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Terror Management Theory in response to Terrorism

Unquestionably, terrorism appears in a myriad of fashions in today's world. With the approaches and methodologies changing and, (some would say becoming more sophisticated and tactical), the way we react to these threats and dangers matters more than ever. When discussing the implications of terrorism and its influence, we must also consider the psychological, behavioral, and cognitive effects on the human psyche, as well as the perceptions we hold of ourselves, others, and the world. As terrorist groups are constantly evolving and surfacing, our reactions and thought processes towards ourselves and others are evolving as well –and whether we like it or not, the omnipresent threat of terrorism is a crucial reminder of our changing schemas, our mortality, and the way we view death. It is then salient to develop an understanding of *Terror Management Theory* and *Cognitive-Behavioral Theory,* two models that aim to explain and predict human judgement, decision-making, behavior, as well as thought-processes –and how these relate to terrorism as a whole.

If you are going to die, why go to school? If you are going to die, why show up to work, the gym, dinners, parties…social events? Why do anything at all? Death has the power to render life meaningless, insignificant, and worthless. One can reason, "Why bother, I'm just going to die anyway…" This is crucial, as *Terror Management Theory,* (abbreviated TMT), deals with this existential, unnatural, and incapacitating idea. To further explicate, humans are all faced with *mortality salience* –the concept that death is inevitable, and our mortality is certain. Mortality salience evokes feelings of angst, dread, anxiety, and trepidation within us because our survival instinct is conflicting with the awareness that we are all going to die one day. That is to say, we

experience some cognitive dissonance when faced with the fact of death. TMT begs the question of how we manage the terror, as well as what buffers we have in place to combat this anxiety and alleviate dread. Two important buffers to note are cultural worldviews and self-esteem, both being intricately connected.

Cultural worldviews are salient because they help us cushion the idea of death. They offer us answers to our philosophical questions regarding life, death, and where we stand in "the grand scheme of things". Cultural worldviews provide us with rituals, practices, and sacraments that connect us to the sacred, and flip our switch from individual frameworks to being part of something bigger. They offer us a promise of immortality, or everlasting life, if you will. Subsequently, we partake in these practices and engage in communities of likeminded people and it makes the thought of death a little less scary. Moreover, cultural worldviews offer us standards to live up to. What was once, "What is the point, life has no meaning because I'm going to die, anyway…" has turned to, "My life has meaning because I am a good person and have heaven to look forward to when I die…" Consider this. TMT predicts that when humans live up to high standards set in place by a religion, cultural framework, or institution, their self-esteem increases –and in return, death-related anxiety is alleviated.

This concept makes sense. If I live up to a standard set in place by my religion, whether that be going to church every Sunday, giving to the poor, receiving sacraments, etc., I will consider myself to be a good person; and in return, I will feel good about myself, associate myself with those whose worldview reinforces mine, as well as exile those whom I don't see eye-to-eye with. Furthermore, I may even discriminate against those who have opposing worldviews, as mortality salience and TMT predict this.

Intriguingly, TMT isn't the only theory that discusses humans' reactions and behaviors concerning terrorism. *Cognitive Behavioral Theory,* abbreviated CBT, is the model that suggests that our behaviors, emotions, and thoughts are all complexly connected. That is to say, what we do and what we think about affects how we feel. CBT also predicts that we hold *schemas* in our minds. Schemas are imperative for humans and greatly affect how we see the world. They provide frameworks and contexts to experiences, objects, people, places, and other things we come across in our day to day life. Fascinatingly, we can develop schemas about ourselves, as well. We must reason, though, how do we *create* schemas and how are they related to terrorism?

