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Terror Management Theory and the Educational Situation

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How might we teach more successfully toward better relations between and among social groups? Recognizing factors that limit rapprochement with those with divergent worldviews has been a perennial concern for education research. However, more research is needed to understand how feelings of conflict arise, and thus this paper discusses terror management theory (TMT) as a generative theoretical framework for engaging with conflicting perspectives in classrooms and beyond. An awareness of existential processes that impact teaching and learning provides an opportunity to engage with divergent worldviews in a way that mitigates hostile responses. TMT can assist our understandings of the psychological process of worldview threat with the hope that we might better metacognitively anticipate our threat and defence cycles.

Keywords: cultural education; curriculum research; diversity; educational strategies; educational theories; social psychology

Education brings with it certain challenges and complexities that activate resistance among would be learners and the broader community. Multiple perspectives and worldviews within and between a variety of groups are present in many subjects, ranging from debates about climate change and evolution to engagements with difficult histories of colonialism and racializations still at work today. As such, we see great value in returning to a question raised by H. James Garrett (2017) who asked us to consider a key question at the heart of education: How might we live well together with others? Our response to Garrett's question lies in reframing and adding to education insights through an engagement with terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). TMT explains one specific source from where unhelpful reactions arise—existential fear—as we attempt to grapple with differing perspectives and culturally distinct worldviews. Although an established theory in psychology, TMT is relatively new to educational research.

For more than three decades, TMT researchers have been exploring ways people adhere to cultural values to protect against confrontations with the fact of our mortality (e.g., Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007). TMT research suggests people protect against living with the anxiety of death by investing in a cultural belief system, or cultural worldview, that prescribes standards for how to live a good, moral, and prosperous life. Doing so provides adherents of the worldview literal or symbolic avenues for transcending death. Because these beliefs serve an important anxiety-buffering function, any provocation that underscores the arbitrary, subjective

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nature of their cultural values can therefore spark existential fear and negative reactions stemming from the need to defend the worldview. According to TMT, existential fear arises when individuals are reminded of their inevitable death directly or when core components of their conceptions of reality are called into question.

In this paper, we explore how TMT enriches curriculum and pedagogy by providing a summary of the theory with a focus on the role of cultural worldviews and illuminating the ways that TMT operates in relation to other theories that aid in the understanding of emotional or affective responses in education. TMT is unique from other approaches in its analysis of the human need for social validation of one's accepted worldview to ward off our fears of death (and consequently the lack of tolerance for divergent worldviews) that shape human cognition and behaviour. As explored in this article after the theory is outlined, an engagement with TMT can act as a valuable supplement to Critical Race Theory, psychoanalytic approaches to education, as well as research in the emotional aspects of teaching and learning. We argue that engaging teachers and students with TMT offers an avenue for all to consider the ways in which humans, regardless of their identifications, might engage with and learn from troubling initial reactions to perspectives and worldviews different from their own. It is perhaps obvious, although nonetheless important, to emphasize that the proposed benefits of TMT in education in no way erase the significant power differences regarding how a particular person or group can enact their defensive reactions (e.g., a white man experiencing existential threat in a colonial, heteropatriarchal system has the opportunity to harm others in a way that a woman of colour would not). Given that all three authors on this paper are white, cisgender, and able-bodied (among other privileged statuses), we believe it is important to note these differences among us with regard to vulnerabilities to suffering.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory is based on the work of the late cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker (1971, 1973, 1975) and begins with the assumption that the evolved complexity of the human brain has provided many survival advantages in terms of anticipating future outcomes, planning, cooperating, and overcoming environmental challenges. Despite having clear advantages, these abilities also came at a cost. Specifically, the capacity to have an awareness of self and to be able to project that self forward in time gave humans the intellectual proclivity to understand that we are subject to the same natural processes as other animals—specifically aging, decay, and ultimately death. According to TMT, the knowledge of inevitable mortality is troubling because it conflicts with a basic desire to continue living that humans share with all other living organisms. Knowing that one is destined to die, coupled with an intense desire to go on living, creates in the human animal an acute potential for existential terror.

