

**A Terror Management Theory Perspective on Tribalism**

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Humans are social creatures who have always lived in groups. From our ancestors who primarily lived with their kin in small clans to modern societies where people belong to and identify with multiple groups, including ethnicities, nationalities, religions, occupations, and political parties, humans are social beings. Natural selection endowed humankind with a set of social motives and cognitive abilities that facilitated group living by helping them predict the intentions of others, categorize people based on various attributes, and use individuals and groups to help them meet their needs. Social living requires faith and trust in particular individuals and groups and at least some level of distrust of others. Though much has changed since the early days of our species, humankind remains a highly social species in which individuals depend on groups for meeting their needs, desires and, indeed, their survival.

Although the specific environmental pressures of humankind's evolutionary past that fostered these adaptations and cognitive by-products are not entirely clear, it is apparent that many products of human evolution continue today, one of which is the focus of this book and chapter: tribalism. Humans evolved a set of psychological mechanisms that disposed them to affiliate and identify with their in-group and defend it against perceived threats, in part, by viewing out-groups as potentially dangerous. Over the course of human history, tribalism has bled into many areas of public life, especially those involving group identity and the cultural worldviews and other signifiers of identity that characterize one's group. Ethnic identity, religious beliefs, and political ideologies are especially important aspects of cultural worldviews that imbue one's ingroup with meaning and value while providing a contrast with outgroups.

This chapter will focus on the psychological mechanisms underlying tribalism in contemporary societies. To understand these mechanisms, researchers need to account for both

the psychological processes and motivations rooted in the evolutionary history of our species and the ideas, beliefs, and values that humans invented – and continue to develop and refine -- to help them cope with the reality they experience.

One framework that can shed light on tribalism and the forces that drive loyalty toward one's own group and suspicion (and sometimes downright hostility) toward outgroups, is terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). TMT focuses on the existential problems that resulted from the evolution of the sophisticated cognitive abilities that make humankind different from all other species. Only humans live their lives in a world of abstract ideas and meanings and regulate their behavior toward living up to values that are part of these meaning systems. These meaning systems are the products of human ingenuity, built on top of the evolved intuitions and behavioral tendencies that resulted from natural selection. One of the goals of this chapter is to integrate evolutionary and existential perspectives in the hopes of providing a more comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of the forces that promote tribalism and intergroup conflict. In the following section, we outline the core tenets of TMT below before discussing its role in the psychology of tribalism.

### **Terror Management Theory**

TMT was inspired by the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973), who posited that the potential for anxiety that results from human awareness of the inevitability of death plays an important role in numerous aspects of human behavior -- even those that bear no obvious connection to this problem. Becker argued that a side effect of the evolution of sophisticated cognitive abilities was that it rendered early humans aware of their inevitable mortality. Even before this cognizance arose, humans and their evolutionary predecessors had likely developed strategies to avoid death and prolong their life, including avoiding pathogens,

predators, dangerous situations, and untrustworthy people, and surrounding themselves with in-group members who were needed to meet their needs and facilitate their survival. Following Becker, TMT posits that awareness of death is terrifying because it conflicts with the many biological and psychological motives that evolved to keep an animal alive long enough to reproduce and care for its offspring, both of which are needed for its genes continue on into future generations. Of all the threats humans encounter, death is the most basic because it entails the cessation of life and thus the thwarting of all other needs and motives.

As the sophisticated intellectual abilities that gave rise to awareness of death were emerging, early humans used them to develop understandings of the world and how to act in it to meet their needs. As awareness of death emerged, the potential for fear to which it gave rise influenced the ideas our ancestors invented to understand their world and the values that they invented to regulate their own and other people's behavior. Ideas and values that helped them manage the potential for anxiety inherent in awareness of death were especially appealing, likely to be shared with others, spread within communities, and eventually become part of shared cultural worldviews that were passed on to future generations. The ideas and values our ancestors developed with their newfound cognitive and (especially) linguistic abilities likely built on the pre-linguistic intuitions and behavior tendencies that existed prior to the emergence of death awareness. But awareness of death provided a new function for the linguistic abstractions and elaborations of them – managing existential terror.

TMT defines *cultural worldviews* as shared symbolic conceptions of reality that imbue life with meaning, significance, structure, and permanence, while providing standards for valued behavior through which people acquire self-esteem. Cultural worldviews are socially constructed beliefs and values that provide a basis for *self-esteem* – feeling valuable and significant. Cultural

worldviews are often specific to particular groups (e.g., religion, political party, nation) and often change over time.

