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Do People Need Self-Esteem? Comment on Pyszczynski, et al. (2004)

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In spite of impressive empirical evidence consistent with aspects of terror management theory (TMT), several fundamental assumptions of the theory remain untested or lack support. Specifically, research guided by TMT has not demonstrated that 1) people need self-esteem, 2) pursuing self-esteem is an effective means for reducing anxiety, 3) that pursuing self-esteem helps people achieve their important goals, 4) that having or pursuing self-esteem is the only way to deal with anxiety to achieve important goals, or 5) that death is the real issue driving the pursuit of self-esteem. We suggest that there is a different paradigm for thinking about death, one in which awareness of one's mortality serves as a precious reminder of the limited time one has to accomplish one's most important goals. All of these questions can be addressed with empirical research.

Terror management theory (TMT) proposes that humans need self-esteem to manage their existential anxiety about death (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, in press). Without self-esteem, people would be overwhelmed with terror resulting from awareness of the inevitability and unpredictability of their own death. This terror can be paralyzing; without some mechanism to manage and reduce it, people

would lack the "fortitude to carry on" (Pyszczynski et al., in press). In other words, the problem with awareness of the inevitability of death is that conscious or unconscious reminders of death create anxiety that can be paralyzing. Therefore, according to the theory, people need self-esteem to buffer the anxiety and avoid being paralyzed by it, so they can move forward toward their important goals. To get self-esteem, people must believe in a cultural worldview that specifies standards for what makes a person valuable, and they must believe they satisfy those standards.

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We are persuaded by the evidence that mortality salience typically increases anxiety, defense of the cultural worldview, and self-esteem striving, and we are further persuaded that boosts to self-esteem temporarily quell existential anxiety about death. Terror management researchers have conducted a very large number of studies on these points, and systematically addressed a wide range of criticisms and alternative

interpretations of their findings. Nonetheless, we find ourselves with lingering doubts. In this article, we articulate the reasons for our doubts, with the goal of raising questions for research.

Do People Need Self-Esteem?

Whereas TMT takes as its starting point that people need self-esteem and asks, “why?” we start with the question, “do they?” The assumption that people need self-esteem is based on hundreds of studies demonstrating the tendency to maintain, enhance, and protect self-esteem. But to infer that because people often do something, they need to do it—to go from description to prescription—is an inferential leap. Although this leap has been made by many others regarding the need for self-esteem, it remains a stumbling block, because TMT does not provide evidence that self-esteem is a need. Implicit in TMT are the assumptions that pursuing self-esteem is an effective solution to the problem of anxiety, that it helps people achieve their important goals, and that pursuing self-esteem is the only means for doing so. If these assumptions do not hold, we would suggest that pursuing self-esteem is one strategy for dealing with anxiety about death, but it is not needed for this purpose.

Is Pursuing Self-esteem an Effective Solution to the Problem of Anxiety?

According to TMT, people need self-esteem to quell their anxiety about death, so they pursue self-esteem, trying to prove that they have worth by demonstrating that they satisfy contingencies of self-worth. We question whether pursuing self-esteem is an effective solution to the problem of anxiety. When people seek to prove their worth and value by demonstrating that they meet the standards of value specified by their cultural

worldview, and satisfy contingencies of self-worth, their behavior has many costs to themselves and other people. When their self-esteem is at stake, people are motivated to succeed, but they react to threats or potential threats in ways that are destructive or self-destructive (Crocker & Park, in press). The pursuit of self-esteem can actually exacerbate anxiety. For example, regardless of their actual grades or level of self-esteem, students who base their self-esteem on their academic performance report more time pressure, conflicts with professors, dissatisfaction with their performance, and less intrinsic motivation (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003). Thus, pursuing self-esteem does not seem to solve the problem of anxiety.

It is true that when people achieve success in the domains in which their self-esteem is staked, they experience a boost to self-esteem, an increase in positive affect, and a decrease in negative affect, including anxiety (Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn, & Chase, 2003; Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). But even significant success in domains in which self-worth is contingent provides only a temporary boost to self-esteem and decrease in negative affect. For example, although college seniors who base their self-esteem on academics show a boost in self-esteem and a reduction of negative affect when they are admitted to a graduate program, the boost to self-esteem lasts at most a few days, and then returns to its baseline level (Crocker et al., 2002).

If people pursue self-esteem to relieve their anxiety about death, it is not surprising that the relief would be short-lived. Boosts to self-esteem do not solve the real problem; instead, we see pursuing self-esteem as an attempt to escape the anxiety similar to drinking alcohol or taking drugs (Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995). It is not surprising that once the boost to self-

esteem dissipates, the anxiety returns, because the real problem—the inevitability and unpredictability of death—remains. As a result, the pursuit of self-esteem becomes relentless—the anxiety always returns, necessitating another boost to self-esteem, requiring ever greater successes and accomplishments to achieve (Crocker & Nuer, 2003). Pursuing self-esteem to relieve anxiety is like running on a treadmill—despite enormous effort, one never really gets anywhere.

