer the sibling was in age (and therefore the more appropriate for social comparison), the less the males perceived themselves as similar to their siblings. This inverse relationship was not found for males who were not less competent than their siblings. Presumably, males with superior siblings close in age attempted to deny the appropriateness of a threatening social comparison; consistent with this reasoning, these individuals also reported more friction in their relationships with their siblings than any of the other subjects in the study.

A laboratory study by Pleban and Tesser (1981) obtained further support for this process. They found that, when the performance dimension was low in relevance, the more a confederate outperformed a subject, the more the subject perceived the confederate as similar to himself or herself. This finding can be viewed as an attempt to bask in reflected glory, just as identification with a football team increases with success of the team (Cialdini et al., 1976). However, when the performance was high in relevance and, therefore, similarity would imply that a potentially threatening social comparison would be appropriate, the more the confederate outperformed a subject, the less the subject perceived the confederate as similar to himself or herself. As in the sibling study, when threatened with a self-esteem-damaging social comparison, individuals deny similarity to the potential comparison other.

Evidence for Self-Esteem Maintenance or Public Impression Management?

To summarize, a substantial body of evidence has accumulated suggesting that, in order to maintain self-esteem, we alter our self-referent causal attributions, our self-reports of states and traits, our performance-related behavior, our attitudes and beliefs, and our social perceptions and comparisons. Despite this impressive array of support for a need for self-esteem, an alternative explanation based on impression management warrants consideration. Indeed, much of the aforementioned evidence can be explained by a need to protect public image rather than private self-image. Instead of needing self-esteem, perhaps individuals simply need to maintain a positive image in the eyes of others. This reasoning has been used to explain the evidence

for the self-serving bias (Bradley, 1978), dissonance reduction (e.g., Schlenker et al., 1980; Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971; Tedeschi & Rosenfeld, 1981), compensation effects (Baumeister & Jones, 1978), and self-handicapping (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982). Research has shown that individuals do engage in a variety of behaviors to manage impressions for others (see Baumeister, 1982; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980; and Tedeschi, 1981 for reviews). Therefore, given the public nature of most laboratory research, it is possible that many of the findings attributed to a need for self-esteem actually resulted from self-presentational concerns about public image.

However, a number of recent studies have demonstrated the self-serving attributional bias under conditions in which attributions were unlikely to be influenced by such self-presentational concerns (Greenberg et al., 1982; House, 1980; Ries, Rosenfeld, Melburg, & Tedeschi, 1981; Weary et al., 1982). For example, Greenberg et al. (1982) created private success and failure by giving groups of subjects an intelligence test they could score themselves, and instructing them to conceal their scored answer sheets and keep them when they left the study. Subjects were then asked on an anonymous questionnaire to attribute causal responsibility to potential factors. In this way their attributions would have no clear implications for public image unless others knew whether they had succeeded or failed. Under these private conditions, a strong self-serving bias was found. There were also some indications that under public conditions the bias was weaker. Along with a private self-serving attributional bias, this study, and a study by Frey (1978) as well, found a self-serving tendency for subjects to privately evaluate a test as more valid if they had succeeded than if they had failed.

These studies suggest that a need for self-esteem, apart from a desire for public esteem, seems to underlie the self-serving bias. Recent research has shown that a number of other self-esteem maintenance strategies also function to protect one's private self-image. With regard to anticipatory attributional defenses, Greenberg et al. (1984) found that self-reports of test anxiety to set up an excuse for possible future failure occurred under anonymous conditions and, furthermore, did not occur when the incentive for success was high. The latter finding suggests that the self-reports of test anxiety were privately believed because they did not occur when subjects did not want their chances for success hindered; if the self-reports of test anxiety were simply to serve as potential public excuses, they would have been used even when subjects were primarily concerned with succeeding on the test.

It has also been shown that a general increase in the favorability of self-evaluations in response to a specific threat to self-esteem occurs even under conditions in which such compensatory self-inflation could serve no public impression management function (Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). Similarly, research has recently found attitude change after counterattitudinal behavior under bogus pipeline conditions and under private conditions, thereby supporting an intrapsychic explanation of dissonance phenomena over a public impression management explanation (Baumeister & Tice, 1984; Stults, Messe, & Kerr, 1984). Finally, Tesser and Paulhus (1983) have shown that individuals deny the ego relevance of a test they have failed even when they are led to believe that only they know they failed *and* that the experimenter believes they succeeded.