Thus, from the perspective of TMT, people shield themselves from the potential for terror that results from awareness of the inevitability of death by: 1) maintaining faith in their cultural worldviews, and 2) acquiring self-esteem by perceiving themselves as living up to the standards of value that are part of their worldviews. Said differently, people manage existential anxiety by viewing themselves as valuable contributors to a meaningful universe. From this perspective, self-esteem is inextricably tied to the values of one's cultural worldview; what makes one feel valuable and heroic within one cultural context might lead to feeling of shame or guilt in another.

Self-esteem and faith in one's worldview combine to manage death anxiety by providing the hope of either literally or symbolically transcending death. *Literal immortality* is the sense that one will continue to exist in some form after one's physical death. This is usually provided by the religious aspects of one's culture. Virtually all religions that have withstood the test of time and spread beyond their initial adherents include afterlife concepts, such as heaven, reincarnation, or joining with ancestral spirit. *Symbolic immortality*, on the other hand, is provided by construing oneself as a valuable contributor to something that will continue to exist long after one has died, such as a family, community, nation, ethnic group, profession, or indeed any meaningful group. Religions are especially potent for vehicles for terror management because they typically provide pathways to both literal immortality, through the afterlife beliefs the espouse, and symbolic immortality, through the sense of belonging to a community of believers that people get from their connection to them.

Because both cultural worldviews and self-esteem are flimsy symbolic constructions – mere ideas – that cannot be definitively verified and often run counter to observable reality,

people rely on other people to consensually validate them. When others share one's beliefs and values, it implies that they are correct and increases one's faith in them. When others embrace beliefs and values different from one's own, it raises the possibility that one's own worldviews are incorrect and consequently undermines faith in them. From the perspective of attribution theory (Kelly, 1967), people who share one's beliefs and values provide high consensus which implies that our worldview reflects external reality; people who do not share our beliefs and values provide low consensus which implies that our beliefs and values are caused by internal factors rather than external reality. Consequently, people are attracted to those who share their beliefs and values and repulsed by those with different worldviews. This, of course, reflects the oft-replicated similarity-attraction relationship (Byrne, 1971), which TMT suggests is driven, at least in part, by the validation of our worldviews and enhanced protection from anxiety that similar others, and groups of similar others, provide.

In addition to the consensual validation that is essential for maintaining confidence in one's worldview, other people provide protection from existential anxiety in another way – through attachment and close relationships. Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger (2000) convincingly argued that attachment relationships should be considered an additional component of the anxiety-buffering system, because they quell anxiety in and of themselves, independent of the consensual validation they provide. Indeed, TMT provides an analysis of the development of the capacity of self-esteem and worldviews to buffer anxiety that views these psychological structures as developing out of infants' attachment to their parents or primary caregivers (Solomon et al., 1991). Bowlby (1967) suggested that attachment relationships function to quell distress, and there is a long tradition of viewing the self-concept and self-esteem as developing through early relationships with one's parents.

Mikulincer and colleagues amassed a considerable body of evidence documenting the terror management function of adult attachments, to primary caregivers, romantic partners, and close others. This analysis can be extended to connections to important reference groups, such as one's nation, religion, or political party (Castano & Dechesne, 2005) and is consistent with the idea that humans have a deeply rooted need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1990). TMT simply adds that one of the reasons that people crave close relationships and belonging to groups is the protection from existential anxiety that these social connections provide.

### ***Empirical Evidence for TMT***

Empirical assessments of TMT have centered on testing three distinct but converging hypotheses that have been applied to all three components of the anxiety-buffering system. In this section we provide a broad overview of this evidence, and discuss studies particularly relevant to tribalism in later sections. The mortality salience (MS) hypothesis states that, to the extent that a psychological structure provides protection from anxiety, then reminding people of the source of that anxiety will increase their need for that structure and consequently lead to behavior more in line with that structure and more positive reactions to people and ideas that support it and more negative reactions to those that undermine it. The initial test of this hypothesis (Rosenblatt et al., 1989) showed the MS led people to recommend harsher punishment for moral transgressors, presumably because they violated the cultural worldview. Consistent with this hypothesis, MS been shown to lead to behavior more in line with the standards of one's worldview (as a way to enhance self-esteem), more positive reactions to ingroup members and those who support one's worldview and more negative reactions to outgroup members and those who criticize it, and greater desire for and defense of close relationships (for a review, see Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Meta-analyses have provided support

for this general hypothesis, which has been tested on a wide range of behaviors and attitudes (Burke et al., 2010). This line of research shows that when death is salient, people are more prone to cling to and defend their cultural worldviews, strive to reestablish their self-worth, and cling to and seek close relationships and group affiliations.

