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# Avoiding Death or Engaging Life as Accounts of Meaning and Culture: Comment on Pyszczynski et al. (2004)

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Terror management theory emphasizes that self-esteem consists of a sense of meaning and significance, which serves mainly to defend against death awareness. The current authors counter that people's search for meaning and significance cannot be wholly reduced to defensive processes because it also reflects intrinsic developmental processes. Sociometer theory similarly offers a mainly defensive account of self-esteem, and its exclusive focus on belongingness versus exclusion ill equips it to deal with the multiple needs underlying self-esteem. The current authors suggest that self-esteem resulting from defenses against anxiety (whether about death or exclusion) is akin to contingent self-esteem, whereas true self-esteem is based in ongoing satisfaction of needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

The treatise by Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, and Schimel (2004) highlights a clash between two "single-need" theories of self-esteem—terror management theory (TMT) and sociometer theory (ST). TMT sees self-esteem as a defense against death anxiety, whereas ST views it as a warning gage for social exclusion. Although we find points of agreement with both approaches, we submit that by generalizing from well-established but circumscribed phenomena, each provides an incomplete account of self-esteem. Specifically, both theories have a limited view of the psychological needs underlying the dynamics of self-esteem, and thus both explain mainly defensive or "introjected" forms of self-esteem. In this comment we offer an alternative, yet complementary, perspective based on self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000b) that deals not only with defensive self-esteem but also with the intrinsic developmental propensities that lead people to pursue competence, connection, meaning, and significance.

TMT concerns how people respond to a profound threat to self, namely, the threat posed by awareness of death. The theory argues that when this threat is salient, people attempt to find significance by embracing ambient cultural worldviews. Feeling *significant* is what TMT describes as self-esteem, and this feeling is argued to be the primary, if not exclusive, source of solace in the face of impermanence. Self-esteem is thus cast as defensive in nature, serving to buffer or block a profound source of anxiety. By accepting, without critical examination, cultural values, people can feel worthy and hold anxiety at bay. This process has, presumably, been operative for people at all levels of development, in all cultures, and in all historical epochs.

Awareness of death represents a formidable challenge in human existence, and we find compelling TMT's experimental evidence that mortality salience (MS) can prompt defensive behaviors, including the introjection of beliefs and altered evaluations of self and others. There is, in fact, theoretical coherence and existential depth to the idea that people, when reminded of their impermanence, may cling to meanings and beliefs that promise symbolic immortality.

What we question is TMT's stunning reversal of this idea and the implications it carries. Specifically, it does not follow from the fact that MS can lead people to defensively cling to cultural meanings, that the creation of cultures, or engaging in acts of meaning, are typically motivated by defenses against death awareness. People typically engage life—that is, they seek challenges, connections, authentic meaning, and significance—not because they are trying to avoid the scent of death, but because they are healthy and alive. By turning on its head a solid and data-grounded idea, TMT at times loses sight of the intrinsic forces in psychological growth—namely, people's inherent developmental propensities to assimilate meanings and to connect with others through cultural construction and internalization.

Similarly, we accept TMT's assertion that intrinsic and integrative processes flourish best when anxiety is contained, but containment of anxiety is not, thereby, the source of these growth processes. Even though MS can engender defensive attempts to grasp for self-esteem, there are more primary nondefensive sources of interest, confidence, and integrity that can catalyze a healthy sense of self, and there are more authentic responses to death awareness.

In short, TMT's well-documented dynamic of people seeking feelings of significance when reminded of mortality is insufficient to explain the more general processes of growth, meaning making, and relatedness that are the essence of human nature, and whose workings support a more stable or authentic sense of self. These natural motivations toward competence, connectedness, and integration, as well as the obstacles to their effective functioning, are the foci of SDT. Defensive processes such as those revealed by TMT must therefore be coordinated with growth processes, as we have done, for example, in distinguishing between basic psychological needs and deficit motives (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000a). In our view, threats to basic needs often prompt deficit motives, including compensatory defenses to maintain a sense of self. The interface of growth and defense has also led TMT authors (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995; Pyszczynski, Green-

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berg, & Goldenberg, 2003) to forward a *dual motive* approach to personality entailing both growth and defensive motivations. In TMT's dual motive approach, defensive motivations are viewed as the prepotent cause, not only of self-esteem, but also of efforts toward growth, love, and cultural activity. However, the dual motive approach also allows that growth tendencies can independently explain creativity, growth, and connectedness. Remarkably, however, in Pyszczynski et al.'s (2004) *Psychological Bulletin* review, consideration of the growth arm of that dual approach is saliently absent. Thus, our commentary is intended in part to highlight the importance of that growth arm and its independent rather than derivative nature.

