

Implications of Terror Management Theory for the War on Terrorism: Understanding Muslim Attitudes and the Unique Stress of Peace-Keeping Missions

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Research Goals

- To explore factors that increase and decrease hostility toward the United States and support of terrorist violence among Muslim populations.
- To explore ways of reducing hostility toward the United States and support of terrorist violence among Muslim populations.
- To explore how military troops serving in conflicted regions cope with the anxiety inherent in being in a situation where random attacks provide a continual reminder of their vulnerability and mortality. Laboratory research on TMT has documented the wide ranging deleterious effects of reminders of one's vulnerability and mortality and the wide range of defenses that people use to cope with such threats.
- To help military personnel better cope with the psychological stress inherent in service in a conflicted region, that is likely to be exacerbated by the ambiguities of a “peace keeping mission.”

Theoretical Rationale: Terror Management Theory

- Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) was developed to explain the psychological function of self-esteem and cultural belief systems. It fuses ideas from existential and contemporary social psychology to create an *experimental existential psychology*.
- Much TMT research explores the implications of the theory for understanding prejudice, inter-group conflict, and ethnic violence. A great deal of research has demonstrated that hatred toward those who are different from oneself is rooted, at least in part, in basic fears that are inherent in the human condition.
- After the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks, many psychologists began discussing the relevance of TMT to understanding the causes and consequences of terrorist violence. The *American Psychological Association* commissioned us to write a book exploring these issues.
- *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror*, provides an analysis of the varying reactions to the terrorist bombings observed among US citizens, the psychological forces at the root of terrorist violence, and provides suggestions for constructive social changes to defuse the current conflict.
- To promote a long-term resolution to the current conflict, we must move beyond a “good guy – bad guy” mentality and understand the psychological forces that lead to terrorist violence.

- TMT posits that cultural belief systems, including religious and political ideologies, function, at least in part, to provide protection against a fear of death that is inherent in the human condition.
- Because cultural belief systems are human constructions, and because of the wide diversity of belief systems currently in existence, people rely heavily on social consensus or agreement for maintaining their faith in them and enabling them to provide protection against core fears.
- The mere existence of people with different cultural worldviews provides an implicit challenge to the validity of one's own worldview; they remind us that there are other ways of conceiving reality and raise the possibility that our own worldview might be wrong. This is especially likely when those espousing different worldviews are prosperous, successful, or socially or economically dominant.
- People respond with hostility to those who are different to diffuse the implicit threat to their own worldview posed by the alternative worldview held by the deviant others.
- Historically, such responses have included derogation of those with different worldviews (e.g., ignorant savages; lost souls in need of conversion; infidels deserving of death), assimilation (defusing the threat posed by the alternate worldview by adopting minor aspects of it into one's own worldview), and annihilation (e.g., ethnic cleansing, genocide, terrorist violence).

- To date, well over 200 separate studies conducted in 11 different countries have supported hypotheses derived from TMT.
- Research has shown that: (a) reminders of one's mortality (source of core existential fear) increase prejudice, stereotyping, and physical aggression toward members of groups different from one's own; (b) exposure to threats to one's worldview increases the accessibility of death-related thoughts; (c) derogation of or aggression towards out-group members reduces the accessibility of death-related thoughts, and (d) validation of one's own worldview reduces other types of defensive responses to reminders of one's mortality.
- On a hopeful note, reminders of one's mortality *reduce* prejudice and hostility toward those who are different among people who are strongly committed to, or have been reminded of, the value of *tolerance*. Current research is exploring the possibility that reminding people of their "common humanity," features they share with all other humans, will provide a similar palliative effect on hostility toward those who are different.
- Existential fears lead to clinging to one's worldview and derogation of those with different worldviews primarily when such thoughts are on the *fringes of consciousness*, that is, when such thoughts are highly accessible but not in current focal consciousness.
- Taken as a whole, this body of research suggests that prejudice and ethnic conflict is rooted in the threat to the protection from core existential anxiety posed by those with different beliefs and values, and that such reactions might be reversed when people construe different others as fellow members of a broader, more all-encompassing group.