The *anxiety-buffer hypothesis* directly assesses the protective function of self-esteem, worldviews, and close relationships. It states that if a psychological structure provides protection from anxiety, then strengthening or activating it should make people less prone to anxiety in threatening situations. The initial tests of this hypothesis showed that bolstering self-esteem reduced self-reported anxiety, physiological arousal, and death denying defense distortions (Greenberg et al., 1990). Other studies have shown that religious individuals experience less death anxiety than non-religious ones, but only when they had recently affirmed their religious beliefs (Jonas & Fischer, 2006). Non-religious individuals, on the other hand, show less death anxiety when thinking about life-extending procedures that have the potential for indefinite life extension (Vail III et al., 2020). These studies suggest that self-esteem must be continually affirmed in order for it to effectively buffer anxiety.

The *death thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis* reasons that if the three components of the anxiety-buffer function to manage death-related thought, then such thoughts will become more accessible when these components are threatened and less accessible when they are affirmed or bolstered. Early tests of this hypothesis showed that threats to self-esteem, information that challenges one's worldview or derogates one's group, and thoughts of problems with relationships all increase DTA (Hayes et al., 2010). These findings are complemented by research showing that bolstering self-esteem, affirming one's worldview, and thinking about attachment figures decrease DTA. The conditions that increase DTA are the same as those that



increase worldview defense and bolstering the three components of the anxiety-buffer. There is also evidence that DTA mediates the relationship between threats and defenses (Das et al., 2009). Meta-analyses suggest that DTA effects are robust (Steinmen & Updegraff, 2015). The available evidence suggests that MS and threats to one's anxiety-buffer increase DTA, which in turn leads to efforts to strengthen or reaffirm anxiety-buffer components, which then reduces DTA..

Other research has combined elements of these hypotheses. For example, increasing self-esteem, affirming one's worldview, or focusing on close relationships eliminates the increased worldview defense that MS produced in neutral conditions (e.g., Arndt et al., 1997; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Giving participants information suggesting that near death experiences prove that life continues after physical death eliminates the effect of MS on worldview defense (Dechesne et al., 2003). Boosting self-esteem, validating one's worldview, or affirming one's relationships eliminates the increase in DTA that reminders of death typically produce (Hayes et al., 2010). Taken as a whole, the TMT literature provides converging support for the theory's fundamental propositions across a variety of interlocking hypotheses applied to a diverse range of human behavior, attitudes, and emotions.

### **Terror Management as a Source of Tribalism**

The concept of tribalism typically entails a moral imperative to take care of one's own group and its members and favor them over outgroup members. It also entails a tendency toward negative perceptions, attitudes, and behavior toward outgroups as a way of protecting the ingroup from any harm an outgroup might inflict. Indeed, ingroup loyalty is one of the core moral foundations posited to have evolved to facilitate group living by Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt & Josephs, 2004).

Tribalism can dictate what people perceive as morally right or wrong. Bocian et al., (2021) found that behavior favoring one's ingroup was judged as more morally appropriate than behavior benefitting an outgroup, and that judgments of the morality of political actions are influenced by political orientation, especially among those high in collective narcissism. Other research has shown that people perceive behavior by outgroup members as more immoral than identical behavior by ingroup members (e.g., Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Research also suggests tribalistic moral judgments of behavior are motivated more by a desire to uphold an image of the ingroup as morally righteous than with concerns with upholding moral principles in and of themselves (Ashokkumar et al., 2019).

More generally, tribalism affects how people perceive, evaluate, and think about other people. From this perspective, social cognitive processes occur through a tribal lens that biases information to favor one's ingroup over all others (Clark et al., 2019). Tribalism also affects many other aspects of behavior toward ingroup and outgroup members. Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) outlines the basic propositions of how identification and attachment to a social group affects intergroup conflict, while self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) extends this framework to understand how people's social identities affect numerous social-cognitive processes. When people identify with groups, they are prone to view the world through a group-based lens and interpret behavior through salient social categories. Furthermore, when people are psychologically attached to groups that are in active conflict with opposing groups, they are prone to engage in behaviors aimed at distinguishing and protecting their identity. Social Identity Theory research shows that people allocate larger rewards to ingroup than outgroup members (Tajfel, 1970), are reluctant to bet against their ingroup in sporting events even when the outgroup is highly favored to win (Morewedge, et al., 2016), and will

support policies and actions that harm the broader society in order to aggress against the outgroup (Mernyk et al., 2022). Research also shows that people will endorse counter-attitudinal policies that come from ingroup members (Cohen, 2003), but will subject themselves to painful experiences to avoid being exposed to outgroup attitudes (Framer et al., 2017), highlighting the importance of people's group identities in determining diverse aspects of their behavior

