

The Roles of Terror Management in Self-Continuity over Time, the Pursuit of Meaning and Personal Significance in Young and Old Adults, and Political Preferences

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Scientists working from an evolutionary perspective tell us that humans are animals designed only to survive long enough to reproduce and care for their offspring before they die. Yet, subjectively we seem to want to view life as something more and accomplish something more: to have lives that are meaningful and significant. Terror management theory (TMT) argues that these desires for meaning and self-worth also emerge from our biological heritage because they serve a fundamental imperative to endure. According to TMT, the human intellectual capacity to understand our own vulnerability and mortality – that ultimately we will not endure-- creates a unique ever-present potential for anxiety.

To manage this potential anxiety, cultural conceptions of reality have evolved to imbue life with meaning and with possibilities for the individual to attain significance (self-esteem); this in turn provides people with the sense that they will transcend their own death. Humans function relatively securely as long as they sustain faith in such a worldview and in their value within it. In this talk, I will focus on research testing terror management hypotheses regarding how reminders of mortality influence:

- a) Connections of present self to the past and the future;
- b) Striving for meaning and self-worth in young and old adults; and
- c) Preferences for particular types of political leaders.