Managing death

According to TMT, if humans were to experience this existential fear unmitigated it would interfere with many effective forms of thought and action. As such, humans developed a defensive psychological system geared to keeping thoughts of human mortality away from consciousness. The principal way humans manage the fear of death is through the construction and maintenance of cultural worldviews and self-esteem. Maintaining faith in a cultural worldview and self-esteem provides people with a sense of life-continuity, or immortality, which can be understood literally or symbolically. Literal immortality refers to the story a culture tells the group about what happens after death, which for many of the world's religions involves some form of existence in the afterlife. Symbolic immortality refers not only to symbolic extensions of the self through lifelong achievements (e.g., books, works of art, children) that will live on in the culture after one's physical death but also to inclusion in a culture that will endure beyond your existence. In this way, the pursuit of self-esteem through teaching can be construed as a symbolic immortality project when the terror of individual death is alleviated by the reproduction of certain versions of selves through schooling (van Kessel & Burke, 2018).

Cultural worldviews are humanly-created, shared, symbolic conceptions of reality that infuse human existence with a sense of meaning and enduring significance. Aspects of worldviews can be religious or secular (e.g., creationism or intelligent design versus evolution), shared by a larger group (e.g., 'Western society' or a national group like 'Americans') or limited to a niche culture (e.g., 'goths'). Worldviews also prescribe standards and values that define what it means to be a valued member of the culture or group. By living up to these cultural values, people earn a sense of self-esteem. Thus, self-esteem is the general sense that one is a valued and protected member of the cultural meaning system.

Empirical Support for TMT

One of the central propositions of TMT is that cultural worldviews and self-esteem function to buffer people from thoughts and concerns about death. Research assessing this proposition has tested two main theoretical hypotheses, commonly referred to as the *mortality salience hypothesis* and the *death-thought accessibility hypothesis*. Although a full presentation of the supporting TMT literature is beyond the scope of this paper (see Schimel, Hayes, & Sharp, 2018), below we review some of the studies that have tested these hypotheses with respect to cultural worldviews. These hypotheses have reverberating implications for education, particularly how teachers and students respond to those who hold divergent worldviews,.

The mortality salience hypothesis

The first main hypothesis of TMT is mortality salience (MS). According to TMT, if cultural worldviews function to ameliorate concerns about death, then reminding people of death should temporarily increase their need for these protective psychological structures. One of the first studies testing the MS hypothesis was done with municipal court judges. In this study, Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Lyon (1989) had judges review a case brief for a prostitution charge and suggest a bond amount for the accused after writing about their own death (vs. not). If upholding the law is a central component of a judge's worldview, then, per the MS hypothesis, judges who were reminded of their own death should defend their worldview by reacting more harshly towards those that break the law through suggesting a higher bond amount for the accused than those not reminded of their own death. The results supported this prediction.

Judges in the MS condition suggested an average bond of $455, whereas the control judges suggested an average bond of only $50.

Reminders of death not only make people adhere to their worldview more extremely, but also can also entail creating a heightened sense of 'us versus them', such as increasing religion-based and nation-based prejudice (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990) as well as racial prejudice (Greenberg, Schimel, Martens, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 2001). Prehaps even more disturbing is that reminders of death have increased actual aggression against worldview violators. McGregor et al. (1998) found that MS led participants to assign more hot sauce for another person to consume if they thought the person had an opposing (vs. supporting) political worldview. Furthermore, studies have shown that MS can lead to the endorsement of violent intergroup conflict ranging from suicidal martyrdom to the use of nuclear weaponry against people with opposing conceptions of reality (Hirschberger et al. 2016; Pyszczynski, Abdollahi, et al., 2006).

Support for the MS hypothesis has been obtained cross-culturally, that is, reminders of death have produced effects on worldview defense in divergent contexts (e.g., Canada, China, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Israel, Japan, United States). Moreover, substantial bodies of evidence have found these effects to be specific to heightened accessibility of death-related thought and different from the effects of thinking of other aversive topics (e.g., uncertainty, social exclusion, intense physical pain, or a looming exam). A meta-analysis of 164 empirical studies with 277 experiments has shown that the MS hypothesis is a strong one, revealing that the hypothesis is sound according to the standards in the field of social psychology (Burke et al., 2010, p. 185).

The death-thought accessibility hypothesis

A second, central prediction made by TMT is called the *death-thought accessibility hypothesis* (DTA): If cultural worldviews function to buffer individuals from thoughts of death, then threatening or weakening these psychological structures should increase the accessibility of death-thoughts. DTA is typically measured using a word-fragment completion task in which participants are presented with a list of 20 to 25-word fragments and are asked to complete each fragment in succession with the first word that comes to mind (see Webber, Zhang, Schimel, & Blatter, 2016). Some words in the list can be completed as either a death-related word or a non-death-related word. For example, the fragment, 'S K _ L L' could be completed as 'SKULL' or 'SKILL.' The more death words people complete, the more it can be inferred that death thoughts are close to consciousness.

