

# Thirty Years of Terror Management Theory: From Genesis to Revelation

Tom Pyszczynski  
University of Colorado at  
Colorado Springs

Terror Management Theory was developed to answer three basic questions:

- Why do people need self-esteem?

Terror Management Theory was developed to answer three basic questions:

- Why do people need self-esteem?
- Why do people need to believe that out of all the possible ways of understanding the world, their own is the only one that is literally correct?

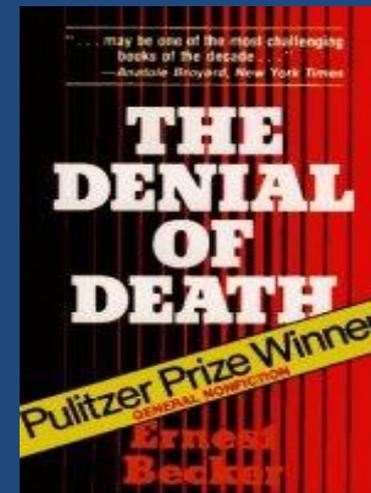
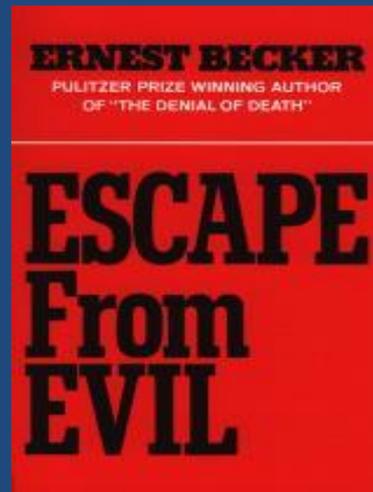
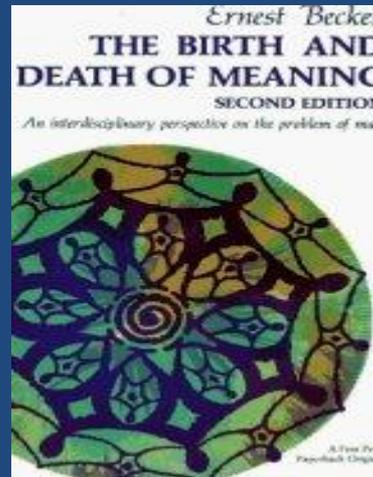
Terror Management Theory was developed to answer three basic questions:

- Why do people need self-esteem?
- Why do people need to believe that out of all the possible ways of understanding the world, their own is the only one that is literally correct?
- Why is it so difficult for people who are different from each other to peacefully get along with each other?

