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From fear to meaning: terror management, cultural worldview, and collective dynamics in the context of war

Armed conflict introduces some of the most severe sources of stress a society can experience. War poses life-threatening conditions, impacting individuals through intense emotional responses — such as fear, distress, and grief — alongside physical suffering, material and personal loss, and constant need to adapt to deprivation. Because it endangers both civilians and military personnel, and leaves lasting scares that continue to afflict its victims long after the war ends, the stressors associated with

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the hostilities of war rank among the most profoundly traumatic experiences a person can endure (Miller & Rasmussen, 2024). Under these circumstances, individuals experience heightened and more frequent awareness of their mortality and vulnerability, making fear for one's life more intense and accessible.

Awareness of death — as a consequence of consciousness — is one of the key drivers behind the formation of a wide range of psychological defense mechanisms and sociocultural narrative structures that mitigate existential anxiety in humans. Research on Terror Management Theory (TMT) provides valuable insights into how people reconcile the inevitability of death with their pursuit of a meaningful everyday life, a sense of security, and cognitive consistency (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015). The core methodology found in TMT research remains largely experimental, which allows for causal inference but confines it to artificial environments for relationship testing. However, since its inception in 1980s, the TMT methodological choices have evolved and developed additional layers. While the foundational period used controlled writing tasks to prime mortality salience and demonstrate its causal connections to worldview defense in 1980s, later contributions brought further expansion and refinement during 1990s. It was also during this period when cross-cultural testing began in Europe, Asia and Latin America, to demonstrate the universality of the TMT tenets and enhance reliability of findings; however, TMT research is still limited to educated populations in WEIRD countries, chiefly. Later on, in 2000s the field has diversified even further, spanning different behavioral domains including consumer behavior (spending, saving, risk-taking, brand preferences), charitable donations, and aggression, as well as applied contexts such as marketing, politics, and intergroup relations. In addition to practical relevance, this research direction has gained data collected in real-world, naturalistic settings (including reaction to real events such as 9/11) and longitudinal contexts; however, it still holds that the core of TMT research is short-term experiments. Since 2010s TMT scholars have been collaborating to reveal the biological underpinnings of neural activity linked to mortality salience (i.e. skin conductance, cortisol levels, brain regions involved in processing relevant information etc.). Following the pandemic, after 2020 new topics relevant to global crisis have entered the orbit of TMT, so that presently it showcases a wide range of real-world problems from wars, terrorist attacks, to more mundane things including public health and health behavior, specific mental health issues (anxiety, PTSD), fear of epidemics and conspiracy beliefs (Cox, Darrell, & Arrowood, 2019; Dechesne & Bandt-Law, 2019; Stieger, Lewetz, Paschenko, & Kurapov, 2023).

Armed conflicts make individuals more vulnerable to thoughts about dying, making wartime contexts significant for testing this theoretical framework (Maltseva, Halimov, & Kuchynskyi, 2023). This paper examines how cognitive defense mechanisms, symbolic worldviews, and sociocultural structures discussed within TMT framework intersect in response to mortality awareness within the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

At the neurobiological level, defense mechanisms serve to shield individuals from existential distress engendered by the realization of one's finality, thereby influencing long-term psychological resilience and behavioral adaptation. At the sociocultural level, symbolic defense mechanisms — such as religious, ideological, and nationalistic

narratives — serve as frameworks for interpreting daily activities and aspirations (Solomon et al., 2015). According to Terror Management Theory scholars, culture provides invaluable tools to suppress death-related cognitions and develop consistent narratives linking personal cultural value to symbolic immortality (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Lifshin, Horner, Helm, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2021). Through these structures, individuals align personal identity with collective narratives, thereby reducing existential anxiety and reinforcing group cohesion.

However, heightened awareness of one's mortality — particularly in times of war and crisis — intensifies both individual and collective responses to existential fear. Historical and contemporary conflicts reveal patterns in which mortality awareness strengthens in-group loyalty, promotes ideological rigidity, and escalates intergroup hostility (Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). Yet, under certain conditions, shared existential threats can also foster social cooperation and collective resilience (Swann et al., 2010).