The first set of studies testing the DTA hypothesis with respect to cultural worldviews was conducted among Canadian participants. Across four studies, Schimel and colleagues (2007) had Canadian participants view a webpage that belittled an array of Canadian cultural values and achievements (e.g., diet, love of hockey, universal healthcare, being polite) versus a control condition that derogated Australian culture. The results consistently showed higher levels of DTA in the anti-Canada (worldview threat) condition. Additional studies have provided evidence for the generalizability of the effect (e.g., Friedman & Rholes; Hayes et al., 2015; Schimel et al., 2007; Webber et al., 2015). DTA is activated following threats to any worldview, because these beliefs function to shield the individual from concerns about death.

Research testing the DTA hypothesis has also demonstrated the role of DTA in the production of defence following worldview threat. From the perspective of TMT, potent threats to the worldview increase DTA, which in turn promotes worldview defences that function to reduce DTA (e.g., Hayes et al., 2015). In a chilling demonstration of this process, Hayes and colleagues (2008) exposed Christian participants to a worldview threat article depicting the rise of Islam in Bethlehem (vs. a neutral control condition). When the article contained additional information regarding a plane crash that killed more than a hundred Muslims, results showed that the perceived deaths of the worldview opposing group eliminated the threat, and DTA therefore remained low.

Worldview Threat and Defence

The problem with adhering to cultural worldviews as an antidote for terror is that all worldviews are to some extent arbitrary assemblages about the nature of reality, and thus require continual validation from others in order to remain believable. Exposure to cultures of people with alternate worldviews, especially those that are diametrically opposed to one's own, therefore, potentially undermine one's faith in the dominant worldview and the psychological protection it provides. Thus, contact with others who define reality in different ways undermines an assumed consensus for people's death-denying ideologies. Anyone or anything that challenges and individual's worldview (intentionally or not) can heighten existential terror, and thus potentiates negative reactions toward others aimed at shoring up one's anxiety buffering views of self and world.

Defensive reactions

Because exposure to people with different worldviews can arouse a feeling of existential threat, there is the need to defend. Defensive reactions to a different worldview can vary, but TMT suggests at least four different types (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015). The first is *assimilation,* which involves attempts to convert worldview-opposing others to our own system of belief. Of course, the prototypical example of assimilation is missionary work, and in education this process can take the form of teachers (or fellow students) attempting to convert students to their perspective on historical or contemporary events. The second and most common method is *derogation*, which includes belittling individuals who espouse a different worldview. If we can view historical or contemporary non-dominant cultures or opposing groups as ignorant or as lacking in decency and common sense, we can dismiss their alternate views of reality as a threat to the validity of our own. Even when marginalized and oppressed groups are recognized as such, derogation can take the form of blaming them for their circumstances; for example, Schick and St. Denis (2005) noted how ethnoracial 'minorities are too readily blamed for the effects of racism' (p. 296).

However, assimilation and derogation are often not enough. Despite the diagnosis that other groups are unsophisticated, naïve, or ignorant, and despite attempts to woo others with what we consider the ‘truth’, these people with strange ways are usually quite happy with their beliefs. Furthermore, these other groups are often just as unimpressed with our values and ideals as we are with theirs, which further implies that our own way of life may not be the one, true way. Thus, a third more extreme method is *annihilation*, which entails aggressive action aimed at killing or injuring members of the threatening worldview (e.g., see Hayes et al., 2008; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, et al., 2006). If groups of people with opposing beliefs can be injured or killed, the implication is that their beliefs are truly inferior to our own. Further to this point, by eliminating large numbers of people with a different version of reality, the threatening worldview may cease to exist, and thus no longer pose a threat. Some of the most horrific human behaviours throughout history, namely war and genocide, are examples of annihilation as a form of worldview defence, and students may express support for these examples of annihilation in the classroom. If a different culture seems to be thriving, then their existence thwarts any assumptions that one might make about their own culture being the one, true way of being in the world.