# The Roots of Terror Management Theory



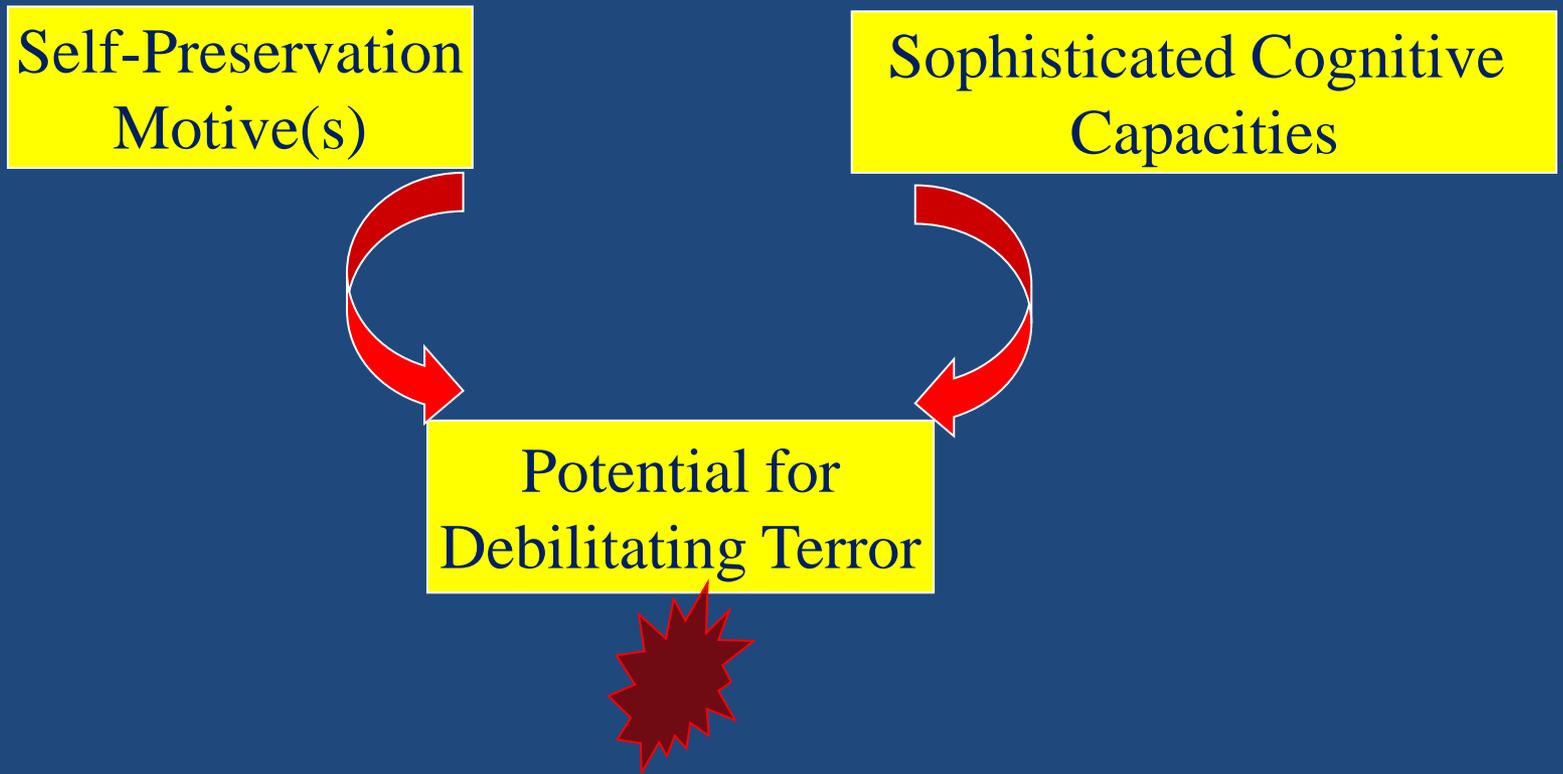
Ernest Becker (1925-1974)



# Terror Management Theory

- Starts with a consideration of how human beings are both similar to and different from all other animals.
- Evolved biological and psychological systems that function to keep us alive
- Sophisticated intellectual abilities that make us aware that we will die, and that death is inevitable, inescapable, and can come at any time

# Terror Management Theory



# Genesis

## Chapters 2 & 3, King James Version

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ... of the tree of the knowledge ... thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die... And when the woman saw that the tree was ... to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked ... And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast ... eaten of the tree ... cursed is the ground for thy sake; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

# Terror Management Theory

Self-Preservation  
Motive(s)

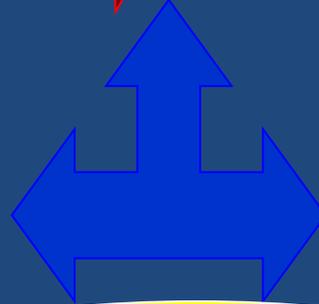
Sophisticated Cognitive  
Capacities

Potential for  
Debilitating Terror

Cultural Worldview

Self-Esteem

Close Relationships



# Modes of Death Transcendence

- Literal Immortality
  - Life after death: heaven, reincarnation, ghosts, joining with ancestral spirits

# Revelations

Chapters 20 & 21, King James Version

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and ... the dead were judged ... according to their works ... And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death...