The psychological and social impacts of heightened awareness of wartime mortality illustrate how identity fusion (Whitehouse, 2018) and the construction of specific narratives (Singer, 2004) shape responses to existential threats and influence their behavioral expressions. Identity fusion is a sense of oneness with the group, where the distinction between the personal and collective self becomes permeable. In doing so, a shared motivational system channels personal agency toward collective goals (Swann & Buhrmester, 2015). As a result, fused individuals perceive the group's well-being as their own and often feel directly responsible for its actions (Whitehouse, 2018). This cognitive closeness extends to genetically unrelated members, as they are often perceived as if they were family (Atran, 2010). Through these mechanisms, identity fusion provides the cognitive base for national resilience and solidarity. Psychological mechanism fosters communities to withstand the mental strain of threat (Swann et al., 2010) — an effect observable in Ukraine, where shared adversity has intensified solidarity, moral commitment, and collective endurance (Kutsenko, 2025; Golovakha et al., 2023).

This publication explores the theoretical importance of examining how war-related stress influences individuals' perception of danger and awareness of mortality, and how cultural worldviews can offer cognitive buffers against these effects. By integrating these dimensions, the study aims to (1) enhance the conceptual understanding of stress processes — particularly contrasting stress exposure with perceived stress within their broader psychological framework, and (2) highlight the relevance of research on identity fusion and Terror Management Theory, applying its premises to the context of the war in Ukraine.

Theoretical foundations of terror management: mortality awareness and individual defense

Evolutionary and neurobiological foundations of threat response

Sociocultural systems envelop the psychological mechanisms of individuals, and the first factor to examine is the affective trigger of these mechanisms — fear. The defense mechanisms underlying fear are (1) threat detection and (2) response. Human beings construct symbolic realities from the ground up, and the structure of this

discussion will follow the same logic: starting with the neurobiological apparatus as a means of responding to physical dangers, progressing through affective reactions as their consequence, tracking patterns of interaction with the external world, and culminating in their conceptualization into symbolic narratives. At the core of these narratives is culture, which plays a central role in shaping group and individual identities. The final step in this exploration is understanding how these composite formations function within the context of war.

The human cognitive apparatus has evolved into a complex, multilayered structure, primarily to ensure the physical survival of the organism (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2011). Achieving this goal requires (1) the development of foundational systems for interacting with threats, (2) adaptive strategies to incorporate responses to novel stimuli, (3) and minimization of risks in the space around us (Buckner & Carroll, 2007). This intricate process also necessitates the interaction of sensory, motor, and social components, which are refined through repeated iterations of engagement with predators, prey, other humans, and environmental factors (Montgomery, 2024). To grasp these connections, it is crucial to consider two key components of human defense mechanisms and the specific objectives they aim to achieve.

Affective traits – such as fear – function as adaptive filters for learning, decision-making, and motivated goal-setting. These traits influence prioritization of stimuli in directing an individual's attention. For instance, fear enhances sensitivity to unfamiliar situations, objects, or people, potentially hindering rapport and interaction (O'Connell et al., 2024). This algorithm is a product of defensive motivational schemas that regulate avoidance and response when faced with perceived threats. These schemas engage survival mechanisms that detect potential threats and initiate automatic defensive responses. Some detection systems are innate and designed to respond to common threats, while others are learned through experience, enabling recognition of novel dangers (Zsido & Hout, 2023; LeDoux, 2014).

When activated, these schemas trigger adaptive responses that enhance the individual's ability to cope with threats effectively. They can involve fleeing, fighting or freezing strategies. Escape or avoidance (distancing) from danger serves to physically separate an individual from the threat. For example, sneezing blocks pathogens from entering the body, while disgust fosters a psychological and physical distance from harmful agents (Oaten et al., 2009). Aggressive defense, expressed through anger, scratching, or hitting, aims to neutralize the source of danger by inflicting harm upon it. In its turn, freezing serves several distinct purposes: facilitating hazard identification and analysis, increasing the likelihood of going undetected by a predator, and reducing the likelihood of triggering the predator's reflex to attack (Roelofs, 2017).

Fear also promotes shared care, protection, and provisioning within group dynamics, particularly in childcare. Danger-motivated cooperation strengthens the survival chances of a social unit — whether a family or a larger group (Mobbs et al., 2015).