One final strategy of worldview defence is *accommodation*, which is to modify one’s own worldview to incorporate some aspects of the threatening worldview. More specifically, through accommodation one accepts some of the peripheral components of the threatening worldview into one’s own, which renders the alternate worldview less threatening and at the same time allows one’s core beliefs to remain intact. For example, upon repeated exposure to scientific evidence for evolution (vs. divine creation) as the origin of human life, a Christian might come to believe that evolution occurs, but that a divine creator had a hand in the process; e.g., the debate between macro vs. micro evolution (Hayes et al., 2015). By adopting aspects of a potentially-threatening worldview, that threat is diffused and absorbed, such as how some white youths have appropriated hip-hop culture via a colour-blind ideology, thus removing racially coded meanings and resistances (Rodriquez, 2006). Similarly, a ‘tipis and costume approach’ to Indigenous content can leave ‘teachers and students with the unfortunate impression that Indians have not done much since the buffalo were killed off and the West was settled’ (Donald, 2009, p. 5), while shallow territorial acknowledgements can give a false sense of decolonization when they are showing merely an awareness (Asher, Curnow, & Davis, 2018; see also Tuck, 2009).

In TMT, our worldview protects us from the fear of death, and therefore leads to a tendency to discount, or even attack, other worldviews (and their proponents) that challenge our own. TMT posits that even the mere existence of different worldviews, let alone a direct engagement with them, can interfere with the anxiety-buffering function of the cultural worldview (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). In other words, banal encounters with a different worldview can trigger defensive reactions like derogation. Although this situation may seem bleak, there is converging evidence that anxiety-induced intolerance can be countered by fostering and rewarding tolerance as an aspect of the cultural worldview by making tolerance both a value and a highly accessible option (Greenberg et al., 1992, p. 218; see Vail et al., 2012, for a review of supporting research). This research explains why some people seem to embrace, or even seek, alternative worldviews and cultures, why some are more openminded than others, even though we all struggle with the same fears of mortality, and thus how we might use our existential anxieties for a greater good. If we can make tolerance (or better still, acceptance and nurturance of difference) a value that is accessible, then TMT allows us to move beyond competence and relevance into the territory of providing a way of thinking about and through difference as not a problem to be resolved (and for examples of prevention as well as prejudice reduction through a TMT framework, see Salzman [2018]). Although teachers cannot (and should not be expected to) create worldviews for their students, they can create a classroom environment that has the potential to encourage and reward open-mindedness.

Resistance to Different Perspectives

Education creates opportunities to (re)think learned but unrecognized assumptions regarding human societies and how they function. TMT adds to these inquiries by offering new insights into what we already know—students, their parents, school boards, and even politicians can become defensive and angry when teachers challenge their worldview in classrooms; for example, TMT explains why Arizona legislators banned Critical Race Theory (CRT) from classrooms (Seitz-Wald, 2012) and why a member of the United Conservative Party pledged to remove 'ideological curriculum' and instead promised to focus on teaching students that 'Alberta's the best province in the best country in the world' (CBC News, 2017, para. 8-9). Curriculum that challenges the 'common sense' (Kumashiro, 2009) is removed because it provokes worldview threat, and worldview affirming material replaces it. By engaging with defensive compensatory reactions as a factor contributing to hostility, there is an opportunity to counter harmful policies by helping people recognize and metacognitively anticipate their troubling defensive reactions.

As discussed in the following sections, current and historical educational researchers in the areas of critical theories, psychoanalysis, emotions and care, as well as multiple perspectives and empathy have explored related issues and commitments in ways that have been helpful when engaging students with perspectives different from their own. Thus, TMT ought to be taken as a *supplement* to these ways of teaching (of which there are many excellent options), not as a replacement.

Critical theories

Critical research in education (e.g., critical race theory) illustrates the ways in which ethnoracism can manifest itself in students' lives. Such manifestations include the obstacles teachers face regarding meaningful engagements with perspectives different from normative whiteness in the context of often pathologized non-dominant communities (Gutiérrez et al., 2017), and how students from dominant groups (e.g., white) often react to information about their dominance, such as anger (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014), denial (Trainor, 2005), and avoidance (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). TMT does not contradict such thorough research; rather, TMT helps explain findings regarding these reactions as well as similar reactions in different cultural contexts. Although, obviously, the damage is exacerbated when dominant groups (as opposed to non-dominant groups) partake in derogation as well as attempts at assimilation and annihilation, TMT explains such processes as part of a human condition.