As schemas provide the context and meaning behind everyday objects, people, and ourselves, we must integrate different information to create the schema itself. This process is called assimilation. If I am a child and see a door, a glass pane, and a wall or metal frame separately, and step outside and look up at a skyscraper, my brain will amalgamate, or assimilate, this information together and provide me with the schema of *skyscraper.* Certainly, skyscrapers are not the only large structures that have doors, windows and are built with metal. Say I see a cruise ship next and mistake it for a skyscraper (because it contains the same framework). My brain will accommodate this new information into this existing schema of mine in order to differentiate the two. Accommodation is just that: altering the existing schemas in the mind in order to integrate new knowledge. This can be significant when discussing how our schemas change in response to terrorist attacks…

Traugott et al. (2002) is a journal that goes into detail of exactly how Americans responded, as a whole, to the September 11th terrorist attacks. Using the *How Americans Respond* survey, or HAR, the primary purpose of the study was to measure pre-attack nationwide data to post-attack data. Notwithstanding this, the conductors of the study also put a strong emphasis on

measuring how this traumatic event affected Americans as a whole, affirming that many had access to the media and watched in horror as the graphic events unfolded that day –including children. There are a myriad of substantial findings in this study. I believe that the most noteworthy is that following the attacks, Americans developed a "lost sense of personal safety and security", and interestingly, was correlated with their psychological mental states, support for government procedures, as well as economic behavior (Traugott, 2). This could be a possible schema change. Another finding I found interesting is civic engagement. Interestingly, volunteering and charitable activity remained unchanged, with every one in seven Americans participating in benevolent acts for aid organizations. This data contradicts data taken within the first few weeks following the attacks, where there was a noticeable increase of charitable acts. It seems that following the attacks on 9/11, Americans exhausted their volunteering efforts relatively quickly.

Notwithstanding this, these results bring up a thought-provoking point on TMT predictions as well as schema changes following terrorist attacks. TMT predicts that when faced with mortality salience, we tend to surround ourselves with others that reinforce our cultural worldview, while ousting and discriminating against those who oppose it. The results in *Traugott et al. (2002)* exemplify this exceedingly. In the HAR survey, ethnic groups associated with the terrorist attacks, (such as Arab Americans, Muslims, and Middle Eastern Americans), received less favorable ratings than Hispanic, Asian, and white Americans. Also, this data proved to be stronger for groups lying outside of the United States. These findings align with TMT predictions because Americans are being reinforced by their cultural worldview –whether that be patriotism, loyalty, or nationalism— and are discriminating towards those who, even though weren't associated with the attack at all, are Muslim-American or belong to an ethnic group as such.

Albeit Americans after 9/11 attacks exhibited indicators that support TMT, they also experienced important schema changes that are worth discussing. The first being trust in others. It was reported that half, approximately 51% of Americans, were more trusting in others than they had been a year earlier. This schema was assimilated before 9/11, and after the attack, was most likely accommodated in respect to each American's viewpoint on the attack. Secondly, it should be noted that following the attacks, Americans felt a loss of personal safety and security. This is a momentous schema change.

Americans like security. We love our comfort, relaxation, and feelings of ease that come with security. We have built up schemas that place a heavy importance on secureness and ease of mind. However, these schemas were threatened substantially after 9/11, as many Americans accommodated their existing schemas to a new threat, and a new world. We must consider how the September 11th attacks systematically and fundamentally changed the world, the fabric of American society, as well as our perception of safety. Furthermore, it should come as no surprise that the schemas we held regarding safety and security were changed because of the danger and jeopardy posed to American society. The September 11th attacks propelled us into a world where we *should be* thinking about our personal safety and security, and as the saying goes, "There was America before 9/11, and there was America after 9/11".

Lastly, discrimination against ethnic groups is a schema change in of itself. Seeing the attacks on television, Americans accommodated their preconceptions and schemas regarding ethnic groups and Muslim-Americans to deeming them less-favorable, and possibly as dangerous as the ones executing the attack. Although not explicitly stated in the article, there have been numerous other journals and studies published that elucidate on the schema-change of discrimination and prejudice against those who are ethnically similar to the 9/11 attackers.

While terrorism is a threat that puts American lives in danger and challenges our way of life, the repercussions on the way we think, cognize situations and other people in our day-to-day lives, as well as our view of death should be discussed in-depth. Terrorism reminds us of death, its inevitability, and the salience and permanence it holds for each of us. In return, we hold close certain cultural beliefs and groups that can buffer this dread and anxiety. Furthermore, this threat seems to be rather ubiquitous, and although unlikely for you and me, it allows us to think about how our schemas change and our responses to mortality salience. Continuing to research this fascinating phenomena would be of utmost interest and importance, and could give us clues to better understand the cognitive processes and judgements we make in our day-to-day lives.