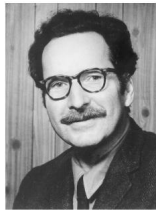
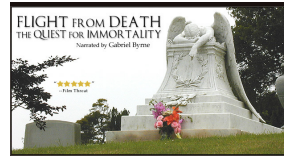


Terror Management: How Our Worldviews Help Us Deny Death

Luke Galen
Department of Psychology
Grand Valley State University

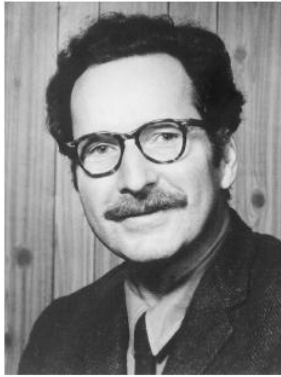


Ernest Becker



1. The theories of Ernest Becker.
2. Terror Management Theory and social science.
3. Implications for religion, politics, group conflict, materialism, vanity, creationism, atheism

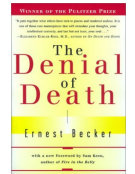
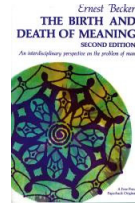
Thanks to Prof. Todd Williams at GVSU's dept. of psychology



Ernest Becker

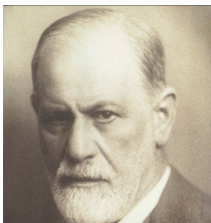
Freud was my
Daddy

- The Birth and Death of Meaning (1962)
- The Denial of Death (1973)
- Escape from Evil (1975)



Becker's Perspective: 3 Points

- Interdisciplinary
- Scholarly and Non-Reactionary
- Synthetic and Integrative
 - Metatheoretical
 - Essentialist



Freud



Otto Rank



Søren Kierkegaard

How are we similar to other Animals?

- We share an instinct for self-preservation
- We must reproduce and propagate the species
- We are animals...

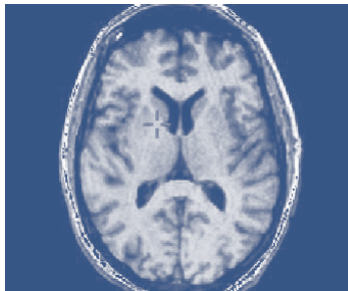


To Survive and Thrive.



How are we different from other animals?

- Big Brains / Complex Cognition



- Ability to think about ourselves and future

Consequences of Cognitive Development

- Self-Awareness
 - The Capacity for Awe
 - The Capacity for Self-Regulation
 - Creates a mind / body conflict



Søren Kierkegaard

Psychological Consequences

- This has two consequences for the child:
 - Inferiority Complex (Adler)
 - Neurosis
 - *The limitation of experience, the fragmentation of perception, and the dispossession of genuine internal control*
 - New Oedipal Complex (Revised from Freud)

The Ultimate Consequence

- DREAD
 - Fear of Mortality
 - Fear of Tragedy



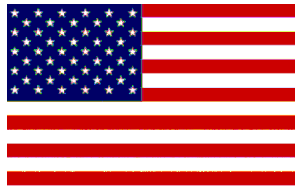
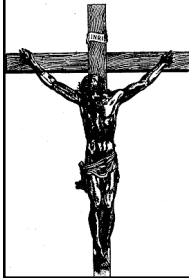
Fear, first of all, produced gods in the world – Statius (AD 45-96)

- Paradox: *Individuality within Finitude*
 - We are symbolic creatures trapped in a mortal body, aware of our own mortality
- We can only continue to function with this knowledge by embedding in a symbolic reality that will transcend death

“Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have” – James Baldwin, *the Fire Next Time*, 1963 .