Furthermore, humans possess a cognitive skill for anticipating, modelling, and predicting future scenarios (Atance & O'Neill, 2001). When motivated by fear, this ability allows individuals to adapt their behavioral patterns to overcome potential risks. For example, individuals in ancestral human populations observed animal

migrations to prepare for food shortages and recognized signs of predators to avoid dangerous encounters (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007).

Biological mechanisms offer immediate responses to physical threats. Yet, human consciousness is more complex and needs additional cognitive structures to manage abstract fears of death. Thus, the foundational assumption the TMT scholarship is building on is that the evolutionary drive for survival in the context of existential threat can be translated into or traced back to a psychological need for self-esteem.

Self-esteem as a key protective symbolic buffer

A central component of Terror Management Theory (TMT) accounting for the culture's ability to stave off thoughts about mortality is self-esteem. According to TMT theorists, it functions as a buffer against existential anxiety (Schimel et al., 2019). To understand this dynamic, we should look through the lens of a hierarchy of standards (Pyszczynski et al., 1990). Within this framework, individuals direct their attention to various levels of goal setting and achievement. Failure to reach a goal prompts a shift in attention toward other possible means. If these attempts also fail, the individual's focus moves «upward» to higher levels of the hierarchy. Consider a student seeking university admission. Their first priority is to attain high exam scores. If they fall short, they may retake the tests with new study methods. Persistent rejection, however, may shift their attention toward questioning their methods of learning. Should these adjustments also fail, they might start doubting their aptitude or overall academic capability. What began as a specific failure on a single test can spiral into self-doubt across multiple layers of meaning.

The instinct for self-preservation — a fundamental human drive (Khantzian & Mack, 1983) — and according to TMT scholars, it is deeply connected to the social need for self-worth, which, in its turn, serves as a symbolic defense mechanism against the fear of death. When an individual detects a mismatch between their self-concept and hierarchical standards, existential terror can surface. This terror often expresses itself through increased anxiety, embarrassment, shame, or guilt in specific situations. Then, it motivates the individual to modify their behavior to reduce the discrepancy. The depth of this experience depends on how high in the hierarchy the discrepancy occurs. Discrepancies at higher levels of the hierarchy result in more profound negative consequences because there are fewer intermediate levels to buffer existential anxiety. In contrast, focusing on lower levels of the hierarchy mitigates the impact, as these levels provide more protective layers to shield the individual from the source of stress.

By understanding the hierarchy of self-esteem, we can analyze how its destabilization affects people under reminders of death. Intense reminders of mortality challenge personal barriers. This activates compensatory strategies that defend the collective worldview, offering a lasting meaning.

Worldview defense and self-esteem bolstering through increased mortality salience and compensatory mechanisms

Over the past thirty years, a wealth of multidisciplinary, cross-cultural experiments on mortality salience has been conducted (Burke & Faucher, 2010). These studies highlight several important relationships. First of all, suppression of anxiety buffers

(e.g., self-worth and cultural worldview salience) can lead to death-related thoughts. Failure, rejection, challenges to deeply held beliefs, or the loss of a close relationship can crack the layer that shields the mind. Latent anxiety re-emerges. Thoughts of death become more frequent, intrusive, and harder to dismiss. This can result in compensatory behaviors (e.g., seeking validation, reinforcement of beliefs) or maladaptive responses (e.g., depression or substance abuse) to distract and numb the individual emotionally.

Heightened mortality awareness evokes anxiety because it disrupts the sense of safety, coherence, and meaning. Existential anxiety manifests in affective and behavioral responses: (1) feelings of fear and vulnerability, (2) and avoidance of death-related stimuli or engagement in activities aimed at reaffirming a cultural worldview. The intensity of this anxiety is influenced by factors such as personality differences, the context in which death reminders occur, and the strength of an individual's psychological buffers (Cox et al., 2019).

Mortality awareness also amplifies the defensive efforts aimed at bolstering self-esteem. Self-esteem provides a sense of personal significance and reduces the salience of death-related thoughts (Ben-Ari et al., 1999). This tendency often manifests in the pursuit of achievements, seeking approval, adherence to cultural norms, and prosocial behaviors. In such contexts, activities that reinforce self-esteem tend to take precedence.