# Modes of Death Transcendence

- Literal Immortality
  - Life after death: heaven, reincarnation, ghosts, joining with ancestral spirits
- Symbolic Immortality
  - Being part of and contributing to something greater than oneself that lasts forever

# Security Maintained through Social Consensus: Keeping the Faith

- Effective anxiety buffer functioning requires certainty regarding one's worldview and self-worth
- Multiple interpretations of experience and reality
- Most important aspects of cultural worldviews are abstract ideas and values with no visible referent
- Many of most important aspects of cultural worldviews run directly counter to observable experience and reality
- Living in a cultural world of ideas and values creates new function for social support

# Empirical Support for TMT

- Over 500 studies conducted in diverse countries and cultures:
  - United States, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, Brazil, United Kingdom, Ireland, Netherlands, Germany, Poland, France, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Serbia, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Iran, Algeria, Ivory Coast, India, China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Aboriginal Australia,

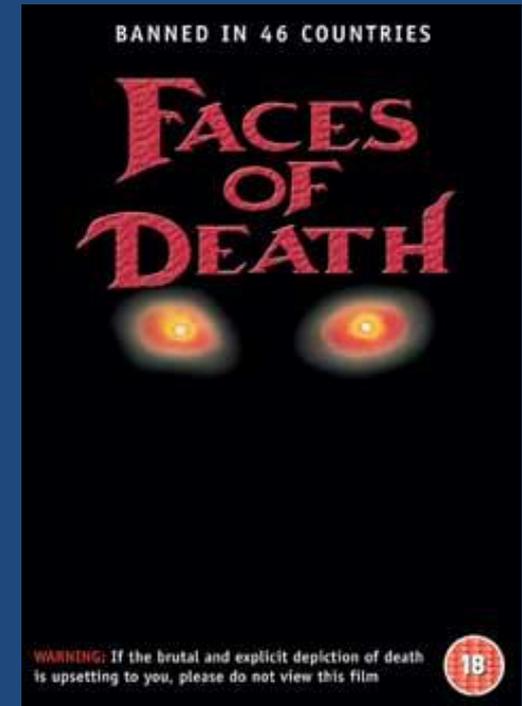
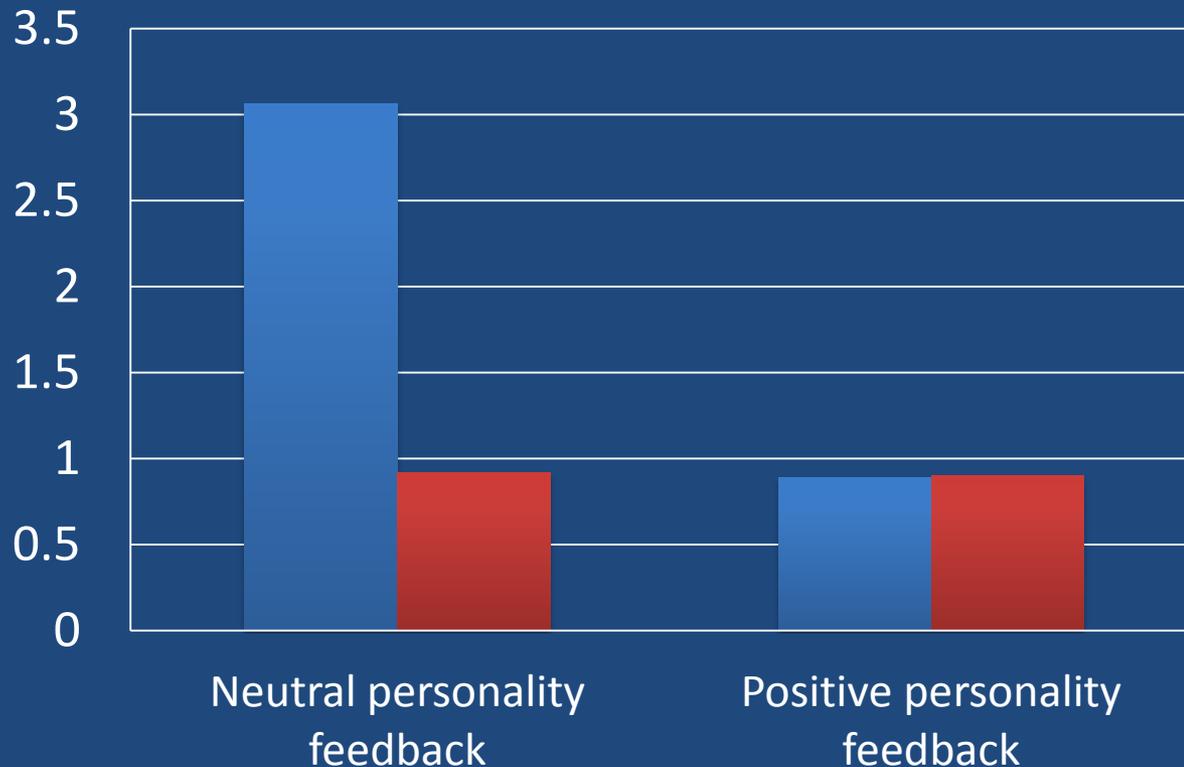
# Major Evidence for Terror Management Theory