The findings of these studies cannot be accounted for by public impression management explanations such as those posited by Bradley (1978), Tedeschi et al. (1971) and others. Clearly, individuals do engage in a variety of strategies to maintain self-esteem even when public image is not at stake. However, this point is compatible with a number of self-presentation theories that propose that individuals have a need to present a positive image to themselves as well as to others (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1955; Schlenker, 1980). In fact, such a proposition is indistinguishable from the notion that people need self-esteem. These theorists simply conceptualize self-esteem maintenance as analogous to, and perhaps a special case of, maintaining a positive image for an audience. In contrast, we describe below a theory that conceptualizes public image maintenance as a component of self-esteem maintenance.

Threats to Public Image Threaten Private Self-Esteem

The evidence reviewed above suggests that, even when public image is not at stake, individuals use a number of strategies to protect self-esteem when it is threatened. However, it has also been found that, when an outcome *does* threaten public image, *private* efforts to protect self-esteem are especially vigorous (Apsler, 1975; Frey, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). Apsler (1975) found that, after females were embarrassed by engaging in a series of silly behaviors in the presence of an audience, they were especially likely to engage in a helpful act, even if no witnesses to their silly behavior would know of their helpfulness. Apparently, after damage to their public image, people need to engage in positive, socially desirable behavior—not to restore a positive image for those others, but to restore a positive image for themselves (self-esteem). Similarly, Gollwitzer and Wicklund (1985) have found that individuals threatened by undesirable personality feedback will describe themselves especially positively to someone unaware of the negative feedback, even if the subject believes the other person prefers people who are self-deprecating. Clearly, in this study, the subjects were not acting to gain public esteem but to restore self-esteem.

In addition, Frey (1978) demonstrated that the self-serving tendency to *privately* evaluate a test as more valid after success than after failure was stronger if the performance outcomes were public than if they were private. Similarly, Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) found that individuals greatly inflated the favorability of their self-images on a private measure of self-esteem after public failure but not after private failure. Finally, Tesser and Paulhus (1983) found that subjects who thought the experimenter believed they had performed poorly on a certain ability dimension *privately* reduced the personal relevance of the dimension, even if they knew they had actually performed well and the experimenter's belief was erroneous. Thus, even when *only* public image is threatened, individuals privately engage in self-esteem defense.

To summarize, the empirical research on self-esteem maintenance shows that individuals do engage in a variety of strategies to privately defend self-esteem when it is privately threatened. On the other hand, it has also been shown that, when public esteem is threatened, individuals are particularly likely to engage in private self-

esteem maintenance strategies. To explain these phenomena, as well as other evidence concerning self-esteem maintenance, and the evidence of the deleterious concomitants of low self-esteem, we require a theory that explains: (a) what self-esteem is; (b) why we need it; (c) how self-esteem is affected by public esteem; and (d) how the need for self-esteem affects social behavior.

A Terror Management Theory of the Need for Self-Esteem

Now that we have established the existence of a need for self-esteem and have reviewed a variety of its manifestations, we outline such a theory. Our theory is based largely on the writings of Ernest Becker, especially *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962), *The Denial of Death* (1973), and *Escape from Evil* (1975). Becker attempted to synthesize the ideas of a very diverse array of theorists in order to understand the dynamics of human social behavior. In doing so, he found that Alfred Adler, Norman Brown, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Charles Horton Cooley, Sigmund Freud, Erving Goffman, Karen Horney, Soren Kierkegaarde, George Herbert Mead, Friedrich Nietzsche, Otto Rank, and Harry Stack Sullivan had all arrived at certain very compatible insights concerning the role of self-esteem in social behavior. Becker built upon these insights in constructing his own theoretical conception of the human animal; consequently, the current theory has benefited from them as well.

The Cultural Animal

Becker (1962) proposed that the need for self-esteem is uniquely human, and exists because of our capacities for symbolic, temporal, and self-reflective thought. Although these attributes have greatly enhanced our ability to survive in a wide variety of environments, they have also led to some uniquely human problems (see M. B. Smith, 1978). Specifically, we have the capacity to wonder why we exist and to consider the possibility that the universe is an uncontrollable, absurd setting in which the only inevitability is our own ongoing decay toward absolute annihilation, which, to make matters worse, could occur at any moment because of any one of a variety of chance events.

Becker (1973, 1975) argued that we would be paralyzed with terror if we could not deny such a conception; therefore, over time, as our cognitive capacities increased, we developed cultural world views that imbued the universe with order, predictability, meaning, and permanence. As Becker noted, all cultures provide a description of how the world was created, a prescription for leading a good, meaningful life, and some hope of immortality (see Rank, 1950). Thus, each culture provides the individual with a relatively benign world view that allows for the denial of his or her ultimate vulnerability and mortality.