In contrast to TMT, Leary and Baumeister's (2000) ST views self-esteem as a gauge of belongingness. As in TMT, self-esteem is a derivative motive, but the underlying aim is to avoid social exclusion. Behaviors that minimize exclusion and maximize connection enhance self-esteem, so self-esteem is the guiding beacon for regulating behavior with respect to the relatedness need. ST suggests that the MS inductions are potent because death connotes an ultimate form of social exclusion, not because self-esteem exists to buffer death anxiety per se (Leary & Downs, 1995). Thus, whereas TMT reduces relatedness seeking to a form of terror management, ST reduces death anxiety to the fear of losing relatedness.

From our perspective, ST is also an incomplete account of self-esteem because it is a single-need approach, concerned only with avoiding exclusion (or, stated positively, for gaining relatedness). Although relatedness is unquestionably a primary psychological need, it is not the only need that sustains the self and bolsters self-esteem. There are also basic needs for competence and autonomy, and the three needs are not reducible to one another (Ryan, 1995). Rather, they have both independent and interactive effects on self-esteem and the well-being it reflects, so secure self-esteem reflects the extent to which people experience the self as loved, effective, and volitional (Deci & Ryan, 1995). Although ST acknowledges that self-esteem can be a faulty gauge, it does not sufficiently account for why some readouts of self-esteem are unstable and defensive whereas others are more stable and reflective of healthy personal and social functioning. In our view, it is only by looking at the dynamics among the three psychological needs that one can distinguish the reliable and stable from the unreliable and fragile self-esteems.

In short, we think both TMT and ST have a partial account of self-esteem, but they focus mainly on its defensive forms. SDT, in contrast, differentiates true or stable versus contingent or fragile self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). The self-esteem prompted by MS or fear of exclusion is largely *contingent self-esteem,* whereas *true self-esteem* connotes a fuller functioning person, who engages life feeling autonomous, competent, and related.

## SDT as a Contrasting Approach to Needs and Self-Esteem

In a nutshell, SDT addresses what people find interesting; why they value certain things; why they join certain groups; how they internalize social practices; and why they develop insecurities, psychopathologies, or maladaptive patterns (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2003). It explains proactive and positive behavior as well as self- and other-destructive tendencies (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan, Deci, & Grolnick, 1995). The theory argues that people are most alive, motivated, and vital when they satisfy basic psychological needs. They affiliate with and feel attached to partners, groups, and countries when their needs are satisfied, and they feel unmotivated, rigid, and alienated when their basic needs are thwarted. Thus, relationships, groups, and cultures that provide supports and opportunities to fulfill basic needs are more enhancing of well-being (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003; La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000).

SDT has a long history of empirical support, and because of its generative theoretical base, the theory has uncovered a variety of novel phenomena. They include the undermining of intrinsic motivation by rewards; the functional impact of praise, feedback, competition, and other external events on motivation and performance in educational, work, sport, and clinical settings; the differentiation of types of internalization of extrinsic regulations; the distinction between autonomy and independence in development and culture; the determinants of psychological vitality; the detrimental effects of materialism and other extrinsic life goals on well-being; the facilitating effects of parental autonomy support versus control on development; the relations of mindfulness to self-regulation and well-being; the difference between hedonic and eudaimonic motivation; and the contribution of autonomy and competence supports to secure attachments.