Many scholars view tribalism as being an inherent feature of human nature, an immutable feature of human biology. Evolutionary psychologists often use the term *tribes* when speaking about groups and define *tribalism* as being "loyal to and favorable towards one's own tribe (and less favorable towards other tribes)," (Clark et al., 2019, p. 591). Explanations of tribalism rooted in evolutionary thinking emphasize the ways in which favoring one's ingroup promotes the survival and therefore reproductive success of those with whom one's shares genes – and thus, one's own genes as well. Competition for scarce resources and the occurrence of sometimes lethal conflicts between groups over resources and territory created adaptive value for favoring one's own group over outgroups and a readiness for hostility toward outgroups.

While not disputing the role of evolved tendencies, TMT emphasizes the role of the anxiety-buffering system that emerged as a consequence of human awareness of the inevitability of death. From the perspective of TMT, tribalism reflects self-esteem striving and worldview defense oriented toward defending and clinging to one's in-group identity and values while derogating out-groups and those who explicitly or implicitly challenge one's worldview. If this were the case, the basic hypotheses used to assess TMT would hold for the various ways in which tribalism is manifested. Specifically, MS would increase tribalist tendencies, threats to one's ingroup would increase DTA, affirming one's self-esteem or worldview and negative outcomes for outgroups would reduce both DTA and behavior thought to function to manage

death concerns. In the following sections, we review evidence for these hypotheses within the context of various ways in which tribalism is manifested, including studies focused on ingroup bias, attitude polarization, support for leaders, and hostile and aggressive actions towards outgroups. We also discuss research assessing derivations from the theory regarding ways to decrease tribalist hostility toward outgroups.

### **Worldview Defense as Tribalism**

Many TMT studies have shown that people are more defensive of their in-group's values, identity, and members, and more negative in their evaluations of those who violate these values, challenge their worldviews, and belong to other groups after being reminded of their mortality. Indeed, the initial tests of the MS hypothesis found that death reminders lead people to assign harsher punishments to those who violate their worldviews and greater rewards to those who uphold their worldview (Rosenblatt et al., 1989). Other early studies showed that MS leads to more positive evaluations of those who praise one's culture and more negative evaluations to those who criticize it (Greenberg et al., 1994) and more positive reactions to ingroup than outgroup members (Greenberg et al., 1990). Research has also shown MS to increase perceptions of the entitativity of one's nation (Castano et al., 1999), optimism regarding the outcome of sporting events involving one's national team (Dechesne et al., 2000), preference for symbols of one's country such as its currency (Jonas et al., 2005), and distress when using sacred symbols of one's culture in a disrespectful way (Greenberg et al., 1995). Other research has shown that MS can decrease identification with a favored sports team after a major loss (Dechesene et al., 2000) or one's ethnic group when negative information about its members is salient (Arndt et al., 2002).

Research has also shown that threats to one's worldview or insults to one's group increase DTA. For example, religious fundamentalists who read an article promoting evolutionary theory and Canadians who read an article critical of Canada both showed increased DTA (Friedman & Rholes, 2007; Schimel et al., 2007). Hayes et al. (2008) found an increase in DTA among Christian participants who read about Nazareth becoming increasingly dominated by Muslims. In a particularly disturbing demonstration of the terror management function of tribalism, they found that this increase in DTA was completely eliminated among participants also read about a plane crash in which many Muslims died. In this study, the death of one's enemy helped people manage concerns with their own mortality that were activated by the success of that enemy.

From the perspective of TMT, these studies document the connection between thoughts of death and tribalist tendencies to maintain and defend one's worldview and ingroup. More specifically, they show that reminders of death lead people to respond more positively toward those who either explicitly or implicitly help them maintain faith in their worldviews and more negatively toward those who either explicitly or implicitly undermine this faith. Preference for one's ingroup over outgroups in response to MS demonstrates the role of group membership in managing death concerns, and the tendency to disidentify from one's group when negative aspects of it are salient shows that the pursuit of self-esteem is an important driving force behind group membership as a terror management strategy.

### **Political Polarization and Tribalism**

One area of especially clear relevance to tribalism in today's world is *political polarization*, which occurs when people become more extreme in their political ideology (e.g., liberals become *more* liberal, and conservatives become more conservative). Political

polarization has always existed in the U. S. but has increased considerably over the past two decades (Pew Research Center, 2014, 2022). Numerous mainstream media outlets emphasize content that favors one ideological position over the other, and people selectively expose themselves to news outlets that support their ideology and avoid ones that challenge it. People tend to avoid political opponents in interpersonal relationships and on social media (Colleoni et al., 2014; Huber & Malhotra, 2017). There is even evidence of a tendency for people to move to physical locations where the majority of residents share their political orientations and away from areas where they are in the political minority (Motyl et al., 2014). Tribalistic tendencies clearly affect political attitudes and behavior and seem to be a major feature of contemporary political discourse and daily life.

