

The Roles of Self-Esteem and Attachment within the Framework of Terror Management Theory

Dehşet Yönetimi Kuramı Çerçevesinde Benlik Saygısı ve Bağlanmanın Rolü

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Abstract

Built upon the idea that human beings, as the only species whose members are aware of their own consciousness and future death, have to come up with a system to deal with this awareness, terror management theory aims to shed light on the mechanisms that human beings have developed in order to avoid the cold fact of death. According to terror management theory, culture serves as an anxiety buffer against death by offering either a literal or symbolic immortality. The sense of protection and safety provided by the parental care in childhood is sought in the worldview in adulthood. At this point, self-esteem comes into the equation; individuals with high self-esteem experience more sense of compliance with their worldview than those with low self-esteem, and they feel less anxiety when their mortality is reminded to them. Recent research links these with attachment styles. In this study, it is aimed to review the ideas presented here and developed within the framework of terror management theory, and to discuss the benefits that can be drawn from their findings, especially in regards to clinical applications.

Keywords: Terror management, attachment, self-esteem.

Öz

İnsanın, diğer canlılardan farklı olarak kendi bilincinin ve müstakbel ölümünün farkında ve bu farkındalıkla başa çıkabilmek bir sistem geliştirme ihtiyacında olduğu düşüncesinden yola çıkarak ortaya konan dehşet yönetimi kuramı, insanın ölüm gerçeğinden kaçmak için geliştirdiği mekanizmalara ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır. Dehşet yönetimi kuramına göre kültür, gerçek ya da sembolik anlamda bir ölümsüzlük vaadiyle ölüm karşısında bir kaygı tamponu görevi görmektedir. Çocuklukta ebeveyn ilgisi ve sevgisinin sağladığı koruma ve güvenlik hissi zamanla dünya görüşünde aranır. Bu noktada benlik saygısı devreye girmektedir; benlik saygısı yüksek olan bireyler dünya görüşleriyle uyum içerisinde olduklarını daha fazla hissetmekte ve ölümleri belirginleştirildiğinde daha az kaygı hissetmektedirler. Yakın zamanda yapılan çalışmalar, bu durumu bağlanma tarzlarıyla ilişkilendirmektedir. Bu çalışmada, dehşet yönetimi kuramı çerçevesinde sözü edilen bu görüşleri incelemek üzere yapılan çalışmaların derlenmesi ve bulgularının klinik anlamda ne tür faydalar sağlayabileceğinin tartışılması amaçlanmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dehşet yönetimi, bağlanma, benlik saygısı.

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MEANING in life has been defined in different ways by different scholars; however, following Steger et al. (2015), it can be defined as having a coherent comprehension of oneself and life experiences, and having a purpose in one's life. Frankl (2009), states that meaning of each person's life will be particular to her/him and cannot be prescribed for anyone; each person will be satisfied as long as she/he discovers the unique meaning in her/his life by herself/himself. Various studies point out that attributing a meaning to one's life is related to higher psychological and physical health (Brassai et al. 2012, Steger et al. 2015). Yalom (2011) states that when one attributes a meaning to her/his life, she/he enjoys a great feeling of control. It is harder to claim that search for meaning has a similar effect; search for meaning does not always result in the presence of meaning, and it also is associated with high anxiety (Steger et al. 2008, Yek et al. 2017).

One of the important issues in the search for meaning is our mortality. Ernest Becker (1973), in his book titled *The Denial of Death*, claims that human beings have to develop a system in order to cope with the anxiety created by the awareness of their own death. Following this idea of Becker Greenberg et al. (1997) introduced terror management theory. This theory, which gained an important place in social psychology studies as well as serving as a productive ground for interdisciplinary studies with fields such as economics, military, politics, law etc. (Pyszczynski 2004, Arndt et al. 2005, Chatard et al. 2007, Salisbury and Nenkov 2016), aims to shed light on the effect of our awareness of mortality on our emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Human beings differ from other species in the sense that they are conscious of their own existence, and have a tendency to sustain their existence, however, they also have to face the fact that they are mortal beings (Pyszczynski et al. 2004). It is not possible to leave the death only to those who are dying (Yalom 2011). Keeping this in mind, terror management theory tries to explain some of the mechanisms developed by human beings while trying to escape from the weight of the fact of death (Greenberg et al. 1986). The aim of this study is to review studies exploring the roles of self-esteem and attachment within the framework of terror management theory.