From this perspective, humans are not unique because they are social animals, but because they are *cultural animals*. Humans live within a shared symbolic conception

of the universe that is ultimately determined by culture, and yet is believed to be an absolutely accurate representation of reality by individuals within the culture. As the source of meaning and value, the culture provides the individual with a basis for valuing himself or herself. The individual can have a sense of worth to the extent that she or he satisfies the cultural criteria for being good (valuable). Thus, self-esteem consists of viewing oneself as valuable within the context of the universal drama conveyed by the culture.

Self-Esteem as a Cultural Anxiety-Buffer

> *I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,*
> *And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,*
> *And in short, I was afraid.*
>
> T. S. Eliot

But why do humans seem to have such a desperate and pervasive need to view themselves as valuable (i.e., to have self-esteem)? From birth through early childhood, the only basis of safety and security is the care from the parents. They satisfy needs and minimize anxiety. Indeed, human infants are completely dependent on their parents for survival. As infants develop into children, they begin to acquire self-consciousness; along with this, the warmth and care of the parents becomes increasingly conditional. Therefore, they develop an understanding that as long as they are good boys or good girls, they will receive good outcomes and be protected from bad outcomes by their apparently omnipotent parents; they also learn that if they are bad boys or bad girls, they risk loss of the ultimate care and protection of the parents and, perhaps, annihilation by them. Consistent with this reasoning, Rochlin (1965) has observed a transformation in children from dread of being abandoned to dread of being worthless. As a consequence of this perceived contingency, a positive self-concept becomes associated with feelings of warmth and security, and a negative self-concept becomes associated with terror (Becker, 1962, 1973; Sullivan, 1953). From this point on, in order to avoid feelings of terror, individuals must believe they are good (i.e., valuable); therefore, individuals need self-esteem to function with minimal anxiety.

For the child, this sense of equanimity consists of believing that he or she is of primary value to the parents. However, as the child's cognitive capacities increase, he or she begins to realize that there are outcomes from which the parents cannot protect him or her. The child may also begin to realize that his or her parents are vulnerable creatures who will eventually die and cannot protect the child from a variety of aversive experiences, including their own death. Thus, the child's basis for equanimity is undermined and new means of dealing with the terror of annihilation must be developed. At this point, it is not sufficient to be loved by the mortal parents; to restore equanimity, a superior basis of value and protection must be found. Fortunately, the culture provides such a basis by providing values, standards and roles, conceptions of the world as just (Lerner, 1980), and the possibility of immortality.

Essentially, once the task of imparting a sense of absolute value and, consequently, immortality, becomes too great for the parents, it is transferred to the religious and secular concepts, symbols, and authorities of the culture. Of course the parents greatly facilitate this transformation by virtue of their intentional and unintentional conveyance of the world view espoused by their culture. The child learns that, to minimize terror, he or she must believe he or she is valuable and deserving within the context of the culture to which he or she subscribes; thus, for the adult human, self-esteem is a cultural-anxiety buffer.

Consistent with this conceptualization of self-esteem as an anxiety-buffer, a number of researchers have found that individuals who are chronically low in self-esteem are especially prone to anxiety (e.g., Bledsoe, 1964; French, 1968; Lipsitt, 1958; Rosenberg, 1965; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972; Truax, Schuldt, & Wargo, 1968; Winkler & Myers, 1963). The research reviewed earlier, showing that a state of arousal labeled as negative affect mediates self-serving attributions and test evaluations following failure and attitude change following counterattitudinal behavior, also supports this idea (for self-serving beliefs, see Fries & Frey, 1980; Gollwitzer, Earle, & Stephan, 1982; Stephan & Gollwitzer, 1981; for dissonance phenomena, see Fazio & Cooper, 1983, for a review). From the present perspective, these findings occurred because, by threatening self-esteem, failures and counterattitudinal behaviors weakened individuals' cultural anxiety-buffers and thereby engendered anxiety. We are suggesting, then, that the psychological significance of such events goes far beyond their implications for the specific domain in which the threats occur. This point is supported by the research demonstrating that under certain conditions individuals compensate for failures by generally inflating the favorability of their self-images (e.g., Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985).

The Two Components of Self-Esteem

To summarize, because we can conceive of our ultimate vulnerability and mortality and can anticipate a variety of horrifying experiences, we have the potential to be paralyzed by terror at any moment in our lives. By elevating us above the rest of the living world, and providing a view of the world as orderly, predictable, meaningful, and permanent, culture allows for the possibility of minimizing our terror by denying our essential creatureliness (i.e., our impotence, vulnerability, and mortality). This possibility is realized to the extent that we can feel we are valuable members of the culture.