Discussions of race in relation to white privilege can be difficult for those oppressed by racist systems as well as those who intend to be allies. The word 'privilege' is used here following Choules (2007) and Swalwell (2013) to indicate that those who benefit from the current ethnoracial system are implicated in that system, even if they are initially unaware; i.e., as a shorthand for 'those positioned by power relations within systems of supremacy that are continuously shaped by historical social, political, and economic factors and that are made stronger when rendered invisible, consciously or not, to those who benefit from them most (Smalwell, 2013, p. 5-6). From a TMT perspective, defensive reactions or avoidance regarding the topic of racism and white privilege are, at least in part, compensation for a brush with existential anxiety. Because all humans fear death, this fundamental fear is activated by worldview threat, although this process may lay in the unconscious. For many students, the privileges associated with being white (that they consider based upon individual merit) are a cornerstone of their personal significance. Furthermore, students likely identify as being "good" people, and so they are further troubled that they have played a role in perpetuating racism. As such, a student asked to come to terms with their white privilege would also need help grappling with their concomitant existential terror in order for that lesson to be as effective in its anti-racist goals as possible.

When discussions of race centre white experience, the experiences of people of colour can be erased or hijacked: "White fragility often renders Black educators either hypervisible or invisible" (Murray & Yuhaniak, 2017, p. 75). Lessons intended to combat oppression, then, can re-victimize the oppressed as the privileged are asked to learn at the expense of the oppressed (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). A case in point is the practice of privilege walks. Students are asked to take steps forward or backward based upon their experience relative to particular privileges articulated by the teacher. Those who end up at the front of the pack then look back at those behind them, and then are supposed to feel their privilege and be inspired to work toward social justice. Such an activity not only places oppressed bodies on display for the purpose of educating the privileged, but also can easily flatten the structural nature of oppression and frame rights that everyone should have as privileges (Crowley & Smith, in press). Furthermore, when privilege walks (and comparable activities) inspire guilt, then even students who wish to fight oppression may be unintentionally stunted from anti-racist work because they are hindered by perceived attacks on their source of self-esteem. In this way, worldview threat via TMT explains how the privileged can retreat into denial or become defensive. Thus, somewhat ironically, it is important to recognize the existential anxieties of those in the privileged groups in order to decentre those emotions during anti-racist lessons and discussions. TMT is a means to "toughen up" the fragile so that anti-oppression work is more likely to resonate among the privileged.

As part of an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) or interlocking (Razack, 1998) approach, TMT can provide a framework to understand how someone abused by systems of oppression in one context might resist the knowledge of a privilege in another context; e.g., white feminists who ignore ethnoracism (hooks, 1984), Black men who ignore sexism (Sizemore, 1973), and so on. Such a broad-level human framing helps explain entangled relationships in any geographical or historical context, and thus potentially provides a less threatening approach than the teaching of specific privileges in historical and contemporary times (e.g., white privilege). Intersectional approaches call for more than one category to be analyzed, and that these entangled categories be recognized as dynamic and functioning in the context of interconnected individuals in a social milieu who cannot be essentialized (Dhamoon, 2011; Hancock, 2007). TMT provides a supplementary conceptual tool to create space for educators to consider intersecting oppressions at individual and structural levels. Brown, Bloome, Morris, Power-Carter, and Willis (2017) have called for education scholars to 'intentionally work to expand research to include classroom discussions of race that address all racial groups' (p. 472), and, as such, educators could shift discussions of group dynamics such as power and privilege to a more general human level, thus explaining prejudice in multiple contexts, building feelings of individual responsibility to counter unfair systems of privilege. This framework explains, but does not excuse, defensive reactions in a variety of situations. Without depriving people of their group status as a unifying force of rallying point (e.g., Blackness, Indigeneity, sisterhood), a TMT framing can attend to intergroup relations both specifically and broadly, and can apply in a number of fraught relations based on not only race or religion, but also class, ability, as well as sexual identities, orientations and expression, among other potential intergroup conflicts. We seek to expand such intersectional discussions. Teachers who engage students in difficult discussions as part of their critical pedagogies can employ terror management theory as one method of deconstructing the interconnection of individual instances of prejudice and derogation with structural processes in play. As an example, in addition to identifying structural forces that perpetuate ethnoracism, TMT provides teachers with helpful psychological insights with an antiracist commitment through the discussion of worldview threat.

Psychoanalytic approaches to education

Britzman's (1998, 2013) concept of 'difficult knowledge' speaks to the fraught complexities of social life. There is often a troubling initial reaction: '[T]he force of an event is felt before it is understood' (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 758). This idea, a component of the psychoanalytic concept of *deferred action*, illustrates a tie to TMT, namely that what we say and do comes after we have been affected and before any rational analysis begins. There can be a "cascade of responses" (Garrett, 2017, p. 19) in relation to difficult knowledge, which, in part, can be tied to the defensive compensatory reactions identified by TMT.