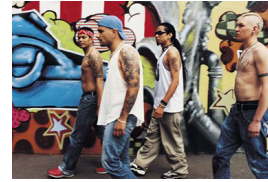
How We Deal With Our Existential Anxiety

- The Creation of Culture
 - Cultural Worldviews
 - Self-Esteem (By living up to the expectations of our worldviews)



Self-Esteem

- *The culturally derived sense that one is an object of primary value in a meaningful world. Is socially validated*
- Children receive love and security from parents, but transfer from parental base to external sources.
- Generalizes to peers during adolescence
- Social and cultural values as we enter adulthood (religion, ideologies, leaders)
- If conditions make sustaining faith in mainstream sources difficult, sources can shift to alternatives offering confidence and grand visions.



Culture as a Codified Hero System

“Some people work out their urge to superiority by plying their physical and sexual attractiveness-what the psychoanalysts call the Don Juan character. Other work it out by the superiority of their minds; others by being generous and helpful; others by making superior things, or money, or playing beautiful music, or being an unusual mimic and joke teller; some work it out by being devoted slaves: I am a locus of real value because I serve a great man. Others serve the corporation to get the same feeling, and some serve the war-machines. And so on and so on.” Ernest Becker

13

What is the ideal form of Heroism?

- Personal
 - Investment in oneself
- Social
 - Investment in others
- Secular
 - Investment in culturally prescribed ways (Publishing articles, painting your masterpiece, having children)
- Sacred
 - Investing in an abstract system of spirituality or meaning (religion or philosophical meaning system)

Cultural Worldviews

- Provides the answer to our cosmological questions
- Tells us what is good and bad
- Come from outside the self but become personalized
- Teach us how to Die
 - they provide us with a means through which we can transcend our mortality
 - Allow us to contribute to a system of meaning that will remain beyond our mortal years
 - A promise of *Immortality*.

Immortality

- Literal Immortality
 - Heaven
 - Reincarnation
- Symbolic Immortality
 - Children, legacies
 - The creation of something everlasting and meaningful



Immortality Striving maintains self esteem in the face of death



Cultural Relativity and Normality

- Problem: If self esteem is derived culturally by behavior corresponding with norms, what happens when we are exposed to alternative cultures?



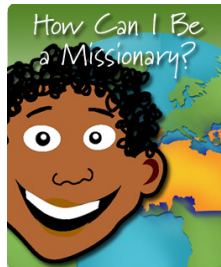
The love of hate

Why is there so much prejudice and hate?

1. Worldviews are fragile constructions
2. Alternative worldviews suggest that ours may be wrong
3. We strive to validate our own worldview

How do we deal with different others?

- Derogation
- Proselytize and convert



How do we deal with different others?

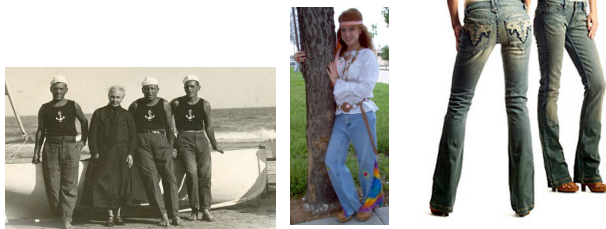
- Assimilation: absorb threatening minority into majority. Neutralizes threat



How do we deal with different others?

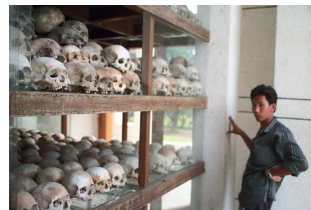


- Accommodation: Diffuse threat by incorporating elements of other worldviews stripped of full meaning.

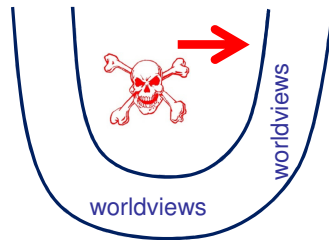


How do we deal with different others?

- Annihilation



Terror Management Theory (TMT) An empirical formulation of Becker's theories



1. Increase in death salience causes increase in worldview (defensive)
2. Challenging worldview causes spike (unconscious) in death anxiety.