From this perspective, self-esteem is an anxiety-buffering sense of personal value (or heroism, as Becker refers to it) that consists of two components: first, faith in a particular cultural drama that portrays human life as meaningful, important, and enduring; and second, belief that one plays a significant part in that drama. Each component is essential for self-esteem and, thus, for adequate terror management.

It is fairly obvious that events that suggest we have shortcomings can threaten our self-esteem; however, events that suggest that our cultural drama is not absolutely valid threaten self-esteem as well. If the standards by which we imbue ourselves with value are questioned, our personal claims of value are questioned as well. Therefore, we propose that a substantial portion of our social behavior is directed toward either or both of the following two goals: sustaining faith in a cultural drama that provides the basis for self-esteem and maintaining a sense of value within that cultural world view. It may be fruitful, then, to consider the possible role of each of these two goals in social behavior. In considering these issues we find it useful to distinguish between general maintenance processes and defenses against threat. In order to keep the anxiety-buffer provided by self-esteem, one must continually reaffirm one's value and one's faith in the absolute validity of one's world view. This facilitates one's ability to cope with specific threats when they arise. When threats do occur, the urgency of maintaining one's anxiety-buffer is greatly enhanced and a wide range of defensive strategies aimed at defusing the threat or repairing the damage it produced may be used.

Sustaining faith in the cultural drama. General maintenance. Volumes have been, and still could be written on the innumerable ways in which faith in a given culture is developed and maintained. We will not even attempt here to do this topic justice, except to mention a few basic modes of cultural affirmation. Most socialization and education of children serves to instill the values and world view of the culture. Formal and informal historical and religious teachings may be particularly directed toward conveying a cultural conception of reality that provides order, meaning, and the possibilities of significance and immortality.

Cultural symbols (e.g., in the United States, government officials, churches, monuments, flags, currency, religious and historical artifacts) and cultural rituals (e.g., in the United States, singing the national anthem, going to church, visiting historical locations and theme parks, following news and sports events, fashion, and entertainment) also play major roles in maintaining our faith in the reality, significance, and permanence of the cultural drama, because they objectify it and demonstrate social consensus.

Defenses against threat. This theory implies that any experience that suggests that our cultural drama is wrong, or that other versions of reality are equally valid, threatens self-esteem and is therefore a source of anxiety. Consequently, such experiences motivate us to eliminate the threat; by so doing, we can sustain faith in the basis of our self-esteem.

Such threats can result from environmental events; for example, when one's culture predicts the world should end on a certain day but it does not. As Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) have observed, such dramatic disconfirmations of a central aspect of one's cultural world view often lead to renewed efforts to convince oneself of the validity of the threatened belief. Threats to one's cultural drama more commonly result, however, from the knowledge that others do not subscribe to the same cultural drama. For example, outgroups often have very different beliefs and values from the cultural mainstream. We suggest that the pervasive tendency of ingroup members to display negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward out-

group members is an attempt to defuse the threat to one's own beliefs implied by the existence of the outgroup.

Quite consistent with our theory, a substantial body of research has shown that this bias against outgroup members results largely from the belief that they have different cultural values and beliefs (e.g., Byrne & Wong, 1962; Goldstein & Davis, 1972; Moe, Nacoste, & Insko, 1981; Rokeach, 1968; Rokeach & Mezei, 1966; Silverman, 1974; Stein, Hardyck, & Smith, 1965). It has even been found that, with the possible exception of intimate contacts, outgroupers who seem to share the ingroup's values may be liked just as much as ingroupers (e.g., McKirnan, Smith, & Hamayan, 1983). It is when individuals are confronted with others who view the world quite differently that they are threatened and consequently react negatively.

Our theory suggests that such negative reactions are increasingly likely the more compelling the alternative conception of reality appears to be and the more committed the outgroupers are to their views. The awareness of such people is threatening because they call into question the absolute validity of one's own cultural drama; the individual cannot maintain a sense of absolute personal value if the basis of such a judgment is merely one of a wide variety of subjective world views, none any more correct than the others. History is replete with examples of cultural efforts to eradicate such threats, ranging from derogating to proselytizing to annihilating. In fact, most, if not all wars can be viewed as battles to determine whose cultural terror-shield is the right one (e.g., the Crusades, the wars between Moslems and Jews, Hindus and Moslems, Protestants and Catholics, and the United States and the Soviet Union). Consistent with this position, we suggest that, although political and economic considerations have certainly played a role in many armed conflicts, it is the *ideological* threat upon which leaders focus to motivate masses of people into battle.