From the perspective of TMT, political polarization increases when death-related thoughts become more accessible, either in response to events that make mortality salient or to threats to their worldviews or self-esteem, which, by undermining their anxiety buffers, also increase the accessibility of death-related thoughts. Becoming more ideologically extreme can provide people with a sense of validation and certainty about their worldviews as well increasing their self-esteem by demonstrating their allegiance to their worldviews and highly valued ingroups. Ideological segregation (a consequence of polarization) reduces the likelihood of encountering opposing worldviews that call into question the shared nature of one's own worldviews and consequently elicit death anxiety. All of these tendencies help manage death anxiety, as the research noted above has shown.

It seems likely that polarization is, at least in part, a reactionary response to the existence and promotion of ideologies that directly challenge one's own. Indeed, one of the more frequently replicated findings in the TMT literature is that people and worldviews different from

one's own increase DTA (Hayes et al., 2010) and that MS increases negative reactions to such people and ideas (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). It seems likely that such reactions are especially likely to emerge when those with different worldviews are especially strident, extreme, or assertive in promoting their views, but this hypothesis has yet to be directly tested.

Because cultural worldviews are the products of human thought, they have the potential to change over time as people learn more about the world they inhabit and share ideas with people with worldviews different from their own. Though many core elements of worldviews have persisted through much of human history, the beliefs and values of contemporary humans differ dramatically from our ancestors, and in some ways, even from those widely held a few decades ago. However, the protection from existential anxiety that worldviews provide lead some people to cling to them and resist change while others pursue changes that they hope will lead to a better world. This gives rise to an ongoing tension or dialectic between traditional worldviews that have successfully provided equanimity for many years and new ideas and values that seem (to some people, but not others) to better comport with observable reality and are expected to improve the well-being of individuals and groups. The changes that occur in cultural worldviews as people discuss and debate can be anxiety-provoking, destabilizing, and provoke backlash and conflict both between and within groups.

Research on the relationship between death anxiety and political polarization has yielded conflicting patterns, both of which could be viewed as consistent with TMT. On the one hand, many studies have revealed *polarization effects* in response to MS, with attitudes shifting in the direction of those held prior to the threat induction. Theoretically, this should happen when one's pre-existing attitudes are effectively managing death concerns, in that people would go with what has worked well for them in the past. On the other hand, other studies have documented a

*conservative shift* in response to MS. Theoretically, this would happen in times of turmoil, if conservative attitudes provide more security than liberal ones, perhaps because they provide more structure, align with tradition, or reflect ideas that feel safer, more familiar, and maintain the status quo. Of course, this state of affairs, when competing predictions can both be derived from the theory (and supported by empirical data) suggests that further conceptual elaboration is needed. We suspect that both individual differences and situational forces likely play a role in whether one's existing worldview or a more conservative one that provides more structure and certainty would be important components a hoped for conceptual resolution to this dilemma.

In support of the proposition that death concerns can lead to political polarization, Weise et al. (2012) found that, in both France and the U. S., MS increased opposition to immigration among participants high in RWA but increased acceptance of immigration among participants low in RWA. Similarly, Bassett et al. (2014) found that, among university students, political liberals' endorsement of individualizing moral values (i.e., caring and fairness) was strengthened by MS. In a complementary fashion, MS strengthened political conservatives' endorsement of binding moral values (i.e., loyalty, authority, and purity). These findings suggest that people on both sides of the ideological spectrum sometimes strengthen their political attitudes in the direction of their pre-existing worldviews in response to MS.

However, some scholars have challenged the idea that worldview defense and polarization processes occur equally across the ideological spectrum. Specifically, Jost et al. (2003) argued that conservative ideologies are better at addressing existential concerns than liberal ideologies due to their support of the status quo and opposition to social change. They also suggest that liberal ideologies associated with promoting social change, tolerating out-groups, and dismantling structural inequality can elicit death anxiety due to challenging long-



established cultural worldviews. Consistent with this view, research has shown that stronger needs for order, structure, and closure are positively associated conservative attitudes, while tolerance for uncertainty, openness to new experiences, and integrative complexity are associated with liberal attitudes (Jost et al., 2004).