We thus agree with Pyszczynski et al. (2004) that the value of a scientific theory lays in the variety of phenomena it adequately explains and its capacity to unveil new and often counterintuitive aspects of nature, criteria that both TMT and SDT have fulfilled. Part of our attraction to TMT lays in its being a truly dynamic theory with a philosophically deep and internally consistent foundation that grounds its empirical inquiries. TMT is also perhaps the only other theory in current empirical psychology that has been willing to scratch below surface goals and cultural values to grapple with more ultimate, existential concerns such as death, freedom, isolation, connectedness, and meaning that are at the heart of being human.

SDT addresses these existential issues by specifying psychological and social conditions and processes that support or derail healthy psychological development and self-integration. It defines *basic psychological needs* as nutriments essential for growth, integrity, and well-being, and it has identified only three—namely, relatedness (see also Baumeister & Leary, 1995), competence (see also White, 1963) and autonomy (see also deCharms, 1968). SDT predicts that social contexts and personal goals that support fulfillment of these needs catalyze human growth, vitality, and integrated functioning. Conversely, the "dark side" of human nature—alienation, indolence, and psychopathology—results from conditions that thwart these needs or that turn them against one another within or across important life domains (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

These three needs are, in the SDT view, intrinsic to human nature. Their importance became apparent to us through the study of *intrinsic motivation,* the natural, innate tendency to explore, assimilate, and experience mastery within one's surroundings. Intrinsic motivation, so liberally endowed in mammalian species, is dependent on conditions that are optimally challenging, fostering a sense of competence and that allow organisms to self-organize or regulate their activities, fostering a sense of autonomy. However, to understand intrinsic social motivation, as well as the assimilation of social and cultural regulations that are not intrin-

sically motivated, the theory was expanded to include a third basic need, that for relatedness. Relatedness is especially important for understanding *internalization,* the process by which humans adopt ambient cultural practices and values. In fact, relatedness is so basic a psychological need that people often forego or suppress needs for autonomy and competence to preserve relationships, with predictable negative effects on their integrated functioning and well-being (Assor, Roth, & Deci, 2004). Internalization that occurs in such conditions is *introjection,* whereas more need-satisfying conditions lead to fuller internalization (viz., integration), resulting in authentic, vital behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2003). SDT details how need thwarting engenders psychopathology and how, reciprocally, repair of psychological disorders requires attention to all three needs (Ryan et al., 1995). Such findings support an understanding of well-being in which satisfaction of all three needs is essential for psychological health, or *eudaimonia* (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

## Self-Determination and Terror Management

As noted, SDT does not dispute TMT's claim that under threat people may compensate by defensively clinging to, or introjecting, social meanings, and Pyszczynski et al. (2004) provided ample empirical support for the claim. We merely disagree whenever such evidence is interpreted to imply that avoidance of death awareness is what principally spawns growth, integration, or connectedness. Curiosity, interest, assimilation, attachment, and integration are fundamental manifestations of life; they are not simply flights from death awareness (or rejection anxieties). These intrinsic propensities are apparent in development well before awareness of death emerges, and they were apparent in the evolution of life well before the dawning of language, self-consciousness, and the organization of complex cultures. That is, the tendencies that subserve healthy psychological development—strivings for effectance, self-regulation, and relatedness—have deep roots in animate nature and cannot be reduced to awareness of death.

This suggests to us that MS is a circumscribed phenomenon that does not explain positive development, creativity, or culture. However, what TMT does expose is far from trivial, for it highlights that, when reminded of death, people attempt to preserve a sense of self, often defensively. Moreover, it appears that when basic needs are directly threatened, as they are in MS inductions, people may be least likely to show healthy, interested, and growth-oriented motivation. When the self is threatened, people may be especially prone to introject cultural meanings. This does not make fear and insecurity prepotent in the promotion of growth or learning, but it does show how powerful a social force the thwarting of basic needs can be.

Death of course provokes insecurity, for it represents the loss of all need satisfactions. Leary and Downs (1995) pointed out that death threatens relatedness, and we add that it also threatens one's freedom, competencies, and all sources of meaning. These losses are far more threatening than dental pain (an illustrative experimental contrast), so mortality threats can no doubt spark introjections, distortions of value, and other defensive activities and cognitions.