Major TMT social psychologists:

Sheldon Solomon



Jeff Greenberg



Tom Pyszczynski



1. Increase in death salience causes increase in worldview (defensive)

Mortality Salience: Induce anxiety regarding death by contemplation

- Essay: "When I die _____".
- Accident film footage
- Subliminal priming using death words
- Proximity to cemetery

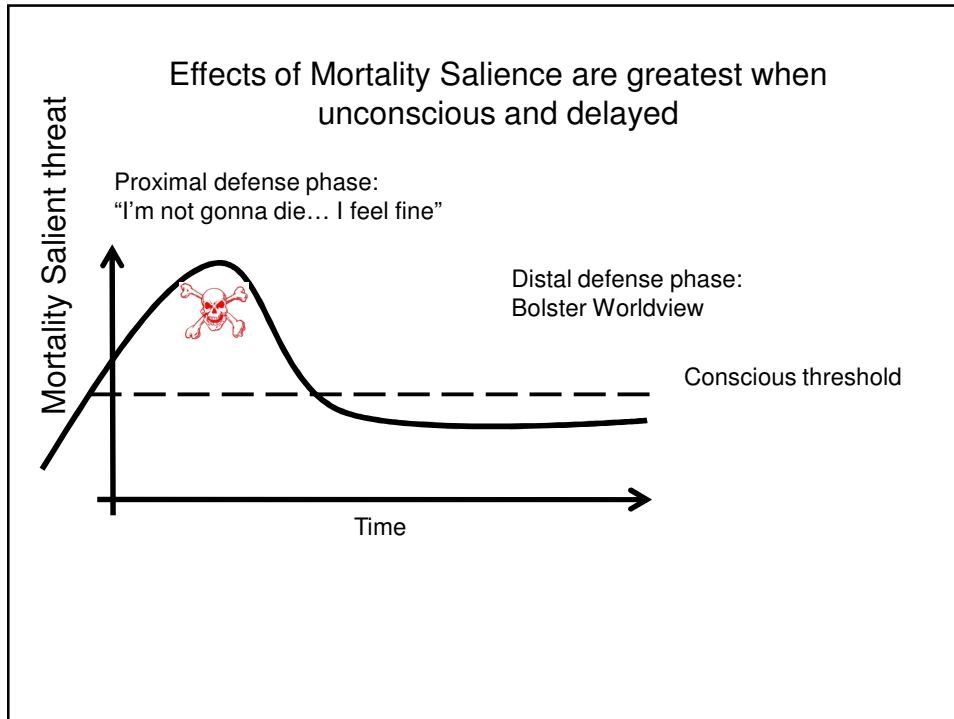
Mortality salience essay:

"Briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you"

"What do you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are dead?"

Dental Pain control essay:

"Briefly describe the emotions that the thought of dental pain arouses in you"



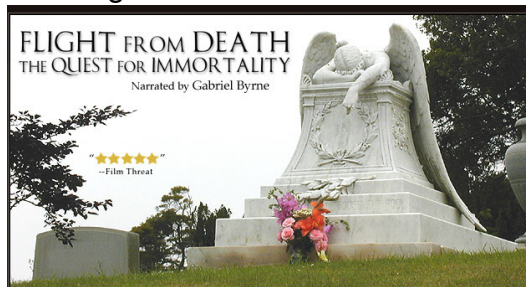
2. Challenging worldview causes spike (unconscious) in death anxiety.

How can we measure the unconscious elevation of death anxiety if its unconscious?

Death Thought Accessibility measure:

- DE __ __, SK __ __ L , COFF __ __
- Behavioral measures

Show clip from “Flight from Death” on TMT research



Terror Management and politics

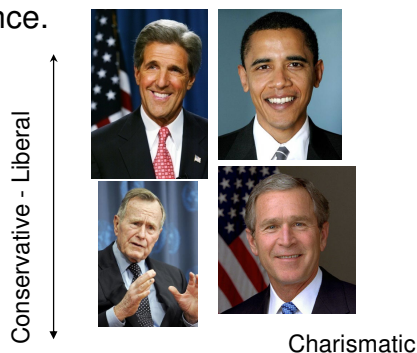
“It is fear that makes people so willing to follow brash strong-looking demagogues...capable of cleaning the world of the vague, the weak, the uncertain, the evil. Ah, to give oneself over to their direction – what calm, what relief”.