Although threats to the cultural drama at the intergroup level may be particularly dramatic, such threats may be significant at the interpersonal level, as well. Even within a given culture, particularly a large heterogeneous culture with highly differentiated roles, value discrepancies among its members are likely. Although, for simplicity's sake, we have referred to the cultural drama upon which self-esteem is based as if it were the same for everyone who is technically a member of a particular culture, clearly this is not the case. For example, for a professional football player, performance on the field is highly valued; the world of football is a substantial part of the basis of his possibilities for self-esteem. In contrast, the ability to read Latin may seem to be a completely worthless skill to him. On the other hand, for a philosophy professor, understanding Latin may be a source of self-esteem; he or she may believe that football is a completely inane and absurd activity. Both individuals may share certain cultural values, such as dedication and integrity, yet their respective views regarding what is important may undermine each other's basis of self-esteem.

Consequently, it is rather unlikely that these two people would like each other, unless they altered their views. In general, then, our theory implies that, even within the context of the overall culture, others whose views are dissimilar may threaten our basis of self-esteem and therefore engender negative reactions. Consistent with this idea, a large body of research has shown that the more dissimilar

another person is, in terms of important attitudes, beliefs, and values, the less an individual will like and help the person and the more willing an individual will be to hurt the person (for reviews, see Byrne, 1971; Rokeach, 1968).

It also has been shown that people try to convert persons with deviant opinions and, if that fails, they reject such persons (Schachter, 1951). Reactions of this type to those who do not display uniformity, conformity, or obedience follow directly from our theory. Rejection of deviants occurs even when their deviance seems to be innocuous. One of the most common examples in U.S. culture is rejection of those who do not maintain their appearance in accord with cultural prescriptions for a particular role or situation. If one is working for an accounting firm, one is required to wear the right type of clothing, and it must be unwrinkled and in good condition. Official dress requirements are much more lax for some occupations, such as college professors. However, if a new faculty member should be seen conducting his duties wearing shorts and unmatched socks, his or her colleagues are likely to be bothered by this, and may even request that the person wear more "dignified" apparel.

Such deviant behavior poses no direct, concrete threat to the well-being of the individuals disturbed by it. The threat exists at a symbolic level. Such behaviors (as well as less and more extreme acts of deviance) threaten the values underlying the cultural prescriptions that have been violated. If individuals derive self-esteem from viewing their occupation as a highly valued cultural role, then someone with the same occupation who has the appearance of a transient or a "common laborer" poses a threat to their cultural anxiety-buffer. The threat may also be more general in that someone who does not maintain an appropriate appearance is, in a small way, challenging the absolute rightness of the cultural way of life (the hippies, as a group, seemed to be viewed as such a threat in the United States in the 1960s). Minor threats of this nature can usually be defused through derogation (e.g., the person can be labeled oddball, nerd, geek, eccentric, neurotic, etc.). Unfortunately, more serious threats may engender such behaviors as ridicule, efforts at conversion, brainwashing, ostracism, beatings, and killings.

Maintaining a sense of personal value within the cultural drama. General maintenance. We are proposing that self-esteem is entirely a cultural creation. People cannot have a sense of self-worth without meeting the requirements of value prescribed by the cultural drama to which they subscribe. Such prescriptions consist of both general standards and more specific role expectations (for both occupational and social positions). The general standards specify certain competencies and moral attitudes that all members of a given culture need to demonstrate. Other requirements for value, however, differ among members of the culture, depending on their ascribed and chosen roles. Similarly, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) have proposed and found support for the notion that individuals vary in their requirements for self-completion (i.e., self-definitional needs) as a function of their chosen self-defining goals (e.g., to be a musician). From the present perspective, these self-defining goals are ways to attain and maintain cultural value; in other words, they are roles from which individuals attempt to secure their self-esteem.

To the extent that self-esteem derives from living up to shared cultural standards

and role expectations, approval from others signifies that we have met these standards and thus are indeed valuable. As Festinger (1954) suggested, such reliance on social reality is especially likely to occur when objective sources of information about one's value are unavailable, as is the case with most culturally valued attributes. Therefore, the affection, attention, and approval that people receive from others within their culture are very important sources of a sense of personal value. Thus we suggest that much self-presentational behavior is motivated by a desire to maximize the favorability of our own self-evaluations; the more approval and the less disapproval that we receive from others, the easier it is for us to privately believe that we are valuable individuals.

The human propensities for conformity, uniformity, and obedience, which have been demonstrated in a variety of contexts, are consistent with this idea, especially given the negative reactions to deviance discussed earlier (e.g., Asch, 1958; Gergen & Wishnov, 1965; Jones, Gergen, & Jones, 1963; Milgram, 1974; Stires & Jones, 1969). Other research has shown that individuals respond positively to those who praise and like them and negatively to those who disapprove of them (e.g., Berscheid & Walster, 1978; S. C. Jones, 1973; Kenny & Nasby, 1980; Shrauger, 1975).