Terror Management Theory

According to terror management theory, human beings possess the instinct of self-protection just as other animals do; however, they have the unique ability to conceive their own death, and this has the potential to paralyze them by a great terror (Greenberg et al. 1986, Simon et al. 1998). What helps us human beings to overcome this terror, and what makes them different from other animals is culture. Culture is a source of meaning and value for human beings and an individual will feel valuable as long as she/he lives in conformity with the values that her/his culture provides (Greenberg et al. 1986).

Cultural Worldview

As an anxiety buffer, culture provides human beings with important tools to cope with the terror of death. One of these is the cultural worldview. Cultural worldview gives one the impression that the universe is ordered, meaningful and stable, and thus predictable, and it reduces the death anxiety by reinforcing the inner belief that death is not a possibility that can realize suddenly, and thus there is no reason to worry. More impor-

tantly, it gives a meaning and purpose to one's life and provides standards for human behaviors; it promises literal or symbolic immortality to those who live in accordance with these standards (Arndt et al. 1997). Whereas religious worldviews mostly emphasize the immortality in afterlife, secular worldviews provide a sense of symbolic immortality (Hayes et al. 2010, Jonas and Fischer 2006). The results of mortality salience studies that are conducted within the framework of terror management theory and often require participants to a- define their feelings related to their own death and/or b- think about what is going to happen to them in physical sense after their death (Hayes et al. 2010) imply that a person who becomes aware of/remembers her/his own death explicitly or implicitly feels a need to be attached to her/his worldview more intensely in order to avoid the anxiety. As a consequence, she/he can react positively to people or things that support her/his worldview, whereas can react negatively to people or things that might pose a danger to her/his worldview. And that might result in a situation where she/he defends her/his own worldview radically and denies others' beliefs and thoughts or despises these beliefs and those who have them (Harmon-Jones et al. 1996, Hayes et al. 2010).

In a study conducted by Aksüt-Çiçek (2008) in order to test this approach, participants whose religious views were threatened and also were subjected to mortality salience displayed more aggressiveness than those whose religious views were threatened only. In another study exploring the protective effect of worldview in the face of death awareness, women who were subjected to mortality salience became more inclined to assess their physical appearance by social norms and they looked more positively to the idea of taking diet pills, which is one of the ways of losing weight that is most deleterious to health, in other words, one way that brings them closer to death instead of postponing it in the physical sense (Cihan 2013).

Yavuz and Van den Bos (2009) found that two groups of participants, one of which was subjected to mortality salience and the other was subjected to uncertainty salience, displayed more negative reactions compared to the control group when their cultural values were violated. However, the researchers stated that uncertainty salience had larger effects than mortality salience, and that might be because that uncertainty concerns has a stronger effect than mortality concerns in societies where the tendency to avoid uncertainty is high, such as Turkey.

Self-esteem

The second tool provided by cultural anxiety-buffer is self-esteem (Arndt et al. 1997). A person's need for protection, safety and being cared are met by the parents during babyhood and early childhood, and as the child continues to grow up, support she/he received from her/his parents gets conditional: she/he realizes that she/he will get the care she wants if she/he behaves in a way that her/his parents approve and she/he will be deprived of it if she/he does not. So, she/he starts to act in accordance with her/his parents' standards. As cognitive functions of the child improve, care and support she/he receives from her/his parents will not be sufficient and she/he will look for a more permanent and superior source of value and protection (Greenberg et al. 1986). And that will be provided by her/his culture. As she/he acts in accordance to the values presented by the culture, she/he will feel safe and secure, and she/he will find the sense

of value, which she/he found when she/he acted like her/his parents liked before, when as she/he lives in compliance to her/his cultural worldview (Pyszczynski et al. 2004).

Importance of Self-esteem in Terror Management

As the role of having a worldview in coping with the fact of death was investigated, it was found that people who had a sense of meaning in life experienced less death anxiety when their awareness of their own death was raised (as they were subjected to mortality salience). In other words, having a sense of meaning in life can serve as an anxiety buffer against the thoughts related to death (Routledge and Juhl 2010). Similarly, those individuals who had a high sense of symbolic immortality were less affected when they were subjected to mortality salience and they experienced less terror of death (Florian and Mikulincer 1998). For example, people who were asked to think about their after-death reputation and were subjected to mortality salience after that felt less death anxiety compared to the control group where people were not asked to think about their after-death reputation (Wojtkowiak and Rutjens 2011). However, this effect goes both ways; it was found that when people felt that their cultural values (this can be called as the meaning of life of a person) were threatened, this could trigger death-related thoughts as well (Schimel et al. 2007).