Furthermore, thoughts of death can also trigger avoidance of self-awareness. Tasks that expose personal limitations or vulnerabilities are deliberately avoided. For example, individuals may steer clear of introspective activities (e.g., written reflections or even looking at their reflection in a mirror), as these actions increase awareness of their finite existence (Kesebir & Pyszczynski, 2012).

Finally, there is often an active defense of one's worldview aimed at reducing the salience of death-related thoughts. A cultural worldview provides a sense of order, stability, and continuity. Compensatory strategies in this context include affirming or defending cultural, religious, or ideological beliefs, which alleviate existential anxiety. Individuals restore psychological balance and mitigate the fear of death because they associate themselves with something enduring.

Cultural worldviews as symbolic buffers: mechanisms of meaning and existential regulation

Cognitive processing of reality: categorization, narrative schemas, and identity-linked meaning

External reality is complex due to extensive amounts of information to process. The human cognitive system does not engage with this complexity in its entirety. Instead, it focuses attention on specific aspects and processes only a small portion of the data at a time. This selective attention enables the classification of phenomena, simplifies their intricacy, and assigns particular meanings within a given context (Peterson, 2002). These *classifications* are then assembled into *narrative schemes* for universal use in similar situations (Broadbent, 1958).

Anomalies (something that does not fit within the narrative framework) appear and prompt reconceptualization — modifications to parts of the narrative. We

encounter objective reality and create *representations* of it. These representations, although abstract and symbolic, have material consequences. In that they influence behavior and shape long-term plans. Our perception is organized to process them efficiently, thus ensuring effective monitoring of the environment and an adequate adaptive response. Let's examine the elements of this process more closely.

The first element can be referred as *simplification*. It breaks down multi-layered experiences into more manageable fragments, making some of them focal while suppressing others. This occurs when an individual directs attention to specific facets of reality (Husserl, 2001a). For instance, when a hunter enters a forest, their attention focuses on immediate, relevant cues — sounds, nearby presence, and distinct smells — temporarily ignoring details essential for tracking prey (e.g., footprints or broken branches). This kind of compartmentalization enables quicker situational assessment and response but inevitably obscures other dimensions of the experience that remain latent.

Another aspect of this process can be described as *classification*. Classificatory operations structure perception by comparing new stimuli with pre-existing categories of objects and ideas and assigning labels. This process relies on two enclaves of information: (1) Socialization knowledge (e.g., the product of socially learning socio-cultural norms and values as well as acquiring an understanding of their meaning and valence). (2) Personal experience capturing a unique record of interaction with the world.

Classification incorporates the unknown into a field of study (Heine & Vohs, 2006). For example, an unfamiliar object (e.g., a tool with unclear function) might be classified as «a kind of axe» based on its shape and perceived function. We fit it into a recognizable system of meanings. Classification reduces the stress of uncertainty and clear the way for action. However, this also limits the perception of other potential roles for the object, constraining interpretation within predefined boundaries (Park, 2010).

Categorization extends classification by transforming fluid categories into static, overgeneralised representations. This process results in the «sedimentation of meaning» (Husserl, 2001b). Repeated engagement with phenomena coalesces into established narratives. For instance, encountering a person with a subcultural style may prompt a stereotypical reaction that prematurely locks in their values, views, and behaviors. The benefit of stereotypical perception is, famously, efficiency; it saves us cognitive effort. Yet, it also restricts the ability to recognize the individual's inherent nuance and dynamic nature, making our perceptions inaccurate and leaving our judgments prone to error.

Categories relevant to the self are logically combined into a *self-narrative*, answering three main questions: Where have I come from? (i.e. coherent stories about the past); Where am I now? (i.e., identification with specific ideas, roles, and groups); and "Where am I going?" (i.e., future goals grounded in current identities). Narratives are instrumental in structuring daily life and providing self-assurance. They provide psychological protection from the chaos of external reality and enable effective interactions with other people. Identities and identity-linked structures infuse life events with meaning — specifically, for an event to be stressful, its outcomes must

be identity-relevant. Articulating the meaning through self-narratives allows us to create a sense of order, reduce existential anxiety, and foster a coherent personal identity.

The processes of simplifying and categorizing reality are extrapolated to the social level, to ensure group coordination. Thus, personal narratives are integrated into shared cultural and religious systems, which transform fragmented perceptions into a coherent collective structure.