Research has also shown that MS sometimes leads to a shift toward conservative positions. For instance, Nail et al. (2009) found that MS resulted in a conservative shift among ideologically liberal students. Specifically, their findings showed that MS increased liberals' defense of their national identity and their opposition to same-sex relationships (which are both typically conservative stances). Research on how people cope with the death of a close other also supports the ideological asymmetry argument. Unlike the typical focus on thought of one's own death, Chatard et al. (2010) focused on how the death of close others affected ideological positions. They found that, among U. S. conservatives, the death of a close other resulted in more conservative positions across various measures (self-reported ideology, social and environmental attitudes). However, this effect was not found among liberals, suggesting that the death of a close other and the ensuing terror management processes have differential impacts across the ideological spectrum.

Meta-analyses of this literature have also yielded somewhat inconsistent conclusions. The original meta-analyses by Jost et al. (2003) that focused on ideological asymmetries in existential motives found a large relationship between existential threats and political conservatism. However, six of the eight effect sizes used for this meta-analysis came from one of the original studies on TMT that assessed people setting bond for prostitutes (Rosenblatt et al., 1989). A more recent meta-analysis that had a larger sample size ( $N = 362,525$ ) and used multiple operational definitions of conservatism and existential threats found a similar pattern of

results. However, the effect sizes were smaller, and the results were more nuanced (Jost et al., 2017). Specifically, MS ( $r_{\text{weighted}} = .08$ ), exposure to threatening events ( $r_{\text{weighted}} = .07$ ), and subjective perceptions of threat ( $r_{\text{weighted}} = .12$ ) were related to stronger conservatism; however, the relationship between fear of death and conservatism was non-significant ( $r_{\text{weighted}} = .02$ ). Burke et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis that examined how MS affects people's political attitudes and behavioral intentions. Their results showed that MS can yield *both* political polarization among persons on both sides of the political spectrum as well as a conservative shift among liberals.

It thus seems there is an empirical impasse on how terror management processes affect political polarization – do terror management processes lead partisans to defend their current ideological stance or do they drive people to the ideologically conservative side of the spectrum regardless of their initial worldviews? Similar inconsistent findings have emerged regarding the specific pattern of MS effects on support for leaders, another important form of tribalism.

### **Leadership Support as Tribalism**

Leaders are in a unique position to dictate a group's norms, behavior, and the direction of the group. People often want their leaders to help navigate uncertain situations and intergroup conflicts in ways that provide a sense of security and safety. Because leaders are essential to how groups function and survive, and in many cases, leaders symbolize the group's identity, worldview, and values, supporting one's leader and their stances is another form of tribalism.

The initial studies linking terror management processes to support for leaders showed that, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, MS increased Americans' support for President George W. Bush (Landau et al. (2004). Though in the week before the 9/11 attacks, support for Bush in public opinion polls hovered around 50%, a few days after the attacks his support had

increased to nearly 90%. Landau et al. found across four studies that reminding people of either their own mortality or the 9/11 attacks dramatically increased support for Bush and reduced support for his Democratic opponent in the next election, John Kerry. The fact that MS and 9/11 reminders produced equivalent increases and did not differ from each other suggests that at least some of the effect of the terrorist attacks was due to the reminder of death and vulnerability that it provided. Consistent with this view, Landau et al. also found that subliminal presentations of the number 911 or the letters WTC (world trade center) increased DTA. Interestingly, neither MS nor 9/11 reminders affected participants' self-reported political orientation. Cohen et al. (2005) similarly found that while participants at the liberal university who participated in their study had a strong preference for Democratic candidate John Kerry in a control condition, MS completely reversed this preference, yielding a strong intention to vote for the incumbent Republican president, George W. Bush. All of these effects occurred independent of participants' political orientation. More recently, Cohen et al. (2017) found across two studies that MS strengthened intentions to vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 U. S. presidential election, regardless of political orientation. An additional study in this paper showed that thinking about an immigrant family moving into their neighborhood, a common theme in Trump's campaign, increased DTA, again independent of participants' political orientation. These studies show that political rhetoric can increase DTA and that increasing DTA can influence support for leaders.