Research projects inspired by difficult knowledge attend to the complexities of possible responses to texts and media (e.g., Salvio, 2009). TMT adds to this educational conversation by providing one form of analysis as to the source from which these affects can arise—worldview threat. We might become defensive about a certain text because it presents a challenge to our worldviews and perspectives, causing us to shut down or lash out, and thus teachers and students benefit from conceptual tools to articulate defensive compensatory reactions—our own and those of others in the past and present.

Difficult knowledge displaces the ‘lovely’ knowledge to which we cling, and begs the question: ‘If lovely knowledge is knowledge one loves, what does one love when lovely knowledge is lost? (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 766). Lovely knowledge focuses on our desires to interpret knowledge in particular (and not other) ways. In a TMT analysis, lovely knowledge is that which conforms to and validates our bases of self-esteem. In this way, educators must attend to the ‘kernel of trauma in the very capacity to know’ when we challenge versions of lovely knowledge such as learning from non-dominant perspectives (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 756; See also Britzman, 2000; Todd, 2001).

Through a TMT lens, a trauma of knowing is not just some specific event but also even knowledge that might seem banal can be difficult to bear because of our existential fear. That knowledge, message, or photo of another ‘odd’ human who comes as a stranger standing outside our worldview triggers our defensive, compensatory reactions without our realization of a fear of death as a motivating force. Even without directly threatening us, such encounters spark a fear as to the non-universal status of our worldview—there are many ways of being in the world. Thus, their mere existence can destabilize our attempts at symbolic immortality. With some insights into why we are reactive, we then have a choice about what we might do in compensation, and ideally, we would find ways that do not hurt others.

A specific kernel of trauma related to engagements with non-dominant perspectives (rather than simply a different perspective) is the ‘ignorance-privilege nexus’ of the person with the dominant worldview (den Heyer & Conrad, 2011). Here, the definition of ignorance is psychoanalytic in that it is institutionally formed emotional resistance. People have a passion for ignorance and to avoid both the difficult knowledge of their complicity in troubling realities and the daunting effort required to change the system that produces such realities (den Heyer & Conrad, 2011). The impact of difficult knowledge is powerful when it prompts you to reconsider your assumptions about how the world works and your place within it. TMT provides one explanation for that impact by facilitating an understanding of our ‘gut’ reactions before we put irrevocable words and actions into play—and is applicable to anyone encountering a different perspective, not just those with dominant worldviews. Attending to existential trauma is with the hope that illuminating ethical obligations to counter such social breakdowns. In the context of prejudice and racism, Georgis and Kennedy (2009) attend to ‘the often unpredictable role of affect’ and how the unconscious shapes our perceptions of history (p. 22; See also Britzman, 1998, p. 1). Such an endeavor begs the question of how we might ‘imagine what it might mean to risk falling out of love with idealized aims, and after such loss, to find value in the imperfect process of trying to know as the creative grounds of both learning and research’ (Farley, 2015, p. 450).

Psychoanalytic approaches to education have thus provided (and continue to provide) a meaningful framework to explore traumatic topics. TMT provides a generative addition to difficult knowledge by explaining a specific type of such difficult knowings—our existential situation. Furthermore, TMT adds specific discussion about the harmful material effects in the civic world that are produced by defensive posturing. Educators working with the framework of difficult knowledge can easily engage with TMT as a specific manifestation—teaching TMT itself, as well as reminding students of looming defensive compensatory reactions as they explore difficult topics together. Our fear of death works upon our body and mind in ways we often do not even know consciously, such as defensive reactions in the classroom (e.g., derogation, accommodation, assimilation) due to worldview threat. The troubling realization of the role of existential fear when encountering difficult knowledge is an important step toward attending to these defensive compensatory actions in our classrooms. Students and teachers have an opportunity to metacognitively anticipate threat-and-defence cycles if they are taught about worldview threat before difficult knowledges, and then the teacher revisits TMT as needed during classroom conversations. We might manage our existential fear if we 'monitor and alter' unhelpful reactions, and thus be 'more self-determined in the choices [we] make and the actions [we] take' (Solomon et al., 2015, p. 225).

