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Terror Management Theory: Relevance for Control of the Intelligence Agent

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Title: Terror Management Theory: Relevance for Control of the Intelligence Agent

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Abstract. This article describes psychological findings stemming from terror management theory that have relevance for case officer control of an intelligent agent.

Terror management theory is founded on the premise that an awareness of mortality in conjunction with a motive for self-preservation creates the potential for psychological terror. As this awareness and this motive increase, so does the terror potential. The theory posits that an individual has two recourses to ward off or minimize the terror: (1) development and maintenance of a cultural worldview that provides meaning, values, order, and a sense of permanence permeated with the possibility of literal or symbolic immortality contingent on meeting or exceeding prescriptions and avoiding proscriptions and (2) development and maintenance of self-esteem stemming from believing that one is appropriately dealing with prescriptions and proscriptions. The theory also posits that mortality salience, e.g., reminders of mortality, increase the need for the above two recourses.

Empirical and experimental findings generated from terror management theory--although obtained for populations outside the world of intelligence--seem very relevant for the intelligence case officer in controlling an agent. As mortality salience increases--a phenomenon that can be titrated by the case officer: (1) the agent may well increase positive evaluations of people who validate one's belief system and negative evaluations of those who threaten it. Here the case officer cannot only become more positively evaluated by the agent but foster negative evaluations of other people who may threaten or impede an intelligence operation. (2) The agent may increase ingroup bias, i.e., increase positive evaluations of ingroup versus outgroup characteristics. The case officer, then, can become more positively evaluated by the agent by reinforcing an ingroup identity--e.g., by emphasizing similarities between case officer characteristics and those forming ego-syntonic and ego ideal components of the agent. (3) The agent may increase perceived consensus for his or her own beliefs. The case officer can employ perceived consensus to attenuate the agent's doubt and intensify the agent's comfort and acceptability about the nature of the intelligence operation. (4) The agent may become more reluctant to violate cultural norms. Here, the case officer may induce the belief in the agent that actions taken that are seemingly not in the best interest of the agent's own country or organization are quite congruent with the country's or organizations norms. In fact, the actions are being taken only because leaders of the country or organization are themselves violating these norms, and the agent is merely trying to right a wrong or to act in his or her best interests after leaders have cancelled a moral or social contract through their own violation of norms. (5) The agent may increase physical (and psychological) distance from outgroup members. This phenomenon can mitigate operations and communications security concerns of the case officer. This phenomenon, however, also may impede an operation if physical distance must at times be minimized. Here, the case officer might want to implicitly train the agent in psychological distancing techniques to increase toleration for operationally required physical proximity to outgroup members. (6) The agent may lower the threshold for aggression against those who violate the agent's cultural world view. If properly managed, this can work in the case office's favor. If the case officer is unaware of this phenomenon, it can spell operational disaster.

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Experienced case officers may view at least some of the above as supporting the lore of intelligence operations. More importantly, the development of terror management theory and the fostering of related empirical and experimental pursuits may lead to future operational successes that will correct and add to this lore. (See Arndt, J., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Pyszczynski, T., & Simon, L. (1997). Suppression, accessibility of death-related thoughts, and cultural worldview defense: Exploring the psychodynamics of terror management. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 5-18; Becker, E. (1962). *The birth and death of meaning*. NY: Free Press; Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (1986.) *The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory*. In R.F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Public self and private self* (pp. 189-212). NY: Springer-Verlag.) (Keywords: Intelligence, Terror.)