Does Pursuing Self-esteem Facilitate Important Goals?

According to TMT, people need self-esteem as a means to avoid being paralyzed by anxiety, so they can accomplish their important, non-self-esteem goals. Yet, research suggests that when people pursue self-esteem, they often create obstacles to accomplishment of their most important goals. Self-handicapping is an excellent example of creating barriers to one's own success for the sake of protecting or enhancing self-esteem by creating an excuse for failure (Tice, 1991). Students who have the goal of validating their intelligence show a downward spiral of performance in a difficult course if they are not initially successful (Grant & Dweck, 2003). People who pursue self-esteem through others' approval and regard often create rejection, rather than acceptance or love. Although reassurance seeking may, in the short term, relieve anxiety about social inclusion when it elicits the desired reassurance from others, over time people who are high in reassurance-seeking tend to be rejected by those who are close to them (Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992). Similarly, people who are high in rejection sensitivity anxiously expect rejection and are vigilant for it; because they are vigilant they quickly see it and they overreact, causing others to reject

them (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). People who doubt their romantic partner's regard for them act in ways that undermine their relationships (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001). In sum, instead of facilitating the accomplishment of goals, or creating safety and acceptance, the pursuit of self-esteem can create the opposite of what people want.

In our view, rather than helping people achieve their important goals, the pursuit of self-esteem causes people to lose sight of their most important goals; people confuse the means with the end. On the one hand, people can become so preoccupied with proving that they are not worthless that they lose sight of other goals, such as connecting with others, that can actually create safety and well-being over the long-term (Crocker & Park, in press; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). On the other hand, the high of positive emotion that comes with boosts to self-esteem, the feeling of being great, can become addictive, and people pursue self-esteem to get that high (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). The desire to validate self-worth can blind people to goals that would in the long run increase well-being and satisfy fundamental human needs (Crocker & Park, in press). In this sense, high and low self-esteem are two sides of the same coin, because both high and low self-esteem people pursue self-esteem by trying to prove that they are worthy, not worthless, and in both cases they lose sight of other goals.

Are there Alternative Means for Dealing with Anxiety to Achieve Goals?

Implied in TMT is the notion that self-esteem is not merely one option for dealing with anxiety, but rather the only strategy people have at their disposal to deal with anxiety—otherwise, self-esteem would not be a need, it would be an option.

However, there are other ways to deal with anxiety and help people move forward with their goals when they are afraid, including mutually supportive relationships that provide a secure base or safe haven, and very clear and inclusive goals.

Secure attachments. Secure attachments provide an alternative means to relieve anxiety, without the need to pursue self-esteem. When caregivers are available and responsive to the needs of infants and children, those children develop a mental model of the self as worthy of love and care, and a mental model of the caregiver as reliable and trustworthy; they grow up with a sense of felt security that regulates emotional distress and facilitates learning and exploration. In this framework, children do not need to continually prove their worth and value to elicit caregiving. In contrast, when caregivers are unavailable, unresponsive, or inconsistent in their caregiving, children grow up with insecure attachment styles, with a lack of trust in others that creates a sense of felt insecurity (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). The development of felt security in childhood, and mutually caring relationships in adulthood, is an alternative means for dealing with anxiety that does not require constantly proving one's worth and value.

Consistent with this view, Mikulincer and his colleagues have provided evidence that priming thoughts of secure attachments and the maintenance of close relationships provides an alternative mechanism for quelling existential anxiety about death (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). For example, priming relationship security attenuates negative reactions to outgroups (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001). Mikulincer argues that close relationships function as a separate mechanism from self-esteem and cultural world-view defenses. Thus, secure

attachments provide one alternative for dealing with anxiety about death.

Clear, inclusive goals. But we would go a step further, and argue that it is not always necessary to have a buffer against anxiety before people can act on their important goals. Although a person giving a public speech may be anxious about being judged or criticized by others, many people with great fear of public speaking nonetheless manage to speak in public, sometimes very effectively, because they have a clear and compelling motivation. Performers often step on stage and sing their hearts out in spite of stage fright. Parents sometimes have difficult conversations with their children in spite of fears that their children will reject them. In other words, with the right motivation and a clear enough goal, it is possible to move forward toward important goals in spite of fears. Goals that include what is good for others as well as the self can be particularly useful for going forward in spite of fears—as much as one might be willing to compromise the goal to avoid facing one's fears, knowing that it can be important to others can provide a crucial source of motivation, and reason to persist (Crocker & Park, in press). If Nelson Mandela wanted to end apartheid only because it would be good for him as an individual, surely he would have compromised his goal during his years of imprisonment. At present, our evidence for this suggestion is mainly anecdotal; research could examine the quality of goals that enable people to move forward in spite of their fears.