- Increasing self-esteem, faith in one's cultural worldview or attachment security makes people less prone to anxiety and anxiety-related behavior, and reduces accessibility of death-related thought

# Raising self-esteem reduces anxiety in response to images of death

(Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, Rosenblatt, Burling, Lyon, Simon, & Pinel, 1992)

## Anxiety scores as a function of mortality salience and self-esteem



# Major Evidence for Terror Management Theory

- Increasing self-esteem, faith in one's cultural worldview or attachment security makes people less prone to anxiety and anxiety-related behavior, and reduces accessibility of death-related thought
- Reminders of death increase striving to maintain faith in one's cultural worldview, self-esteem, and attachment security

# Manipulating Mortality Saliience

*"Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you"*

---

---

---

---

*"What do you think happens to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead?"*

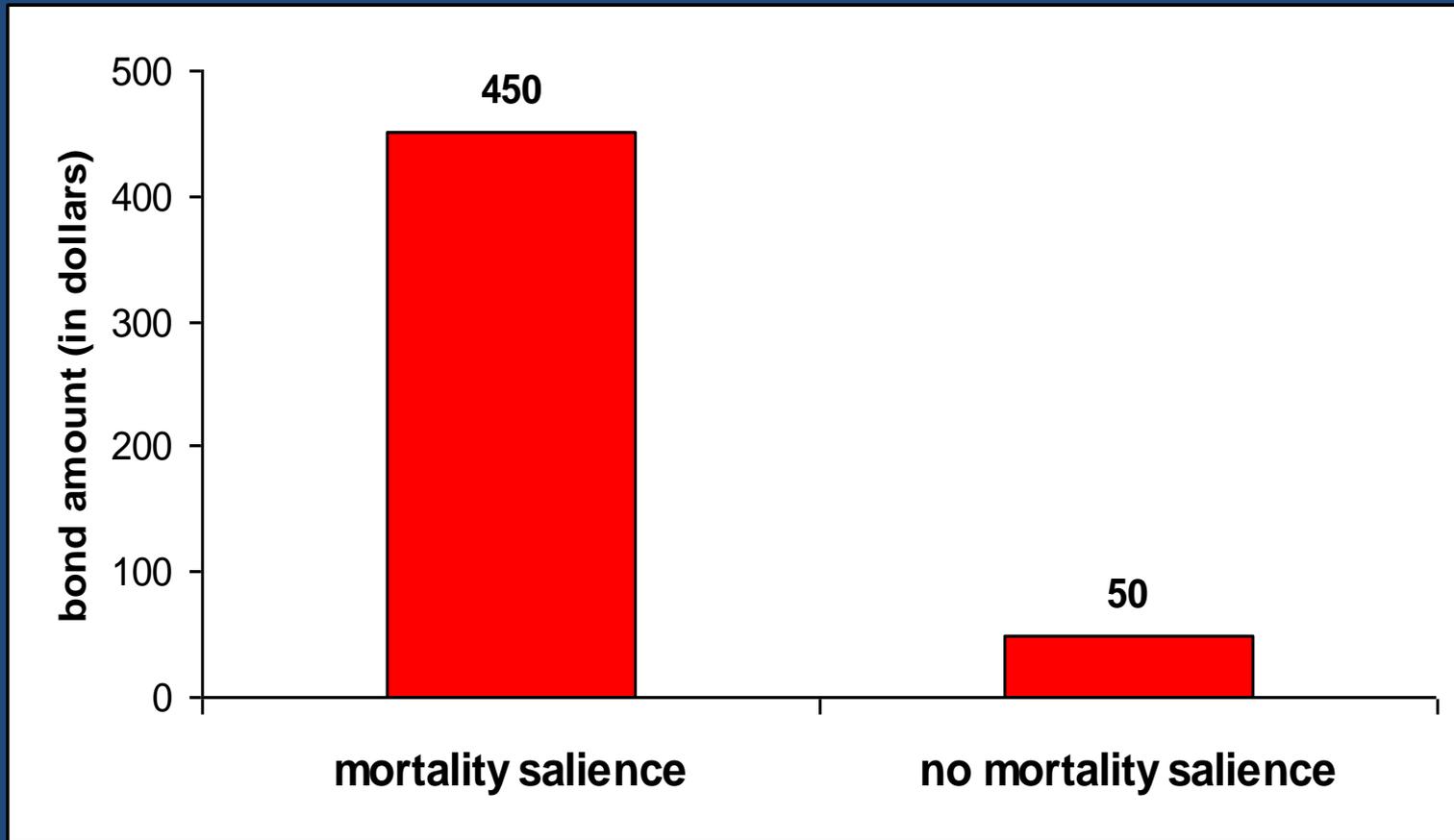
---

---

---

---

# Bond amounts for alleged prostitute as a function of mortality salience



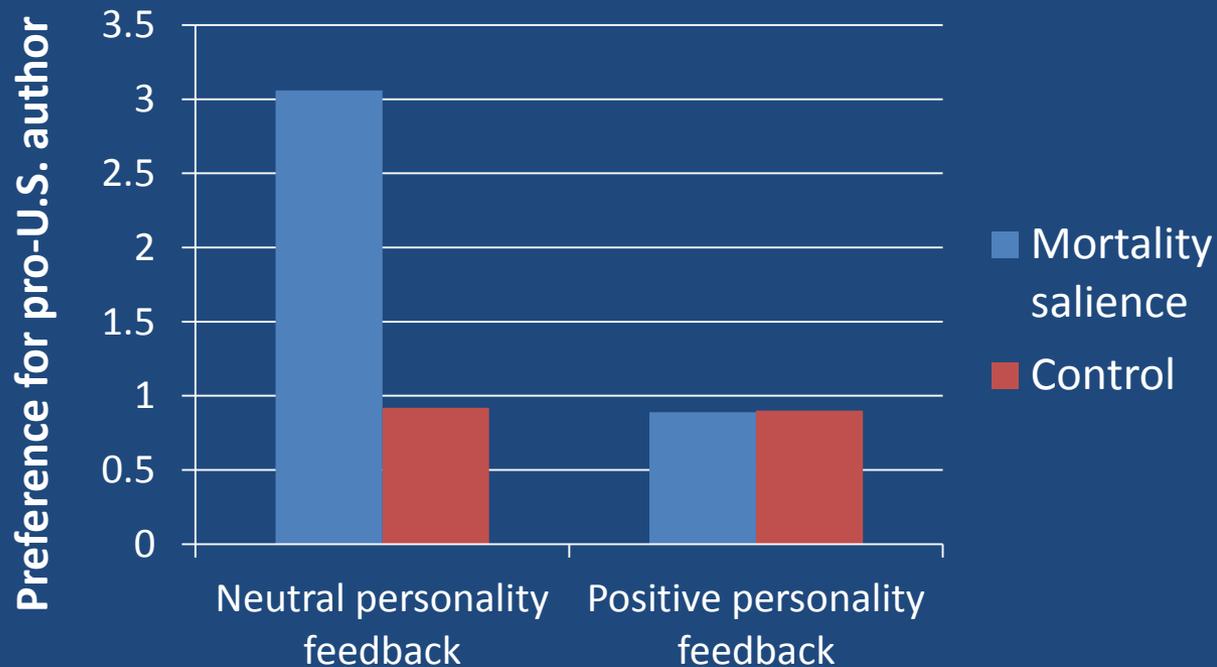
# Major Evidence for Terror Management Theory