Perhaps the most potent form of approval occurs when one is loved; therefore, mutual love relationships may be primary sources of self-esteem. In such cases, individual A imbues individual B with great value; if B wants and needs A, then A can perceive himself or herself as valuable as well. In other words, the more a person loves his or her partner, the more his or her partner's love adds to his or her sense of personal value. This may account for the intensity of familial and romantic love in most, if not all cultures. Interestingly, in Western culture, love is often lauded as magical, transcendent, and eternal (see Rubin, 1973), thus making it a particularly suitable basis for minimizing existential terror. As Becker (1973) noted, the one problem is that one's sense of equanimity then becomes dependent on the romantic partner. Perhaps this is why people will do almost anything to preserve good relationships; from this perspective, the negative feeling when such a relationship is threatened, which we call jealousy, is anxiety engendered by the threat of loss of an important source of self-esteem.

Children also play a major role in maintaining a sense of personal value. As many theorists have suggested (e.g., Becker, 1962; Rogers, 1959; Sullivan, 1953), the child's sense of value is derived from the parent's (or parents') love; but offspring provide parents with a tremendous sense of value as well. Parents can take credit for the existence of these creatures; therefore any value they perceive in their children and their behaviors (from being cute to saving the world) imparts value to the parent(s). In addition, parents know they are needed by their children and are almost constantly reminded of this. Finally, parents can derive a sense of permanent value and immortality to the extent that they view their children as extension of themselves who can eventually have their own children, ad infinitum. These ideas can help explain the intensity of parental concern for their children's well-being, prosperity, and adherence to the parents' cultural drama.

In general, then, individuals can feel valuable to the extent that they feel needed. Therefore, a person can build and maintain self-esteem by being helpful to others,

particularly others who have been deemed by the culture to be particularly worthy of help. Helping imparts a sense of value both because of the approval it generates from others and because of one's private sense of living up to cultural standards of goodness.

There are also more tangible bases of value in most cultures. For example, in the United States a wide variety of material symbols of value exist, most of which indicate one's financial status (e.g., jewelry, clothes, automobiles). For most members of American culture, material wealth is a prime indicator of success in the cultural drama. Such a basis of self-esteem may be particularly appealing because it allows for visible, tangible, and enduring symbols of one's worth. In small and large ways, Americans may build their own pyramids.

Perhaps individuals can also establish a sense of worth vicariously through identification with real and fictional cultural heroes. By identifying with someone special and important, especially someone who has defied death, one can attain a feeling of being significant and immortal, even if only momentarily. This may be particularly likely to occur when a culture is having difficulty providing self-esteem for its people. Under such circumstances, people may flock to an individual with heroic qualities and a clear alternative world view to establish or restore a sense of their own value. This may help explain why certain historical figures gained so many dedicated followers (e.g., Gandhi, Hitler, Jesus).

Similarly, it may be that the appeal of much entertainment derives from the portrayal of heroism (see Bettelheim, 1977; Campbell, 1968). Heroes in literature, film, television, and sports also allow us to share the glory. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this is the Spanish bullfight, in which the heroic matador, as the representative of the culture, defies death by "vanquishing" the terrifying bull; however, this analysis applies equally well to a variety of spectator sports, films, and works of fiction. Such portrayals of heroism may also help individuals frame their own lives within a heroic context (e.g., in the United States, one could be the Bob Hope or Richard Pryor of teachers, the Dr. J. of shortorder cooks, the John Wayne of computer troubleshooters, or the Clint Eastwood of politics).

Similarly, participatory forms of entertainment, such as gambling, video games, board games ("Dungeons and Dragons" may be a rather extreme example of this), theater groups, and participatory sports provide individuals with contexts in which they may attain a temporary sense of heroism (i.e., self-esteem). Thus, leisure activities may be enjoyable primarily because they allow individuals to bolster their cultural anxiety-buffers.

Each of these modes of attaining self-esteem probably varies with regard to the strength and durability of the sense of personal value that it confers. An inspiring movie may provide a couple of hours' worth, bringing one's partner to orgasm a couple of days' worth, and saving someone's life a couple of months' worth. However, the effects are always transitory, making self-esteem maintenance a complex and taxing problem. People adapt quickly to whatever they have already attained; therefore, a sense of personal value is a tenuous, day-to-day proposition (see Brickman & Campbell, 1971). Consequently, people have a virtually constant need for reminders or new indicators of achievement and being loved. The athlete needs to come through in the next pressure situation, the millionaire businessman needs to keep

accumulating money, the Don Juan needs new romantic conquests, and the parents need continual affection from their offspring.