Emotions and education

Some education scholars have attended to the emotional component of teaching; for example, Megan Boler (2014) engaged with the emotional habits that are necessary to recognizing one's privilege, and Michanlinos Zembylas (2007) examined the emotional effects of trauma narratives in terms of empathy and reconciliation. Theoretical and empirical engagements with emotions in the context of education is lacking in many subject areas. Such engagements are notably absent from social studies (Sheppard, Katz, & Grosland, 2015).

If we are to challenge students' worldviews, educators must attend to the emotional responses. Megan Boler (2014) noted three types of students in her classes in the context of challenging the American Dream and its associated myth of meritocracy:

> First, there are those willing to walk down a path of critical thinking with me, who find their worldviews shattered but simultaneously engage in creatively rebuilding a sense of meaning and coherence in the face of ambiguity. Secondly, there are those who angrily and vocally resist my attempts to suggest that the world might possibly be other than they have comfortably experienced it. Thirdly, there are those who appear disaffected, already sufficiently numb so that my attempts to ask them to rethink the world encounter only blank and vacant spaces. (p. 26)

Boler (2014) aptly identified the angry responses to discussions of structural oppression as indicators of "someone who is struggling to maintain his or her identity in what feels like a threat of annihilation" (p. 27). According to TMT, this analysis is not purely metaphoric. When worldviews are shattered and the self-esteem one has from fitting into that worldview are under threat, students are put into a state of existential terror—to our bodies and our unconscious annihilation is indeed the threat.

Individual teachers might attend to difficult emotional spaces very well in their classrooms, but such a worthy endeavor needs to be explicit in teacher education and teacher professional development. TMT provides a specific way to frame some emotional aspects of both the content and the classroom where students engage with that content, all toward the goal of improved social group relations. By attending to defensive compensatory reactions arising from existential threat, the non-personal aspect of these reactions are emphasized, thus potentially diffusing such a reaction more so than a less specific emphasis on troubling (and troublesome) emotions.

There are many challenging components regarding student emotions arising from discomfort; namely: grappling with student reactions; talking about emotions openly; negotiating the political dimensions of teaching in multicultural/diverse classrooms; and experiencing teacher fatigue arising from being emotionally available to students as they undertake the process of dealing with discomfort (Cutri & Whiting, 2015). Zembylas (2016) has examined the ‘therapisation’ of social justice education, in other words, the danger of pathologizing systemic injustices like racism as individual deficiencies (see also van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). Furthermore, Zembylas and Bekerman (2008) noted that narratives that challenge assumptions about a group’s identity are “dangerous” because of their potential for subverting “essentialized, static and tribalistic” dichotomies in helpful ways, but must be treated with care (p. 127). An engagement with TMT to facilitate teaching for social change could help educators exist in the tension between blaming supposedly deficient individuals and diffusing responsibility to the point where no one takes responsibility (e.g., simply blaming an amorphous entity like society; see van Kessel & Crowley, 2017), thus avoiding what Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevárez (2017) identify as the ‘new racism’ (i.e., evaded, falsely antiracist, everyday racism). With TMT complementing antiracist education with an emotional framework, for example, there is an opportunity to assign responsibility to an individual without a deficit model that neglects the institutional aspect of structural racism.

Thus, a TMT approach adds to educational research on the underlying and often hidden emotional components of teaching difficult knowledge (i.e., TMT adds death anxiety to discussions about difficult knowledge), an aspect of the ‘emotional ecology’ of which Zembylas (2007) has described. A TMT-informed classroom necessitates not only an engagement with the theory itself to broaden our understanding of self and others as a sort of ‘emotional scaffolding’ (Rosiek, 2003), but also a communication of the teacher’s own struggles with worldview threat. It is important for the teacher to convey that this quest is to struggle with and learn from an innate psychological process, not to overcome it.

Some Implications for Education

Enabling students and teachers to understand a source of their resistance to worldviews other than their own may help them overcome the resistance that blocks their potential to learn. Studies have revealed that reading comprehension can be affected by the existence of worldview affirming or disconfirming information within the text (Williams, Schimel, Hayes, & Faucher, 2012; see also Landau, Greenberg & Rothschild, 2009). Even more insidious is when worldview threat presents itself as derogation (or worse) in our classrooms.