- Increasing self-esteem, faith in one's cultural worldview or attachment security makes people less prone to anxiety and anxiety-related behavior, and reduces accessibility of death-related thought
- Reminders of death increase striving to maintain faith in one's cultural worldview, self-esteem, and attachment security
- Increasing self-esteem, faith in one's cultural worldview, or attachment security eliminates the effects of reminders of death on self-esteem striving and worldview defense

# Increasing self-esteem reduces mortality salience effects on worldview defense

Harmon-Jones, Simon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & McGregor, 1997

Preference for a pro-U.S. author as a function of mortality salience and self-esteem manipulation



# Major Evidence for Terror Management Theory

- Increasing self-esteem, faith in one's cultural worldview or attachment security makes people less prone to anxiety and anxiety-related behavior, and reduces accessibility of death-related thought
- Reminders of death increase striving to maintain faith in one's cultural worldview, self-esteem, and attachment security
- Increasing self-esteem, faith in one's cultural worldview, or attachment security eliminates the effects of reminders of death on self-esteem striving and worldview defense
- Threats to self-esteem, worldview, or attachment security increase the accessibility of death-related thoughts

# Worldview threat increases accessibility of death thoughts

Schimel, Hayes, Williams, Jahrig, 2007

- ❖ Canadian participants were exposed to a webpage that either derogated fundamental Canadian values or a webpage that derogated Australian values.
- ❖ Then, the accessibility of their death-related thoughts was measured using a word-fragment completion task.

# Measuring Death Thought Accessibility

## SAMPLE WORD COMPLETION TASK

We are simply pre-testing this questionnaire for future studies. Please complete the following by filling letters in the blanks to create words. Please fill in the blanks with the first word that comes to mind. Write one letter per blank. Some words may be plural. Thank you.

1. BUR \_\_ \_ D

2. PLA \_\_ \_

3. \_\_ \_ OK

4. WAT \_\_ \_

5. DE \_\_ \_

6. MU \_\_ \_

7. \_\_ \_ NG

8. B \_ T \_ LE

9. M \_ J \_ R

10. P \_\_ \_ TURE

11. FL \_ W \_ R

12. GRA \_\_ \_

13. K \_\_ \_ GS

14. CHA \_\_ \_

15. KI \_\_ \_ ED

16. CL \_\_ \_ K

17. TAB \_\_ \_

18. W \_\_ \_ DOW

19. SK \_\_ \_ L

20. TR \_\_ \_

21. P \_ P \_ R

22. COFF \_\_ \_

23. \_ O \_ SE

24. POST \_\_ \_

25. R \_ DI \_

# Death thought accessibility as a function of exposure to worldview threatening information