Collective narratives as group meaning-making systems

Fragmented individual experience — integrated into a self-narrative — also operates at the collective level. Cultural and religious narratives function as group meaning-making systems (Eliade, 1959; McAdams, 1993). As humans are social creatures, most life experiences occur in interaction with others. Narratives serve to impose meaningful order on lived experience. By encompassing the social nature of daily life, these stories cultivate a sense of belonging and reduce existential isolation.

A social group is in need of coherence in beliefs, values, and goals to cooperate efficaciously. Without such coherence, cognitive dissonance arises (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). This dissonance increases vulnerability to the fear of the unknown — particularly the fear of death — and disrupts an individual's ability to perceive their life as coherent and meaningful. A lack of stable internal structure heightens psychological distress (Campbell et al., 1996). Cultural and religious frameworks provide tools to ensure individual congruence with culture by offering stable guidelines for what is «right,» «true,» and «valuable» (Batson & Stocks, 2004). They structure human experience and deliver predefined codes of behavior, moral clarity, and existential purpose. When people frame their lives as part of a broader cosmological, historical, or symbolic order, these frameworks resolve inconsistencies between competing beliefs or behaviors. They embed personal experience within a larger, more meaningful context, and attach valence and value to it. Adherence to a collective narrative promotes a consistent sense of personal identity. By aligning with a larger normative structure shared by one's social group, individuals gain a sense of purpose, control, and moral grounding (Peterson, 2002). In their eyes, their personal narratives become part of a collective understanding of life and their role within it, promoting psychological stability and reducing existential fear.

The stability of collective systems of meaning is maintained not only through abstract beliefs but also through concrete explanatory models that structure the chaos of the outside world. Cultural mythology and ritual practices become practical tools for embodying these narratives.

Cultural mythology and rituals as an explanatory model for natural phenomena, disasters, and crises

Cultural myths and cosmologies offer explanations that place meaning and predictability into natural phenomena, disasters, and life cycles (Durkheim, 2001). By attributing events to divine will or natural laws, such explanations convert unordered

or ambiguous events into orderly and understandable events. For instance, myths about wars between gods — impersonated human values and ideals — not only allowed violence to be symbolically enacted rather than physically, but also articulated why certain patterns of activity were more beneficial to social relations. Similarly, rituals tied to harvests and seasons allowed groups to brace for winter, plan activities, celebrate collective work, and enjoy hard-earned comforts. These structures redirect attention away from the corporeal difficulties of existence toward a narrative significance imbued with ritual, holidays, and socialization opportunities. It can be argued that in a manner, rituals provide a unique therapeutic that helps prepare for enduring hardship and pluck up the courage before ordeals and battles.

The utility of cultural mythology is most clearly visible in how external contingencies — for example, pain, personal loss, or natural catastrophe — are brought into larger plan or higher purpose. By assigning adversity to divine will, karmic retribution, or an opportunity for self-reformation, human agents impose comforting order on natural disorder and randomness. For example, myths anthropomorphize natural disasters and find causes in the activities of gods or supernatural entities. In the Asia-Pacific, volcanoes are explained in myths as gods angered by human actions and are appeased by means of specialized rituals (Nunn, 2014). Similarly, Indian astrology and divination frameworks connect natural disasters to omens, locating such incidents in a bigger cosmological scheme that provides meaning and guidance to act (Beinorius, 2017). Interestingly, psychoanalytic theory also has a similar pathway to individual self-expansion through reflection on the past, integration of traumatic experience, and personal growth. Similarly, Christian philosophical systems provide the same functionality through confession and forgiveness rituals that reframe suffering and guilt as locations for redemption and spiritual rebirth. Magical thinking has become increasingly prevalent during the full-scale war in Ukraine. Recent data indicate that at least 43% of citizens believe in astrology (35%), extrasensory perception (25%), or tarot reading (15%) (KIIS, 2024). An existential threat creates conditions that foster the renewal of archaic cognitive defenses that were used when cultural perceptions were different. Within this context, magical thinking serves as a means of compensating for perceived loss of control and a mechanism for alleviating anxiety.