Defenses against threat. Our theory implies a number of conditions that may threaten self-esteem and consequently require some form of defense to minimize anxiety. Clearly, self-esteem will be threatened whenever individuals become aware that some aspect of themselves may undermine their efforts to fulfill a valued role, be desired by others, gain social approval, avoid disapproval, or accumulate symbols of worth. A particular activity will therefore be ego-involving to the extent that it has potential for providing information concerning attributes relevant to the individual's ability to be a valued participant in his or her particular cultural drama. Our previous discussion has shown that, when individuals are anticipating, or have experienced, failures on tasks, they alter their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in a variety of ways to protect self-esteem.

Aside from specific failures, events that generally heighten self-awareness may also make potentially threatening shortcomings salient. Recall that Becker proposed that the capacity for self-awareness is largely responsible for the human potential for existential terror; it is when we are self-aware that our creatureliness and our isolated existence is salient. Therefore, it is when we are most self-aware that we should be most concerned with being valued participants in the ongoing cultural drama. Consistent with this reasoning, a substantial body of research has shown that, under conditions of heightened self-awareness, individuals are much more likely to act in accord with salient internalized cultural standards (see Buss, 1980; Carver & Scheier, 1981; and Wicklund, 1975, for reviews) and also to defend self-esteem from the threat of failure (Hull & Levy, 1979; Kernis, Zuckerman, Cohen, & Sparafora, 1982).

Our analysis so far implies that, although the basis of self-esteem threat consists of its implications for *cultural* value, the threat can consist of *private* awareness of a culturally relevant shortcoming; therefore private failures can threaten self-esteem and private ways to minimize the threatening implications of such failures can protect self-esteem. Thus, our theory is consistent with the previously discussed research demonstrating private efforts to defend self-esteem. However, the theory can also account for research showing heightened private self-esteem defense when a shortcoming is known to others; the opinion of others provides a link to the shared cultural drama from which self-esteem is derived. Being of value means living up to shared cultural standards; if others who are fellow participants in, and validators of the cultural drama do not believe we are meeting those standards, our own beliefs that we are doing so are threatened. Self-esteem is therefore threatened whenever individuals become aware that some component of their value as perceived by others within the culture falls short of their own perception of that component. This explains why public awareness of a shortcoming leads to especially vigorous private attempts to defend self-esteem, even if, as in the Tesser and Paulhus (1983) study, the individual knows that such public awareness is based on erroneous information.

It follows, then, that self-esteem concerns are aroused not only in achievement

settings, but in virtually any social situation. Theorists have often noted that individuals try to establish and maintain a particular positive social identity in the public arena (e.g., McCall & Simmons, 1978). Along the same lines, Goffman (1955) has discussed the need to protect the "sacred self" by maintaining face in all social encounters. More recently, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) have argued that public acknowledgment is necessary to anchor one's self-definition in social reality. Quite similarly, Baumeister (1982) has proposed that one of the two major functions of self-presentation is to establish and maintain a preferred self-concept (self-construction). All of these ideas are quite compatible with our proposition that self-esteem is a sense of value that is culturally created and maintained. Whereas each of these approaches is unique in some ways, they all explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that the favorability of social image will directly influence the favorability of private self-image; from our perspective, this is because self-esteem is a function of perceived cultural esteem, which, in turn, is reflected largely in the appraisals of others. Thus, self-presentational behavior is not only designed to garner specific rewards and avoid specific punishments from a particular present audience—it is also designed to maintain and bolster self-esteem.

This idea is highly consistent with the research on interpersonal attraction and self-presentation mentioned in the above discussion of general maintenance. It can also help explain a wide variety of everyday experiences. When a teacher addresses his or her first class, the teacher's concerns about doing well and the associated anxiety are far greater than would be expected if outcomes from the particular audience were all that is at stake—clearly a potential threat to self-esteem is involved. When a lonely man, alone in a bar, refuses to approach attractive women because he is "afraid of rejection," clearly what he is avoiding is not merely negative outcomes from the particular denizens of the bar, but a threat to self-esteem.

In fact, a wide variety of social behaviors, some trivial, some very serious, are influenced by our needs to protect self-esteem. Toward the trivial end, concerns about self-esteem may keep people from buying porno magazines or from dancing in public. Toward the serious end, they may keep someone in dire need of counseling from seeking such nelp. Finally, an extreme example can be seen in Japanese culture, where a traditional response when one's public image has been severely undermined is suicide; an honorable death, which is deemed worthy by the culture, may be preferable to life without the cultural anxiety-buffer.