Arrowood et al. (2017) conducted a study with individuals who had broad autism phenotype. They found that individuals who had more rigid personalities, in other words, who had difficulty adjusting to changes, had higher mortality-related concerns, displayed higher death-related thoughts when they were subjected to mortality salience, and defended their worldviews more severely compared to those who had less rigid personalities.

However, according to terror management theory, both cultural worldview and self-esteem are important when it comes to coping with the fact of death, and though having a worldview and attributing a meaning to one's life are helpful to deal with death, as Arndt and his colleagues (1997) emphasized, self-esteem also plays an important role in the terror management. This is because a person who has low self-esteem might not reinforce the feeling that she/he is in harmony with her/his worldview and attribute an importance to her/his personal existence. Taubman Ben-Ari's (2011) study supports this idea as it shows that when participants were subjected to mortality salience, individuals who had higher self-esteem found their life more meaningful compared to those who had low self-esteem.

The importance of self-esteem that has an important place in terror management theory in relation to psychological wellbeing has been verified by various studies (Orth et al. 2008). Individuals who had higher self-esteem have a clear opinion about their qualities, had purposes, though they had valuable characteristics and coped with unpleasant conditions in a healthy way (Leary et al. 1995, Brown et al. 2001). However, individuals who had low self-esteem were found to not have a clear sense of self, and they usually assessed themselves in negative ways and had problem with improving their sense of self-worth (Josephs et al. 2003).

The relationship between self-esteem, which has an important role both in one's psychological wellbeing and in an effective terror management, and individuals' reactions in the case of mortality salience has been investigated in various studies. These studies have also an important role in supporting terror management theory. Greenberg

and his colleagues (1992) conducted a series of studies in order to display the significance of self-esteem for an individual and its role as a buffer against in the case of anxious situations. From the perspective of terror management theory, the most important finding of the study was that as self-esteem is increased in an experimental environment, individuals felt less anxiety when stimuli evoking death related thoughts were presented. As they compared individuals who had high self-esteem and individuals who had low self-esteem without making any interventions, Harmon-Jones et al. (1997) stated that individuals who were subjected to mortality salience used their attachment to their worldview less in coping with the death anxiety if they had high self-esteem compared to those who had low self-esteem.

Schmeichel and his colleagues (2009), who stated that there are also studies (Landau and Greenberg 2006, McGregor et al. 2007) whose findings pointed out in the opposite direction and tried to explain these contradictory results, concluded that there are more than one type of self-esteem, and one type that serves as an anxiety buffer against the death related thoughts is implicit self-esteem of which a person is relatively less consciously aware, and not explicit self-esteem that is related to the conscious evaluations of a person about herself/himself. Those studies that revealed incompatible results with terror management theory focused on explicit self-esteem that is more open to cognitive distortions and self-presentational biases, not on implicit self-esteem that operates in a "gut-level". On the other hand, Du and his colleagues (2013), who studied cultural influence on the function of self-esteem as an existential buffer, found that interdependent self-esteem played a greater role in collectivist cultures, whereas independent self-esteem played a greater role in individualist cultures.

Mert (2010) suggested that the concept of "courage" should be included in terror management theory in order to present an explanation to individual differences in employing self-esteem as a buffer against death anxiety. From his point of view, courage should be defined not as the eradication of the fear, but as controlling it (Olsthoorn 2007), and determines how effective the strengths of a person are used, including self-esteem (Mert 2010).

Landau and his colleagues (2009) examined the case where self-esteem and cultural worldview, which should operate together to protect a person from death anxiety, were in conflict. They found that the participants gave up on their efforts to increase their self-esteem when these efforts threatened the authorities that represented their worldview. They explained this situation as worldview having a more fundamental role as an anxiety buffer in terror management than self-esteem; this is because, according to these writers, threatening one's worldview also harms the values on which her/his self-esteem is built, whereas threatening one's self-esteem does not necessarily harm her/his cultural worldview as well. In another study Du and Jonas (2015) examined the influence of conformity with modesty norm, that is an important part of cultural values in Eastern cultures, on self-esteem when subjected to mortality salience found that conformity with modesty norm decreased the self-esteem. This was in contradiction with the hypothesis they proposed in line with terror management theory, These researchers, within the framework of terror management theory, expected that conformity with social norms would result in higher self-esteem. However they found opposite results which were in contrast to the findings of the study mentioned above (Landau et al. 2009), stated that violation of modesty norm increased one's self-esteem.