In summary, shared cultural and religious narratives constitute a collective identity that transcends individual existence, buffers against existential fear, and plunges the self into an extended, long-term symbolic matrix. Narratives unite members of the group around a common set of beliefs, values, and representations of reality. They produce feelings of belonging that counter loneliness and attenuate psychic tension from fear of being. These rituals and practices — such as collective worship, storytelling, celebrations, and collective activities — reconstruct these stories and foster a sense of order and security. These rites embed shared values and periodically offer people a chance to reaffirm their commitment to group membership. Synchronized behavior enhances a feeling of oneness and affective bond, ultimately building psychological resilience. Anchoring symbolic abstract narrative within concrete physical behavior, these rituals bridge the gap between the abstract and physical planes of human experience (Whitehouse, 2023).

Collective dynamics in wartime: behavioral adaptation and identity fusion

War-related stressors, psychological distress, and coping mechanisms

Wars have detrimental effects on individuals and societies, leading to difficulty in adaptation and various mental disorders. Because the threat of death and unpredictability persist, they cause unease and disrupt life. So, people strive to cope with the constant fear and insecurity. This can inflict severe, long-term, or chronic psychological consequences (Shifron, 2023).

In armed conflict-affected regions, depression, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are much more prevalent, particularly in women and children. Incidence of such disorders is twice as high in populations that have direct exposure to conflict (Carpiniello, 2023). Then, socio-economic stressors (e.g., displacement, financial losses, and separation from family and community) further aggravate preexisting mental conditions (Dembitskyi et al., 2024).

Successful wartime adaptation requires the active cultivation of resilience resources and the development of specific coping mechanisms. These tools are necessary to mitigate the negative psychological fallout (Harkusha & Dubinskyi, 2023). Resilience improves problem-solving skills and fortifies the “psychological protective membrane”. It offers individuals the capacity to bounce back after facing adversity. For example, the resilience narrative in Ukraine drives multiple outcomes during wartime. It rebuilds morale, secures greater political support, and strengthens narratives essential for cultivating international solidarity.

Efficient social support systems also play a vital role in reducing the prevalence of mental disorders and promoting recovery (Chouhan, 2016). By developing resilience as a skill and adopting adaptive coping strategies — like reinterpreting events through personal and collective narratives — individuals can transform stress into adaptive coping processes. This enhances their ability to navigate and recover from the hardships of war.

The presence of destructive military stressors fundamentally changes an individual’s cognitive activity and actualizes the fear of death as a central determinant of behavior. Accordingly, overcoming psychological distress shifts from the realm of individual resilience to the realm of actively defending value orientations.

The impact of mortality awareness on individual and collective value-based defenses

The experience of war, which heightens mortality awareness, also has a great influence on how individuals and groups react to core values and worldviews. Mortality awareness usually evokes more radical thinking, discriminatory conduct, and stronger aggression against the members of the out-group (Reiss & Jonas, 2019). This mechanism is explained by TMT, which posits that awareness of mortality leads people to defend their cultural worldview as an existential anxiety-buffering mechanism (Pyszczynski et al., 1997).

Defensive reactions shape social behavior and attitudes, especially toward those outside the group. For example, antagonism rises when groups or individuals challenge in-group beliefs (Jonas & Fritzsche, 2013). Self-esteem modulates emotional states and buffers mortality awareness effects. High self-esteem directly mitigates defensive reactions against threats to existence. In addition, heightened awareness of mortality boosts in-group identification and thereby more active defense of one's in-group narrative (Hohman & Hogg, 2015; Maltseva, Halimov, & Kuchynskyi, 2023) and prejudice against out-group's value systems. As a result, mortality salience can be capable of escalating intergroup conflict through heightened prejudice, stereotyping, and aggression. But in some cases, awareness of the fact that a common crisis exists against the group may foster greater tolerance towards outsiders because people seek safety, order, and stability under a collective identity.

The defense of worldview in wartime is not limited to ideological beliefs but manifests in specific social connections that profoundly alter the structure of personality. This process leads to the phenomenon of *identity fusion* linking the individual and collective values systems to enhance the motivation for collective spirit, solidarity and soothing.