In each of these instances, and innumerable others, we can see the powerful influence self-esteem needs exert on social behavior. Phenomenologically, people in these situations modify their behaviors to minimize negative feelings that are described variously as anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, humiliation, nervousness, and shame. Although a variety of theorists have assumed these reactions occur (e.g., Goffman, 1967), and a few have briefly addressed their source (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967), theories directed toward explaining these phenomena are rare. Following Becker (1962, 1973), our theory posits that these feelings are a leakage of the basic existential terror from which self-esteem protects us. Threats to public image threaten one's value in the cultural drama, thereby undermining one's basis of equanimity.

Conclusion

Summary

We have reviewed the research supporting the existence of a need for self-esteem and have attempted to account for these findings with a theory that explains what self-esteem is, why we need it, and how the need for self-esteem affects social behavior. Briefly, we propose that culture reduces the terror engendered by awareness of our vulnerability and mortality by providing a shared symbolic conception of reality that imputes order, predictability, significance, and permanence to our lives. This cultural drama provides the possibility of leading a meaningful and enduring existence; equanimity is attained only when a person believes that she or he is a valued participant in such a cultural drama. This attitude, which is referred to as self-esteem, serves the essentially defensive anxiety-buffering function of imbedding the individual within a transcendent cultural drama. Stated simply, self-esteem gives people a basic sense of security that is needed very badly.

Strengths of the Theory

We have attempted to show how this theory can provide a powerful explanatory framework for a wide variety of social psychological findings. We also believe that, because the theory focuses on the relationship between the individual and culture, it can account for a broad range of phenomena that have not been, or cannot be addressed by other social psychological conceptions of human behavior. It has been noted that social psychology has traditionally been an ahistorical and acultural discipline (see Gergen, 1973; McGuire, 1973; Sampson, 1978). Therefore, many issues concerning past and ongoing human events have been ignored or dismissed as beyond the bounds of legitimate psychological discourse and, thus, have been left to historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists. In contrast, by exploring the psychological functions of culture, the terror management theory suggests that historical, cultural, and economic behaviors cannot be understood without considering the psychological needs of the individual. By doing so, perhaps the theory can aid the slow process of integration of the social sciences toward a full understanding of human behavior.

Research implications. We also believe that the theory has considerable potential for generating empirical research. We are currently examining the proposed anxiety-buffering property of self-esteem by bolstering or threatening self-esteem in a variety of ways and assessing subsequent affect and behavior in potentially anxiety-provoking situations. Another direction we are taking is assessment of the effects of heightened salience of creatureliness and mortality on propensities to protect self-esteem and adhere to cultural values. Interestingly, Paulhus and Levitt (in press) have recently found that subtle exposure to affect-laden words, such as death, coffin, guts, and blood, led individuals to evaluate themselves in an especially favorable manner.

We also hope to assess how direct threats to self-esteem may lead people to bolster such things as cultural values, group identification, and the tendency to like similar

others and reject dissimilar others. Conversely, we are also considering the possibility that heightened group identification decreases the threat to self-esteem of a particular task outcome, and that threats to group identification or other aspects of one's cultural drama intensify the need to bolster self-esteem.

Another direction we hope to take is to assess the role of public knowledge in self-esteem threat. For example, our theory implies that performance on a task that is initially viewed by the individual as trivial may become ego-involving if others seem to value good performance, especially if the others are similar to or valued by the individual. Similarly, when individuals perform potentially embarrassing acts, the extent of embarrassment should covary directly with the perceived similarity and value of the audience. We are also studying the effects of entertainment activities on self-esteem. We could go on, but the main point is that the theory can generate a variety of testable hypotheses, and therefore, judgments of its validity will ultimately depend on the outcome of ongoing and future empirical work.

Final Thoughts

One general implication from this theory is that a variety of mental health problems may result from the individual's inability to maintain a cultural anxiety-buffer, because of loss of faith either in one's ability to maintain a valued role within one's cultural drama or in the cultural drama itself. Thus cultures can be evaluated by examining how well they fulfill the responsibility of providing a compelling conception of reality that allows the greatest number of individuals within the culture to derive self-esteem, with the least expense to others inside and outside the culture. If this idea could be kept in mind, along with acknowledgment of the ubiquitous need for a sense of personal heroism (Becker, 1973), perhaps societies could evolve more effective and benign ways for all of us to manage our basic terror.[1]

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[1]We would like to reemphasize that we derived our theoretical analysis largely from the writings of Ernest Becker. However, in adapting and applying Becker's ideas to serve our purposes, we have probably neglected and oversimplified many of his insights. Therefore, we strongly urge individuals unfamiliar with Becker to read his books, especially *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962), *The Denial of Death* (1973), and *Escape from Evil* (1975).

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