Terror Management Theory and Attachment

The importance of self-esteem in the life of human beings has been confirmed by a vast range of research, aside from those that are designed within the framework of terror management theory. There are countless studies on the development, functions and origin of the self-esteem (Leary et al. 1995, Kuster et al. 2013, Orth and Robins 2014). Research showed that though self-esteem fluctuates through different phases of one's life (Orth and Robins 2014, Chung et al. 2017), the differences between individuals tend to be persistent throughout their lives (Cole et al. 2001, Donnellan et al. 2012). In addition to genetic factors, the environment during the childhood and relations with the caregiver has a relatively profound and permanent effect on the development of self-esteem (Verschuere and Marcoen 1999, Orth 2018). According to Bowlby (1985, 1989), one of the pioneers of attachment theory, interactions with the attachment figures are recorded as mental representations (models on the reactions of the attachment figure), and formation of models regarding the self are also influenced by the interactions with attachment figures. During the attachment process, it is important whether or not the attachment figure comes to help when the baby seeks support and safety. This determines whether she/he will see herself/himself worthy of receiving help from the attachment figure and her/his sense of self will be shaped accordingly. In addition, an individual builds inner working models that guide her/him in her/his struggle to cope with difficulties and helps her/him regulating her/his emotions during this process. According to terror management theory (Pyszczynski et al., 2004), the relationships formed with the parents in order to cope with the anxiety during the attachment process have similarities with the way one copes with the death anxiety. As explained above, as the fact of mortality becomes more apparent for an individual as she/he grows older, the perceived protectiveness of the parents decreases, and she/he eases her/his death anxiety by attaching her/his worldview.

Studies examining the influence of the attachment that has a central role in an individual's life on the terror management show that the attachment style of an individual has influence on the terror of death, and those who are securely attached have lower death anxiety (Mikulincer et al. 1990, Florian and Mikulincer 1998, Mikulincer and Florian 2000). On the other hand, whereas the importance of the attachment style decreases when the terror of death was questioned explicitly, implicit terror of death is mostly found in individuals who are insecurely attached (Mikulincer et al. 1990).

As highlighted above, Mikulincer and Florian (1998) showed that individuals who had higher sense of symbolic immortality experienced less terror of death. Following the idea that the attachment style might be a determinative factor, its effect on the terror of death was examined in the same study. As expected, those individuals who were securely attached developed a sense of symbolic immortality more easily and this helped coping with terror of death better. At this point, it can be suggested that positive experiences in the first years of life helps one to develop a positive approach towards life and death. However, one of the interesting findings of this study was that though individuals who had avoidant attachment style did not develop a strong sense of symbolic immortality, no effect of this was found on their terror of death. Researchers suggested that this might be due to a defense mechanism. It should be taken into consideration that in the related part of the study method of mortality salience was not employed, but self-report scales were used.

Bearing this deficiency in their mind, the same researchers conducted another study two years later, and examined the effect of attachment styles on terror management under mortality salience. When the participants' awareness regarding their death was increased, only those who were securely attached had an increased sense of symbolic immortality and desire for intimacy in their close relationships. These findings suggest that securely attached individuals have a different reaction pattern than those who are insecurely attached when it comes to coping with death awareness. An important finding of the study was that whether or not securely attached, everyone was affected by mortality salience. However, the attachment style could make a difference in ways that individuals used to cope with the terror of death (Mikulincer and Florian 2000).

Mikulincer et al. (2003) examined the function of close relationships in terror management and they proposed that mortality salience reinforces the motivation to form and maintain close relationships, and these relationships serve as a symbolic shield against the terror of death. In another study conducted by the same researchers (Hirschberger et al. 2003), participants in the control group were asked to imagine themselves either receiving praise from their romantic partners, receiving a complaint from their partners or being criticized by their partners. After that, they completed a scale assessing their strivings for intimacy with their partners; striving was highest in the first condition and lowest in the last condition. On the other hand, participants in the intervention group were asked the same thing after they were subjected to mortality salience, and they strived for intimacy equally under three conditions.

In another study examining this relation from another aspect (Mikulincer et al. 2002), participants who were in close relationships were asked to imagine themselves separated from their partners. Death-thought accessibility of participants was heightened, especially when the duration of the separation was long or attachment anxiety was high. In a similar study, participants were asked to imagine themselves separated from their partners and those who displayed higher commitment to their partners experiences less death anxiety (Dalda 2011). Taubman Ben-Ari et al. (2002) broadened this framework and examined the relation between social relationships and terror management. A series of studies revealed that under the mortality salience condition, individuals showed more willingness to initiate social relationships; however, one of the important aspects here is that this willingness is mostly displayed by individuals who were securely attached.