*Collective self-identification, self-sacrifice,
and solidarity through identity fusion in wartime*

Identity fusion under war circumstances generates strong pro-group conduct, whereby people will frequently place group needs over personal safety. Strong identification psychologically with the group incites people to self-sacrifice, even going to the extent of participating in combat and perishing for their own group or for shared values (Whitehouse, 2018). Civilians can become very group-loyal, even at high personal risk.

This is due to identity fusion, which refers to a psychological state in which people in the same group feel closely connected to one another. This results in altruism when there is a crisis (Buhrmester et al., 2015). For example, people can identify with the country, neighbors, or even strangers in public places like subways. Dysphoric experiences — such as fear and psychological distress — can promote cooperation and in-group bond development. Mutual hardships strengthen in-group unity and solidarity.

Being in potentially lethal situations typically increases cooperative behavior. Strongly bonded individuals connected by identity fusion will sometimes engage in self-sacrifice for the sake of group survival. Those allegiances are based on emotional connection, whereas shared stories provide an example of interaction, expectations, and structure.

Conclusions

From an evolutionary perspective, existential anxiety has led to the development of biological, cognitive, and sociosymbolic defense mechanisms. With them, individuals cope more effectively with the awareness of death and sustain psychological balance to act in the context of daily stressors and interactions. According to Terror

Management Theory (TMT), symbolic systems such as cultural and national narratives serve as buffers against death awareness. With them, a person maintains functional self-esteem and everyday coherence of meaning. When a worldview is challenged, people tend to reaffirm their shared values and strengthen their identification with their group.

During wartime, brutality, media exposure to violence, and direct threats to life heighten levels of fear, anxiety, and vulnerability to mental illness. Mortality salience triggers the activation of the symbolic worldview. Then, the identity fusion builds upon this as a complementary layer (under existential threat, shared adversity blurs the lines between personal and collective identities). This sociocognitive mechanism fosters a sense of solidarity, group responsibility, and a readiness for collective action. In summary, this theoretical synthesis highlights that while TMT explains how symbolic worldviews mitigate individual existential terror, identity fusion provides the specific mechanism that channels this individual defense into collective persistence. This dynamic interaction transforms war-related mortality salience from a source of paralyzing distress into a catalyst for intensified social solidarity.

Thus, TMT and identity fusion provide a complex yet subtle understanding of how exposure to war-related stress affects psychological adaptation, collective resilience, and the maintenance of meaning in the face of ongoing danger. The shared experience of external life threats and outer aggression reinforces social bonds and enhances the psychological adaptation necessary for navigating life in a country that is at war. Ultimately, studying these dynamics can clarify how Ukrainians are confronting the immediate challenges of conflict and striving to preserve their values despite ongoing adversity.

Future research should focus on empirically testing this integrative framework through longitudinal studies within the Ukrainian population. Research should particularly examine the durability of identity fusion as the conflict progresses, whether the boundaries between the individual and the group will continue to blur, leading to intense loyalty and a willingness to make personal sacrifices, even at the risk of one's life, or whether cumulative stress or other factors will deteriorate this dynamic. Besides, assessing how symbolic buffers undergo structural transformation during the transition from active hostilities to post-war reconstruction may reveal the nuances of collective meaning-making. Furthermore, examining worldview defense mechanisms within modern, technologically mediated, and long-distance-oriented conflicts will clarify the intersection between individual existential anxiety and digitized social environments.

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НАЗАР ЛІСОВИЙ, КАТЕРИНА МАЛЬЦЕВА

Від страху до осмисленості: менеджмент терору, культурний світогляд та колективна динаміка в контексті війни

Люди долають екзистенційну тривогу, спричинену усвідомленням смертності, через комплексні психологічні механізми, покликані зробити життя більш впорядкованим. Еволюційні засади теорії управління терором (англ.: *Terror Management Theory*, TMT) розкривають, яким чином самооцінки, культурні світогляди та структуровані системи переконань функціонують як буфери, що пом'якшують вплив думок про смерть. Культура й релігія відіграють ключову роль у наданні сенсу, відчуття безпеки та шляхів до символічного безсмертя, виконуючи важливу психологічну функцію у зменшенні екзистенційної тривоги. Під час війни психологічний тиск зростає, оскільки підвищене усвідомлення смертності впливає на колективну ідентичність, згуртованість усередині групи та міжгрупові конфлікти, формуючи цінності й поведінку в умовах екстремальних загроз.