In explaining these findings, the authors emphasized the charismatic nature of Bush and Trump, and their focus on the greatness of their nation and its people. While Bush embarked on a "war of terrorism" against the "axis of evil," Trump's campaign slogan was to "make America great again," in part, by building a wall to keep immigrants from crossing the southern border and banning Muslims from many countries from entering the U.S. Several studies have assessed

the impact of MS on support for charismatic leaders who emphasize ingroup pride relative to task- or relationship-oriented leadership as candidates in hypothetical elections. Cohen et al. (2004) found that although a task-oriented leader was preferred in a control condition, MS produced an almost eightfold increase in preference for a charismatic group-glorifying leader. Kosloff et al. (2010) found a similar pattern of MS increasing support for a group-glorifying hypothetical gubernatorial candidate, but only when the candidate shared one's political orientation: MS increased Democrats' support for a Democrat candidate who espoused the greatness of the people in his state and Republicans' support for a Republican candidate who was similarly group-enhancing. MS decreased support for uncharismatic candidates and those of the opposing party on both sides of the political spectrum. These findings suggest that leaders who signal in-group loyalty and promote one's group are especially attractive when death is salient; but in these studies this held only for leaders of one's own party. These divergent patterns suggest that in some cases the ingroup in question is one's nation as a whole, while in others it is one's political party and ideology.

Research has also shown increased preference for other types of in-group leaders in response to MS. For instance, Hoyt et al. (2009) found a gender-identity bias under MS, such that males preferred male leaders while females preferred female leaders. A second study reported by Hoyt et al. (2009) found that, among female participants, MS increased preference for male leaders described as agentic over male leaders described as relational; among male participants, MS increased preference for male leaders regardless of whether they conformed to or deviated from the agentic male stereotype. In a related vein, Hoyt et al. (2011) found that MS shifted people's implicit leadership theories toward viewing ideal leaders as more agentic but had no effect on the role that communal attributes played in implicit leadership theories.

The literature on the effects of MS on leader preference is complex and in need of further refinement. Though research has consistently shown MS to influence leader preferences, this effect has taken several forms. Some studies have found MS to increase preference for agentic, powerful, charismatic leaders whose rhetoric is aimed at increasing group pride and feelings of superiority. Some studies show this impact is specific to one's own political ideology, while others show an increase in preference for conservative leaders. It's worth noting that the studies showing MS increasing preference for conservative candidates GW Bush and Donald Trum, both involved charismatic group-enhancing politicians who were pitted against opponents (John Kerry and Hillary Clinton) who were targeted as being weak and untrustworthy in their respective campaigns. The few studies that directly assessed the impact of MS on self-reported political orientation have not yielded effects.

In discussing their meta-analysis of studies assessing the effect of MS on polarization vs conservative shifts, Burke et al. (2013) speculated that the dominant cultural ethos when the studies were conducted likely determines which of these effects emerged in particular studies. Studies showing a conservative shift were conducted in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and primarily focused on people's attitudes towards former President Bush and the war in Iraq. A study conducted within the context of the 2008 presidential election between Barack Obama and John McCain found that whereas MS increased support for McCain under neutral conditions, it increased support for Obama when compassionate values were primed; polls taken during this time showed Obama to be viewed as more compassionate than McCain (Vail et al., 2009). One way of tying these diverse studies together is that MS may increase preference for candidates that meet whatever needs are particularly salient at the time, and this likely depends on a multitude of factors, including current events, individual differences, and recently primed

values. Clearly, both conceptual clarification of these processes and additional research is needed to provide a clearer understanding of these issues.

### **Out-group Hostility and Aggression as Tribalism**

One dramatic way in which tribalism is manifested is through military conflicts and war. People support their nation going to war when opposing entities threaten a nation's security, well-being, or its members. Violent conflicts also often reflect insults to the dignity of one's group, perceived or actual injustice, territorial claims that sometimes go back centuries, and desires to impose one's worldview (religion, political ideology, values) on other groups, or avoid having a foreign worldview imposed on one's own group by outsiders. All of these could be viewed as centering on the collective self-esteem and cultural worldview of the ingroup and responding to threats to them posed by outgroups.

Of course, war and other forms of violent conflict entail killing, sometimes on an enormous scale. Thus, violent conflicts, or even the possibility of them, activate thoughts and fears about death, along with concern about the death of close others. Research confirms that viewing scenes of the aftermath of conflict and war can activate thoughts of death. For instance, Vail et al. (2012) found that showing people images of bombed out buildings activates thoughts of death, which in turn, mediates increases in support for war against a rival nation.

Similarly, studies have shown that reminders of terrorist attacks are related to more death-thought accessibility (Mahat-Shamir, Hamama-Raz, et al., 2018; Mahat-Shamir, Hoffman, et al., 2018). More recently, Arnoult et al. (2023) found that recent terrorist attacks increased implicit indicators of anti-Muslim attitudes but had no effect on self-reported attitudes. Other studies in their paper showed that reminders of past terrorism increased anti-Muslim attitudes, especially among people with high Islamophobia or low self-regulation capacity. Thus even when people

don't admit to these feelings or try to suppress them, political violence appears to increase implicit hostility toward people from the same group as those responsible for an attack.