In SDT, *introjection* is behavioral regulation that is driven by self-esteem contingencies. The typical rewards of introjects are self-aggrandizement and pride, which can buoy a sense of significance. The typical punishments of introjects are also self-esteem based—self-criticism, guilt, and feelings of worthlessness. As SDT research has shown, in everyday life, it is the direct thwarting of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (rather than death salience) that spawns introjected regulations as well as ego involvement, narcissism, competition, and critical evaluations. Because contingent regard, social comparison, and excessive control pertain directly to needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, they can lead people to defend by distorting feedback, heteronomously conforming, or rebelling. This suggests that MS may not be the everyday driving force TMT claims it to be, because in fact, people tend to be more preoccupied with the contingencies of their life needs than with death avoidance. Of course if one's sacred canopy comes crashing down, if one faces serious illness, or if one is in a TMT experiment, awareness of death may incite insecurity and defensiveness.

TMT may counter that underneath every thwarted need is a nonconscious fear of death, which although not parsimonious, is plausible. But even if true, that would not dispel the ample empirical evidence that positive engagement in the world (e.g., intrinsic motivation, integrated internalization, and authentic caring) is much more likely to occur in need-supportive conditions than anxiety-provoking ones. If the activity of life were derivative of fear and defense, then it would be threatening, rather than nurturing, conditions in which people functioned most vitally.

Attempts to explain human growth as a cover for fear are akin to the attempts within the Hullian tradition to explain intrinsically motivated exploration as anxiety reduction. Even rats endured anxiety and pain for the chance to explore novel spaces (Nissen, 1930). The evidence that life is basically fulfillment-seeking and outgoing rather than anxiety-reducing and shelter seeking is even more plentiful than TMT's evidence that fear can spark defense. It is precisely low anxiety, highly supportive conditions that allow learning, love, and significance to flourish.

The two theories' differences in centrality of the growth versus defensive tendencies lead to another important difference in views about the way people accommodate to their mortality. Whereas TMT states clearly that people relate to death awareness defensively, SDT takes a more differentiated view. SDT acknowledges that although the awareness of death represents among the most daunting of life's challenges, people can engage that challenge either in a relatively authentic and integrated way or, as is perhaps more common, in a relatively controlled and defensive way. Not long ago a friend retired from her work at age 102, explaining in a letter that she would be spending her remaining time preparing to die. Six months later, after much inner exploration of "letting go," she peacefully left this life. Encountering death had been interesting and meaningful to her. MS can awaken authenticity or defense. Awareness of death can remind one of what is most authentic and valuable, or it can drive one to hide from one's impermanence under a cloak of introjected beliefs, values, and preoccupations.

To the extent that a person's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, he or she has a more solid sense of significance and meaning. According to SDT, such a person is less likely, even when the self is threatened, to reactively grasp for or introject meanings to stave off anxiety. In fact, recent evidence from TMT researchers supports this view: Under conditions that support one's intrinsic self, defensive reactiveness is less likely (Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002; Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001).

SDT has always emphasized the deleterious effects of overchallenging, rejecting, or controlling circumstances that thwart the basic needs and thus threaten the self. TMT has added MS as an inescapable, potent, and perhaps even radical threat to self. This leads to the question of whether the threat posed by MS is more than the sum of threats to SDT's basic needs. This question could be empirically examined, although it has yet to be. However such an examination might turn out, SDT will continue to contend that threat of any sort cannot serve as a theoretically adequate source of growth or as a prepotent cause of life, creativity, and culture.

## SDT and the Sociometer Approach

We agree with Leary and Baumeister (2000) that self-esteem is integrally related to a basic need for relatedness. We disagree, however, about relatedness being the only primary need that self-esteem reflects. As Pyszczynski et al. (2004) underscored, self-esteem concerns more than merely being accepted by the herd. Specifically, people also need to feel competent and volitional, and the absence of either impairs self-esteem. Acceptance without autonomy represents alienation. Relatedness without competence represents amotivation and helplessness.