Cox and his colleagues (2008) highlighted the central role of early relationships with parents in attachment and stated that it might not be sufficient to use close relationships in order to assess the role of attachment. Therefore, in order to understand the effect of attachment in the first years of an individual, they conducted a series of studies. According to the findings, recalling positive maternal interactions served as an anxiety buffer against death related thoughts. This implied that depending on the attachment figure helps the management of terror irrespective of the attachment style. However, researchers emphasize that recalling positive maternal interactions might not be directly related to positive relations with the parents, but might increase self-value. In the same research, it was found that individuals who were securely attached mostly sought intimacy from those they were in a romantic relationship with when they were subjected to mortality salience, whereas individuals who were insecurely attached tended to seek for support from their parents. Similarly, Cox and Arndt (2012) examined

the attachment style differences and found that individuals who were anxiously attached exaggerated how positively their parents regarded them, whereas individuals who were securely attached exaggerated how positively their romantic partners regarded them. Yaakobi et al. (2014) examined the relationship between parenthood and terror management and found that an individual's parenthood-related thoughts served as a buffer against anxiety, especially for those who were securely attached and prevented the activation of other terror management mechanisms such as seeking for romantic intimacy after mortality salience. Same study showed that parenthood-related obstacles increased the death-thought accessibility of the participants. Researchers interpreted these findings as that desire for having children is related to coping with death anxiety. On the other hand, Vance (2014), taking the link between death related thoughts and close relationships into consideration, suggested that we should take advantage of this link in the therapy room and use the terror of death in order to strengthen the relationship between the client and the therapist. In addition, he asserted that ignoring death anxiety might harm the client and the therapeutic relationship.

Strachman and Schimel (2006) examined the relationship between the commitment among partners and worldview, and for that asked some of the participants to think about the differences between them and their romantic partners, and asked others to think about the similarities they had. The commitment of participants in the mortality salience group to their partners was decreased if they thought about the differences. In another study conducted by Tongeren et al. (2013) showed that mortality salience elicited less forgiveness in less close relationships whereas it elicited more forgiveness in more close relationships. Researchers linked these findings to the defense of worldview; strengthening of ties with someone an individual is in close relationship with can provide a sense of existential security, whereas strengthening ties with someone who is not similar nor closely related might harm an individual's worldview.

Hart et al. (2015), trying to explain this sort of findings, proposed a tripartite security system model including attachment, self-esteem and worldview processes. According to this model, in the case one of these components is threatened, other components are active further. In addition, they suggested that the attachment style of an individual might affect the intensity of this defense-related activation. The results of their study supported this model.

Discussion

Terror management theory has been receiving attention; however, it can be said that this attention increased quite recently. Therefore, it is too early to make certain generalizations yet. Still, the current literature seems to shed light on many areas beyond the field of social psychology. Becker (1973) accepted that an individual who spends her/his early years in a supporting environment will experience less intensive terror of death; however, he thought that this was about disguising it. On the other hand, research conducted within the framework of terror management theory indicates that all human beings bear this terror one way or another; however, how they manage this terror differs. Attachment has an important role in the wellbeing of human beings and this is reflected in their terror management as well.

Yalom (2011) suggests that terror of death plays an important role in human life. Vance (2014) states that discussing about the mortality in the therapy room might have

a positive therapeutic influence. Self-esteem is paid special attention in many psychotherapy models, and similarly, many theoretical approaches emphasize the importance of the attachment process. Considering the connection between the awareness of death and both attachment and self-esteem, it can be said that mortality does not receive the attention it should in therapeutic processes. Though psychotherapy models based on existential approaches accept death as an issue of fundamental importance, most of the other models neglects this issue. The results of studies conducted within the framework of terror management theory seem to have the potential for both explaining human behaviors and offering application opportunities in the fields such as psychotherapy.

That the relationship of an individual with her/his parents in her/his early childhood and her/his experiences in the beginning of her/his life can have a determinative role in her/his perception of death which means the end of her/his life is somehow ironical. Though it is not possible yet to identify its exact role following the findings of the related research, future research will possibly shed light on the subject even further. Furthermore, we can accept that attachment has a facilitative role in terror management. Lastly, it should be borne in mind that what the science of psychology might say on death deserves attention, though psychologists have avoided this subject for a long time now (Kastenbaum 2000).

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