- Aftereffects of 9/11: Mortality Salience and worldview threat on a massive scale? Surges in church attendance, Bible sales, and religious website traffic.
- Experiments: Mortality reminders increased support for Bush. (Landau, et al., 2004)

Mortality Salience increases preference for charismatic candidates sharing one's political orientation (Kosloff et al., 2010)

- Some leaders have charisma:
 - confidence,
 - high expectations and optimism,
 - advocate value-based vision and collective identity
- Mortality salience exposure increased individuals' preference for 1) more charismatic candidates 2) of their own political preference.

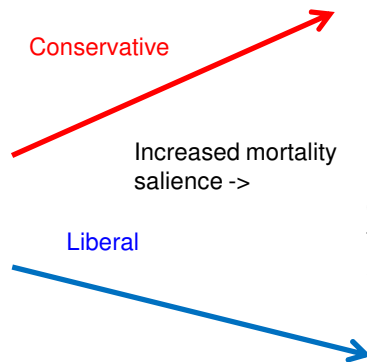


Mortality Salience can thus polarize Conservatives and Liberals

Greenberg et al., 1992

- Attitudes towards dissimilar others: Conservatives dislike dissimilarity, liberals like it.

Negative attitudes to dissimilar other



Example: Those people who have lost loved ones have polarized political opinions over time. But stronger effect for conservatives. (Chatard et al., 2010)

Implications for religious-political conflict

In experiments Mortality Salience caused:

- 1) Iranian students to support suicide attacks. When in benign state preferred a fellow student who argued that Islam is peaceful. When reminded of their death, these students shifted preference to a fellow student who advocated martyrdom by killing Americans.
- 2) US students to support extreme military action (preemptive, nuke) but latter only for conservatives.
- Death anxiety reduced when out-group members die (Hayes, 2008)

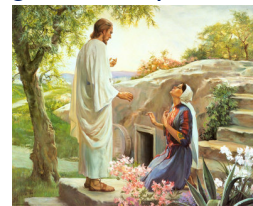
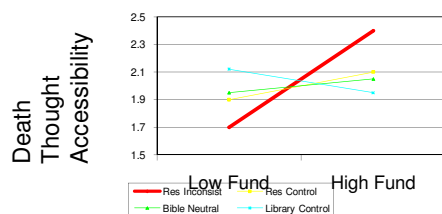
- Existence of alternative worldviews (religions) is challenging. “not all death is unwelcome. If a challenger to one’s worldview dies, there may be comfort.” Hayes et al., 2008
- Threat condition: Christians read news article on Muslims moving into Nazareth: “*The Islamic movement paraded down main street.. Dressed in Muslim battle gear, they proclaimed “Allah is great” etc.* Muslims will soon be a numerical majority. The **annihilation condition added: some Muslims died on their way to the march in plane crash.**
- Mortality salience caused the former condition to increase anxiety in Christians; the latter condition led to decreases.
- Irony: the pursuit of absolute certainty and defense of worldview can cause attitudes inconsistent with that view.



What happens when religious beliefs are challenged?

Fundamentalist beliefs and death awareness (Friedman & Rholes, 2006)

- Subjects read Bible passages in different conditions. Some passages were in a benign context but in one condition....
- “impeaching the resurrection” “There appear to be many direct contradictions in the 4 descriptions of the tomb scene. Who actually encountered the risen Jesus in the garden? Etc
- Some subjects low in fundamentalism, others were high.
- Death thoughts for High funds were greater in the Resurrection Inconsistency condition than in others.
- Beliefs function as “death anxiety buffers”. Might this explain why it is so hard for some to change beliefs?

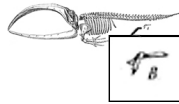
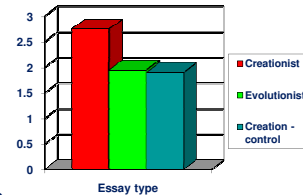


Creationism/ evolution and death thought access (Schimel 2007)

Pre-screened students either: Pro creation or pro evolution.