Research has shown that reminders of death can increase support for violent actions against enemies or rivals in ongoing real-world conflicts. Hirschberger and Ein-Dor, (2006) found that MS increase support for violent counter-terrorism measures among Israelis who opposed returning Gaza territory to the Palestinians. Hirschberger et al. (2007, 2010) similarly found that Israelis more strongly supported military strikes against Palestine and Iran when reminded of the Holocaust. Pyszczynski et al. (2006, Study 2) found MS to increase American conservatives' but not liberals' support for violent military actions to fight terrorism; a parallel study reported in this paper found MS to increase Iranian students' support for terrorist attacks on the US. Chatard et al. (2011) found MS to increase support for military against insurgents in a civil war in the Ivory Coast. Vail et al.'s (2012) study noted above found that death thoughts activated in response to images of destroyed buildings strengthened support for military strikes against Iran. These findings converge in showing that thoughts of death can increase support for hostile and aggressive actions towards perceived enemies.

### **Does Death Anxiety Inevitably Increase Tribalism and Hostility?**

Most of this chapter has painted a relatively grim view how humankind manages its existential dilemma – we humans are terrified of death and this exacerbates our tribalistic tendencies, leading us to derogate out-groups, and sometimes try to annihilate them, as a way of enhancing our self-esteem and maintaining our worldviews. Though TMT researchers have focused much attention on the dark side of human nature, and there is strong evidence that death concerns often do increase hostility toward those who are different, not everyone manages their

anxiety in this way and there are many more pro-social ways of responding to death concerns (for a review, see Vail et al., 2012).

When worldviews contain norms and values promoting tolerance or out-group positivity, then death reminders can reduce the tribalistic tendencies outlined in this chapter. Research also shows that defensive reactions to MS are more likely among those with low self-esteem or insecure attachment (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000; Schmeichel et al., 2009). Schimel et al. (2006) found that among people high in trait empathy, MS salience elicited stronger forgiveness intentions than a control condition. These findings suggest that cultures that provide self-esteem and close relationships for most of its members are less likely to breed people who respond to existential fears with tribalist hostility. Because effective terror management requires both faith in one's worldview and acquiring self-esteem by living up to its standards, prosocial standards have the potential to promote more harmonious intergroup relations.

Research has shown that hostile responses to MS can be reduced, eliminated, and even reversed when values encouraging positive responses to others are salient. Greenberg et al. (1992) found that people primed with the value of tolerance values did not respond to MS by derogating their political opponents. Rothschild et al. (2009) found that when compassionate Christian values were primed, the increase in support for extreme violent tactics to fight terrorism produced by MS was eliminated among American religious fundamentalists. Parallel effects were found among Iranians, who showed more willingness to cooperate with Western nations in response to MS when compassionate Islamic values were primed. Other research shows that inducing a sense of shared humanity can reduce MS-induced implicit prejudice and redirect responses to MS to increase support for international peace-building (Motyl et al., 2011). Another tactic for redirecting responses to MS is to reframe violence as animalistic and



subhuman. Motyl et al. (2009) found that when people were reminded of violent behavior of other primates, MS reduced Americans' support for violent military strikes on Iran under mortality salience. A final way that terror management processes can mitigate tribalistic concerns is by shifting people's to construe world problems as threats to all of humanity, rather than focused only on its impact on their own group. Pyszczynski et al. (2012) found that when people were induced to think about the shared global aspects of climate change, MS increased support for international peace-building processes and weakened people's support for intergroup violence.

### **Conclusion**

Tribalism has been and likely will always be part of human nature. Tribalistic tendencies are likely rooted in our evolutionary history as group-living animals who were often in competition with other groups for scarce resources. We argue that with the evolution of increased cognitive capacities, awareness of the inevitability of death emerged, which led our ancestors to invent ways of understanding the world that built on more primitive intuitive tendencies that gave life meaning and individuals and groups value and significance. These cultural worldviews and the individual and collective self-esteem that resulted from them were used to manage the fears that resulted from death awareness. We view tribalism as the result of a complex interplay between evolved proclivities and human strategies for managing existential fear. Much of the animosity that people feel toward those with different worldviews or who undermine their self-esteem results from the challenges to emotional security that such others pose.

However, as outlined above, steps can be taken to reduce the hostility and contempt people feel toward those who are different from themselves other. Compassionate values that are

part of many if not most worldviews and religions, a sense of shared humanity, framing polarization and violence in negative terms, and viewing groups as needing to work together to manage shared threats are all ways that the terror management system can be used to promote a more peaceful and beneficent world. The challenge facing humankind is finding ways to make these peaceful values more potent and impactful than those that promote conflict.

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