One might argue that pursuing goals that are good for others and the self is simply another indirect means of obtaining self-esteem. We agree that the pursuit of goals that include others can result in increased self-esteem as an unintended consequence. But, in our view, the intention is crucial; if one pursues inclusive goals

with the intention of raising one's self-esteem, the pitfalls of pursuing self-esteem will follow (Crocker & Park, in press). Only by letting go of the goal of having self-esteem and saying "so what?" to fears and anxieties that are assuaged by self-esteem can the costs of pursuing self-esteem be avoided.

Is Death the Real Issue?

We wonder whether any research in TMT really tests the idea that the only or even the main driver of the self-esteem system is anxiety about death. In general, the research strategy in TMT has been to show that reminders of death increase defense of the cultural worldview and the pursuit of self-esteem, and that high trait self-esteem or temporarily boosting self-esteem decreases vulnerability to reminders of death. But in our view, these types of studies cannot address the larger question of whether death anxiety is the *raison d'être* of the self-esteem system. Convincing people of some form of existence after death reduces the effects of mortality salience manipulations (Dechesne et al., 2003). But this simply affirms that the effects of mortality salience manipulations are a result of concerns about death. Would this manipulation also eliminate self-esteem striving in response to other events, such as social rejection, uncertainty, or threats in domains of contingent self-worth?

A more telling test of whether death anxiety is the only important driver of the pursuit of self-esteem would be research showing that solving the problem of death leads people to stop pursuing self-esteem altogether. Researchers could investigate this issue by examining whether people who believe in an afterlife pursue self-esteem. From a terror management perspective, belief in life after death should eliminate the need for self-esteem. Alternatively, if

researchers could convince people that they would not die, for example by telling them that scientists are on the verge of discovering the genetic basis for aging and death, and therefore to extending life expectancy indefinitely, would people stop pursuing self-esteem? If the pursuit of self-esteem is driven by anxiety caused by awareness of the inevitability and unpredictability of death, then these manipulations should eliminate the pursuit of self-esteem.

Even if people were guaranteed that they would never die, we predict they would continue to struggle to find meaning and value to give direction to their lives. Perhaps the fundamental human existential dilemma is not anxiety about death, but finding meaning, purpose, and value in life that give a reason and a direction to go forward (Frankl, 1984; Wong, 1998). As evolutionary psychiatrist Randolph Nesse explains,

According to the principles of resource allocation developed by workers in behavioral ecology, every animal must decide at every moment what to do next—sleep, forage, find a mate, dig a den...People also must make decisions about where, when, and how to invest their resources" (p. 34)

The human capacity for cognition and self-awareness enables people to question the meaning and direction of their lives, and to consciously choose their goals. Having meaning and direction in one's life, having goals, and working toward daily goals that are consistent with longer-term life goals is associated with enhanced well-being (Emmons, 1991; King, 1998; King, Richards, & Stemmerich, 1998), whereas the loss of meaning and direction, and hopelessness about achieving goals, are hallmarks of depression (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Nesse, 1991; Wong, 1998). The loss of meaning and value associated with depression is linked not to *fear* of death, but to increased suicidal

thoughts—without meaning and purpose, people seem to lose not only the direction in their lives, but also their will to live.

Is There a Different Paradigm for the Problem of Death?

According to TMT, either people pursue self-esteem or they are overwhelmed with anxiety about death. TMT research shows that mortality salience often creates anxiety and self-esteem provides a buffer for that anxiety, consistent with this view. We suggest that although this is a common strategy for dealing with the problem of death, there is a different paradigm, one in which death is not a source of anxiety and paralysis, but a source of energy, resolve, and enthusiasm. Although some people are paralyzed by fears of death, in our experience others are inspired by awareness of their mortality to move forward with even greater effort toward their highest priority goals. The difference between them, we suspect, is that people who are paralyzed by reminders of death are unclear or unsure of the meaning and purpose in their life, and lack clear goals, whereas people whose efforts increase have a sense of meaning and purpose, and a clear view of their goals and priorities. With a clear sense of purpose and strong goals, the possibility that one might have only one year, or one day, or 20 minutes to live can be a reminder to focus on the most essential goal at every moment. In this paradigm, awareness of one's mortality is not a source of fear, but a source of inspiration. Thoughts of death are not something to avoid, but a precious reminder of the limited time each person has to accomplish their goals, and a reminder not to waste the time one has. In this paradigm, goals do not provide a buffer to self-esteem; self-esteem is no longer even a relevant question. Instead of becoming frightened by the inevitability of death, it is an awareness

to hold onto and use an anchor to move forward.

Conclusion

TMT has been an extremely generative theory. Yet, despite the large number of studies that support various aspects of the theory, it has in some respects remained isolated from a great deal of research and theory on the self. In spite of empirical evidence consistent with aspects of the theory, several fundamental assumptions of the theory remain untested or lack support. Research that tested these assumptions could greatly strengthen the empirical basis for TMT.

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