Single-need theories simply do not cut it as explanations of the necessary ingredients of self-worth. When needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are satisfied, people, when asked, report high self-esteem, and fluctuations in these needs explain fluctuations in feelings integral to that sense of self (e.g., Reis et al., 2000). When any of these is threatened or thwarted, self-esteem is affected, indicating that there are independent contributions of each basic need.

Moreover, SDT has a further implication not considered within ST. SDT hypothesizes that persons with true self-esteem (based on satisfaction of basic needs) are not concerned with self-esteem; they are not preoccupied by "looking at the gauge," to use Leary and Baumeister's (2000) metaphor. For these people, self-esteem is a less salient motive. Conversely, people for whom self-esteem is a salient motive are prone to nonautonomous self-regulation (e.g., introjection) for which contingent self-esteem is central (Ryan & Brown, 2003). The paradox of self-esteem is that those who have it don't need it and those who need it don't have it.

## The Necessity of Differentiating Contingent From True Self-Esteem

Pyszczynski et al. (2004) acknowledged that SDT has offered a theory of true versus contingent self-esteem (p. 453), although they provided little comment about it. To us, the true-versus-contingent distinction is a critical one that has potential for coordinating findings from TMT, ST, and SDT. Specifically, all three theories agree that fundamental threats to self can catalyze motives to protect self-esteem. But SDT maintains that the resulting self-esteem is defensive and must be distinguished from true (Deci & Ryan, 1995) or stable (Kernis, 2003) self-esteem, which reflects a more authentic state of healthy self-functioning.

When life is full—that is, when psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are ongoingly satisfied—people function in ways that feel relatively whole, authentic, and complete. They experience vitality, confidence, and interests that are motivated not by insecurity about their significance but rather by the deep and intrinsic satisfactions of living and loving. The more nurturing their context, the less likely they are to be concerned about self-esteem or to be engaged in evaluating the self as an object. The focus on self-esteem and the salience of objective self-awareness, self-consciousness, and social anxiety arise most saliently when one lacks autonomy, is relationally insecure, or feels deficient in competence. At such times, people may question their worth and be vulnerable to the dynamic of contingent self-esteem, which drives a variety of introjected and defensive behaviors.

Although the term *self-esteem* is typically used as a noun, as something people have, *contingent self-esteem* is more verblike—people are actively engaged in actions of esteeming and disparaging themselves (Ryan & Brown, 2003). They judge, praise, and chastise themselves, just as controlling parents do to their children (Grolnick, 2003). This evaluative stance toward the self is based in need deprivation. For example, when significant others conditionally regard a person, the person's self-esteem becomes contingent on the behaviors that yielded the regard (Assor et al., 2004). That is, contingent regard from important others tends to call into question people's intrinsic worth, and this forms the basis for contingently regarding themselves. Under such conditions, we argue, ego involvement and introjection will be rampant.

We further suggest that such self-esteeming cognitions are more salient, if not epidemic, in individualistic, competitive, and performance-contingent cultures (Ryan & Deci, 2003). Indeed, the motive to gain self-esteem, and the cultural preoccupation with it, is a reflection of a social sickness. It thus comes as no surprise that the literature on self-esteem is among the largest in the field. It reflects a problem of modern, individualist cultures in which the person is cut lose from supportive moorings. It also reflects the necessity for a psychology that focuses on the nutriments essential to a more secure and energizing way of life.

## Conclusion

TMT is a provocative view that suggests that people's existential impermanence yields a need to defensively cover themselves in a cloak of self-esteem. ST similarly suggests that self-esteem functions to defend people from falling prey to social exclusion. Both theories aptly explain certain defensive forms of self-esteem. SDT agrees that threats to the basic needs of the self can promote defensive processes, including a willingness to introject values or to maintain one's own worth by degrading others. However, SDT also suggests that the healthy development of self is more about the unfolding of intrinsic growth tendencies than about flights from anxiety. Tendencies toward autonomy, competence, and relatedness, when adequately supported, all fuel feelings of significance and worth. Our contribution to this debate is thus to highlight the crucial differentiation between social conditions that conduce toward insecurity and defense versus those that facilitate growth, well-being, and social integration. Understanding the dynamics of growth and defense in turn points the way toward a fuller psychology of personality.

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