TMT and the Roots of the Conflict in the Middle East

- Although political, economic, and practical considerations certainly play a role in all armed conflicts, we argue that it is a threat to individual's own system of psychological security is needed to motivate masses of people to risk their lives to engage in violence, war, or terrorism.
- The highly successful and world dominant Western worldview poses both implicit and explicit threats to the security provided by the more traditional Islamic worldview held in most Middle and Near Eastern nations.
- The failure of corrupt governments in many Middle and Near Eastern countries to meet the basic needs of their people for sustenance, freedom, and basic human rights further undermines the emotional security of their inhabitants and makes them ready to latch onto causes that provide easy explanations for the difficulties they are facing.
- Radical Islamic groups, supported by wealthy Middle Eastern governments galvanize the people against the US in particular and the Western world in general. In essence, the US and West have become scapegoats for much of the frustration, hardship, and the resultant lack of existential security experienced by many people in the region.
- Foreign policies by the US and other Western nations that seem rooted in economic greed, lust for oil, and a disregard for Islamic traditions provides fuel that fan the flames of Islamic radicalism that promote terrorism.

- Although only a small proportion of the Muslim world actively engages in terrorism, US policies are deeply distrusted in much of the Islamic world.
- It seems likely that this widespread distrust and the associated negative attitudes toward the United States among moderate Muslims provides implicit psychological support for the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the much smaller group of Muslims belonging to radical groups.
- Although many political observers have speculated about attitudes toward terrorism, the US, and the general “mood on the street” in Islamic countries, very little hard evidence is available concerning Muslim attitudes toward the US or terrorist activity against the US.
- In one study conducted shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attack, Henry (2002) found that roughly half of Muslims surveyed in Beirut, Lebanon supported the attack; this of course implies that half did not.
- To effectively counter terrorism, we must win the hearts and minds of as many people in the Islamic world as possible, or at least prevent them from sympathizing with the activities of bin Laden and other radicals.
- To do this will require an understanding of current Muslim attitudes toward the US, terrorism, and the conflict in the Middle East, and more importantly, the psychological and social forces that shape these attitudes.

Research Plan: Muslim Attitudes

- Goal: (1) To understand the forces that lead Muslims to sympathize with radical terrorist movements and view the US as their enemy; (2) to explore the role of terror management processes in the production of such sentiments.
- I have organized a consortium of potential collaborators to help conduct the proposed studies in New York City, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany, and Israel. I have also discussed the possibility of conducting such studies in Turkey and Beirut, but daunting political obstacles may make this impossible.
- Basic plan for studies is to investigate the effects of the combination of a reminder of one's mortality and a reminder of various factors or ideas suspected to be responsible for anti-US and pro-terrorist sentiments.
- Because we will be experimentally manipulating the salience of existential concerns and political-social concerns and ideologies, we will be able to go beyond simple descriptions of Muslims' attitudes (which are also sorely needed) to draw conclusions about forces that play a causal role in the genesis of such attitudes.
- Examples of issues to be explored in the proposed research: (a) the impact of Koranic teachings concerning love and peaceful co-existence vs. jihad and fight the infidels; (b) the impact of various foreign policies by the US, including possible war with Iraq, support of Israel, facilitating the emergence of an independent Palestinian state, social and economic support for Afghanistan, Western vs traditional values, (c) the impact of charismatic leaders calling for iihad vs. peaceful coexistence.

- Research will be conducted with the help of research staff of Arabic origin who are fluent in Arabic language and sensitive to concerns of respondents.
- Consortium of researchers in various countries will enable us to examine possible regional differences in attitudes and how these attitudes are influenced by the variables in question.
- Ultimate goal is to develop communication programs to promote more favorable attitudes toward the US and less favorable attitudes toward terrorist groups among the “silent majority” of Muslims world-wide.

Terror Management Processes in a Peace Keeping Mission

- Researchers from the Dutch Royal Military Academy have been using TMT to explore the way the anxiety associated with serving as part of a “peace keeping force” affects Dutch and German military personnel. I have been consulting with the Dutch research team would like to conduct similar studies with US troops in Iraq.
- Their initial study explored the possibility that the threat of death involved in serving as peace-keepers in Kabul played an important role in the mounting tension and return of old rivalries between Dutch and German soldiers, who have been working very successfully and harmoniously with each other for the last decade.
- Consistent with our lab research, it was found that whereas Dutch soldiers had positive attitudes toward their German colleagues during training for the mission in Muenster, once stationed in Kabul (where the threat of death is ever-present) negative attitudes and stereotypes of Germans increased dramatically.
- We are currently discussing the role that the absence of clear enemy in Afghanistan, where most locals are friendly and it is impossible to tell one’s allies from foes, might be playing in this return of old ethnic conflicts between Dutch and German troops.
- Given the tremendous threat, and resulting stress, that US troops currently serving in Iraq are facing, where it is extremely difficult to distinguish friend from foe, research on the impact of this stress could be very useful.