Worldview threat can be present when any cultures come into contact with each other, for example a salient worldview threat in contemporary Canada and the United States is resistance to Indigenous perspectives by the descendants of settlers and newcomers. This issue has become a central focus of the university where we work. The question arises for us: How might TMT help us engage non-Indigenous (and often, but not always, white) students with Indigenous histories, cultures, and worldviews? A TMT interpretation of this situation identifies the culprit as potentially threefold: 1) existential threat arises when two dramatically different, but viable, cultural worldviews interact; 2) the realization of these past injustices threatens the self-esteem of white students who did not think that they were part of an exploitative group; and 3) further threat occurs from the fear of losing the privileged status (and thus self-esteem) that settlers and newcomers have at the expense of Indigenous peoples. TMT offers two contributions to educational concerns noted above: information that can be used to manage difficult emotions during discussions about ethnoracism (i.e., defensive compensatory actions), and a theoretical discussion of human behaviour beyond racialized categories.

Students can undermine and insult opposing views, and in extreme circumstances be physically or verbally violent with others because of the existential fear provoked by worldview threat. Studies have found that the anxiety produced from reminders of death increases stereotypic thinking (Schimel et al., 1999), and people's belief that 'the world is a just and benign place… that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people' because this belief makes the world seem 'orderly and meaningful' (Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2007, p. 124; see also Landau et al., 2004). Consequently, students may actively resist the knowledge that groups have been mistreated in historical and contemporary times because this information constitutes a threat to their worldview, which potentiates existential fear.

As an example from the first author's classroom of undergraduates studying to be secondary social studies teachers, when she used to leap into discussions of local racism, students were eager to derogate our southern neighbours (e.g., expressing that although Canada has made mistakes, at least 'we' are not as racist as those in the U.S.). After realizing that this topic challenged the myth of Canada as full of predominantly 'nice' or 'good' people and our related self-esteem, the first author began to implement principles from TMT. She taught them about TMT so that students had a language for their feelings, and then also used strategies such as humour and selective distancing. Humour diffuses existential (and other) anxieties (Elgee, 2003), and starting with an 'other' before examining 'us' can lower defences. A representative example is how she teaches about the disrespectful naming of the local team from the Canadian Football League—the Edmonton Eskimos. She begins with a humorous clip in a U.S. context, showing them a 'South Park' advertisement (South Park Studios, 2014), in which cartoon versions of the owner of the Washington Redskins and some of the players implore the kids of South Park to change the name of their crowdfunded, do-nothing start-up company (also named the Washington Redskins, due to the trademark being pulled). In this scene, these representatives use the same arguments that activists have used to try and convince football teams to change their offensive names. Such a flipped narrative elicits a lot of laughter from the class. After the video they debrief about why it might be important for the Washington Redskins to consider changing their name. Then, and only then, is there an inquiry into what might be troubling about the name of the Edmonton Eskimos. Some students still resist that topic, but much fewer since frontloading with TMT and implementing complementary strategies. TMT can be applied to a variety of educational settings, but this task is another article in itself. This article is an invitation for educators to consider how TMT might be helpful in their particular context.

Challenges to worldviews can be constants in classrooms. Given that even the mention of a variety of worldviews can trigger existential threat, let alone the presentation of those different worldviews as viable alternative frameworks, the application of TMT in a classroom provides an opportunity for engaging with multiple perspectives while recognizing, and possibly compensating for, emotionally-driven reactions that are not conducive toward tolerance, respect, and nurturance of difference. In this way TMT helps us anticipate our threat-and-defence cycle, and thus act more thoughtfully as we address and learn from educational content that taps into our existential fear. TMT provides one possible, and we argue very helpful, opening for radically different perspectives to meet on more equal terms than they might without such a framing. Further research needs to be done regarding the myriad of possibilities for implementation in various subject areas at a variety of grade levels.

Final Thoughts

TMT is affirming in that it calls for seeking 'enduring significance' not through the derogation, assimilation, or annihilation of those with different worldviews, but rather through 'your own combination of meanings and values, social connections, spirituality, personal accomplishments, identifications with nature, and momentary experiences of transcendence' (Solomon et al., 2015). Thus, TMT provides an opportunity to engage with our mortality in a way that can help us tolerate uncertainty regarding our own worldview and thus help us relate in more amicable ways to those who hold different views. It is vital that those involved in the educational endeavor—teachers, researchers, policy-makers, and curriculum writers—disrupt beliefs about 'just the way it is' regarding the norms of inequalities that plague not only our classrooms, but also broader society. Such a task requires a complex set of tools and dispositions, and TMT is an important part of the puzzle to better human relations. Garrett (2017) has noted that 'a recognition of the universal truth that is our vulnerability to injury and, ultimately, death, is not necessarily hopelessness' (p. 23); instead, embracing our mortality can encourage hope in our shared precariousness and an affirmation of difference.

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