Збройний конфлікт створює одні з найсерйозніших і найруйнівніших стресорів. Війна ставить людину перед безпосередньою загрозою життю й породжує інтенсивні емоційні реакції — страх, розпач, горе — поряд із фізичними стражданнями, матеріальними й особистими втратами, а також постійною необхідністю адаптуватися до нестачі й невизначеності. Війна ставить під загрозу як цивільних, так і військових, і залишає слід, що дається взнаки довідо після завершення бойових дій. Такі стресори належать до найтяжчих травматичних досвідів, які може пережити індивід. За таких умов люди частіше й інтенсивніше усвідомлюють власну смертність і вразливість, а страх за життя стає більш відчутним у повсякденному досвіді.

Психологічні й соціальні наслідки підвищеного рівня усвідомлення смертності у воєнний час демонструють, як механізми злиття ідентичностей (англ.: *identity fusion*) і побудова специфічних наративів формують реакції на екзистенційні загрози й визначають поведінкові патерни. Згідно з TMT, символічні системи — наприклад культурні й національні наративи — виконують роль буферів проти усвідомлення смертності. Завдяки ним людина підтримує прийнятну самооцінку й узгодженість повсякденного сенсу. Коли ж світогляд піддається сумніву, індивіди схильні підтверджувати спільні цінності й посилювати отождолення зі своєю групою.

TMT і злиття ідентичностей уможливають нюансоване пояснення того, як вплив воєнних стресорів позначається на психологічній адаптації, колективній стійкості та збереженні сенсу в умовах постійної небезпеки. Спільний досвід зовнішньої загрози життю й агресії зміцнює соціальні зв'язки та сприяє психологічним механізмам адаптації, необхідним для виживання у країні, що перебуває у стані війни. Вивчення цих динамік дає змогу глибше зрозуміти, як українці вистояють проти безпосередніх викликів збройного конфлікту й формують майбутнє, у якому їхні цінності залишаються незмінними перед негараздами.

Ключові слова: теорія менеджменту терору, культура, загроза життю, збройний конфлікт

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From fear to meaning: terror management, cultural worldview, and collective dynamics in the context of war

Humans navigate existential anxiety provoked by mortality awareness through complex psychological networks designed to make life feel more manageable. The evolutionary foundations of terror management reveal how self-esteem, cultural worldviews, and structured belief systems serve as buffers against death-related cognitions. Culture and religion play critical roles in providing meaning, reassurance, and pathways to symbolic immortality, highlighting their psychological functions in mitigating existential anxiety. During wartime, heightened psychological pressures emerge as mortality salience influences collective identity, in-group cohesion, and intergroup conflict, ultimately shaping values and behavior in high-stakes contexts.

Armed conflict introduces some of the most severe and destabilizing stressors an imaginable. War poses life-threatening conditions, impacting individuals through intense emotional responses — such as fear, distress, and grief — alongside physical suffering, material and personal loss, and constant need to adapt to deprivation. Because war endangers both civilians and military personnel and leaves lasting scares that continue to afflict its victims long after the war ends, the stressors associated with the hostilities of war rank among the most profoundly traumatic experiences a person can endure. Under these circumstances, individuals experience heightened and more frequent awareness of their mortality and vulnerability, making fear for one's life more intense and accessible.

The psychological and social impacts of heightened awareness of wartime mortality illustrate how identity fusion and the construction of specific narratives shape responses to existential threats and influence their behavioral expressions. According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), symbolic systems such as cultural and national narratives serve as buffers against death awareness. With them, a person maintains functional self-esteem and everyday meaning coherence. When a worldview is challenged, people tend to reaffirm their shared values and strengthen their identification with their group.

TMT and identity fusion provide a complex yet subtle understanding of how exposure to war-related stress affects psychological adaptation, collective resilience, and the maintenance of meaning in the face of ongoing danger. The shared experience of external life threats and aggression reinforces social bonds and enhances the psychological adaptation necessary for navigating life in a country that is at war. Ultimately, studying these dynamics can shed light on how the people of Ukraine are enduring the immediate challenges of conflict and working towards a future where their values remain intact, even in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Terror Management Theory, culture, life threat, armed conflict