Later in semester, read essays challenging creationism: “how whales developed from land to sea animals” outlined their “leg” bones and pointed out how evolution could explain, not creationism”

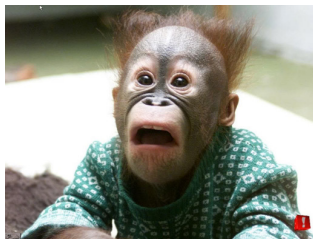
- Responded to death word fragment task (same as in gospel study).
- 3 groups: 1) Creationists viewing essay; 2) evolutionists viewing essay; 3) Creationists viewing control essay (not challenging)
- Predict: who had more accessible death thoughts?



Exposure to worldview threatening info (evolution) causes death thoughts to be more accessible. Again, could this explain what is at stake when people defend religious worldviews?

Distancing from our animal-ness

- Bodies are altered to transform from creaturely, sexual, mortal to symbolic, ethereal (soap, tattoo, jewelry, surgery).
- Death reminders increase preference for an article emphasizing the uniqueness of humans over other animals, and disconnection from natural world. (Goldenberg et al., 2001)
- Exposure to creaturely aspects (disease, bodily waste) causes increase in unconscious death thoughts.
- Therefore, being an animal is threatening because it reminds people of their vulnerability to death.
- Implications for creationism and evolution debates?

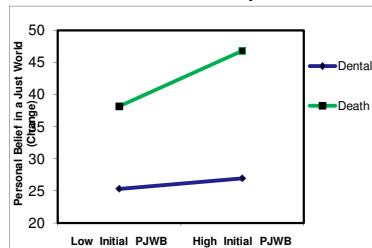


My study on Just World Belief and Terror Management:

Low JWB: Stuff happens

High JWB: People get what they deserve

- Individuals vary in belief that the world operates out of a fundamental pattern of justice; good is rewarded and bad is punished. People get what they deserve.
- This is a worldview, mortality threat should cause bolstering.
- I measured the JWB agreement at start of semester then exposed students to either mortality salience or dental pain.
- Re-measured their JWB after the experiment.



Can Mortality Salience cause bolstering of *positive* worldviews?

- But death reminders accompanied by making PROsocial values salient increases helping, tolerance, and charity (Gailliot,)
- Exposure to compassionate scriptures *decreased* fundamentalists' support for war. (Rothschild)
- In the Iranian study exposure to Koranic scripture ("do good...") combined with mortality reminders led to *less* hostility toward the west.
- Therefore, it depends on what aspects of religion are made salient.

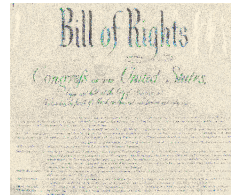
“But what about atheists? They don’t need immortality as a security blanket?”

“It doesn’t matter whether the cultural hero system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive, or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value,... of unshakable meaning.... ‘civilized’ society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money, and goods make man count for more than any other animal. In this sense, everything that man does is religious”. – Becker 1973

For secularists, self esteem may derive more from cultural accomplishments, artistic work, material possessions, or an ideology such as humanism. But these forms of immortality may be less satisfying than eternity.



大力支持农业



Summary: What then must we do?

- How to live with knowledge of mortality without forming worldviews and ideologies that are intolerant or harmful.
- Make the unconscious, conscious.
- Strive for immortality in a non-destructive way.
- Thank you.



Similar concept: Compensatory Control

"You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them...So it's not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.: – Obama

"I'm offended at his stereotype of religious people. I think most religious Americans are religious because they have faith in God, not because they have a lack of faith in their government. People don't turn to religion because government fails them". – blogger

Well.... Actually...in the same way that mortality threats increase compensation by bolstering worldviews...

- After being asked to recall events over which they had no control, individuals endorsed greater belief in God and increased defense of their political system.
- Challenging external political systems led to increased perceptions of personal control (i.e., defensive compensation)