



In the Matter of...Terror Management Theory

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Introduction

What is the meaning of life? What do we all fear? Why am I here? Why do people do what they do when they do it? Why am I the most important person living on Planet Earth? Finally, what drives me to want to control everything around me?

In 1973 cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker posited a belief that human beings seek to give meaning to their lives by processing perceptions of reality around a unique feature of being human, the awareness of one's own death. But Becker's work reflected a philosophical concern for seeking an answer to a simple question: "what makes people act as they do" (Liechty, para.1) Significantly, this question was grounded in the experience of his generation during WWII.

Becker was a first generation Jewish American who served in the U.S. Army infantry and "helped liberate a Nazi concentration camp" (Liechty, para. 2) during the war. This awareness of death and genocide impacted his inquiry. He believed that humans tend to deny death because of a unique, evolutionary cognitive inheritance. We seem to be the only animals who inhabit Planet Earth capable of constructing a world through the creation of symbolic meaning. Further, we then challenge its veracity. In essence, humans are capable of reflecting on the fact that while walking, they are reflecting on the reflection of walking itself. As far as we know, we are the only beings able to self-reflect. Becker's insights catalyzed others to explore of human behavior through a line of academic social psychology inquiry called Terror Management Theory (TMT). It is this that is the purpose of this essay. I seek to explore the application of TMT to ameliorating the current accumulating cultural pressures that impede police agencies building trust with crucial members of their community.

Definitions

Annihilation – The process of moving something to nothing. In the case of this essay it is associated with the fear of "no longer being...a primary existential anxiety" (death). Normal humans seek to control their environment and limit factors that lead to the end of their lives.

Cognitive dissonance – The discomfort (feelings) felt when a person holds two conflicting beliefs. Diminishing (extinguishing) one set of old beliefs and substituting a new set of beliefs reduces conflict.

Management – The judicious use of means to accomplish a given end. (Merriam)

Meme – An idea, behavior, style or usages that spreads from person to person within a culture. (Merriam)

Mortality Salience – The degree of conflict that humans face when seeking to completely avoid death and the futility of try to do so...thus terror management.

Self-esteem – Confidence in one's own worth or abilities. Increased self-esteem is associated with a positive view of living whereas diminished self-esteem is associated with depression.

Signature Pedagogy – The set of theory, practices, and ethical insights that defines the teaching practices of a given profession.

Terror – The state of intense fear. (Merriam)

Theory – The analysis of a set of facts and their relationship to one another. Theory seeks to predict behavior. It is a mental filter used to determine the validity of data.

The “other” – Mental constructs that lead to the objectification of a human being. Usually associated in academic writing to those people who are unlike your ethnicity or not holding your value system.

Merriam-Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary

<http://psychologydictionary.org/>

Pertinent Concepts

Social Learning Theory – (SLT) Proposed by Ronald L. Akers in 1966 and drawing on previous work of Edwin Sutherland and B. F. Skinner, SLT posits that behavior is “learned through both social and nonsocial reinforcements. SLT also advocates that *in the case of criminal behavior*, it occurs in social interactions with other likeminded people” (E.B.). SLT helps to describe that criminal behavior is moderated over time by the actual consequences of criminal acts. It also examines how deviant behavior is normalized in the criminal mind. Thus, one can study how rewarding deviance (never getting caught by the police) tends to reinforce the probability that deviance will reoccur.

Terror Management Theory – (TMT) Proposed in 1986 by Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon (Cox), TMT investigates the extent to which human motivation is driven by the need to “quell the potential terror inherent in [the] awareness of [individual] vulnerability and mortality by investing in cultural belief systems [or world views] that imbue life with meaning”. Just to clarify meaning, TMT is not a method for relating to modern terrorism per se.

Corollary to this is the contention that individuals associate self-esteem within the context of how well an individual is able to structure social interaction with fellow members of their society. This is done in order to “live up to cultural standards thus protecting them [the individual] from [confronting one's] deeply rooted fears of mortality” (Jonas, p. 1239).

Literature

Critically examining the extent to which SLT/TMT application can help diminish police use-of-force against minorities is worthy of investigation.

There has been a substantial amount of empirical (pragmatic, real world) study of both SLT and TMT since their inception. As with any field of academic inquiry, SLT/TMT ranged through the work of a global network of researchers seeking to support these basic assumptions: that social interaction; and resultant death, pain, and trauma significantly affect one's worldview. The field of law enforcement can use both to help examine the application and utility of use-of-force guidelines.

In a recent on-line article (2015) Jon Maskaly and Christopher Donner sought to apply, in tandem, SLT (as traditionally applied to criminological theory) with the non-traditional (for policing) social psychology theory of TMT. This synthesis is novel and done in an attempt to describe more fully causes behind a rash of recent (2015) shooting incidents involving unarmed suspects by police.

Maskaly and Donner begin by noting that police departments are normally viewed by society as bureaucratic organizations guided by proscriptive policy and a rigid administrative mindset. Generally, the use of deadly force is judged by police administrators and the courts around normative values an officer should use in dealing with a potentially violent suspect. These values are formed through trained processes that direct officers to determine the level to which a suspect's comportment exhibits indicators that he/she seeks an opportunity to cause harm to the officer or the public at large. In essence, is the suspect, by his/her behavior, observed to be in a state of "imminent danger" to him/herself or others. As a culture, police are concerned with officer/public safety at all times and this safety first mindset tends to inculcate in them a self-defensive mentality. This frame of mind is, at its heart, tacitly fear based.

The Sub-culture of Police

In order to clarify for the reader salient differences, it is now necessary to examine both Social Learning Theory and Terror Management Theory separately. Social Learning Theory (SLT) seeks to explain the formation and application of cultural normative behavior as an evolving process (see earlier [definition](#)). Aspects of the creation of a policing culture and its unique values can be studied using SLT.

Policing is a profession whose principles are learned in the classroom and on the street. Each generation of officers is introduced to policing through formal education and field training. As a calling, the level of self-esteem officers have about themselves and what they do is tied to symbolic power. These memes include but are not limited to: honor, discipline, fortitude in the face of danger, and the accomplishment of courageous acts. All reinforce loyalty to the force and those with whom one works.

In contrast, self-esteem can be diminished by an officer becoming desensitized to their work through investigating the brutal grind of the beatings, killings, bribes and mindless violence of everyday life they experience daily in executing their official duties. Thus the formation of a police sub-culture is a complex, evolving social act dominated by both life enhancing and life threatening challenge. It also helps to understand the formation of a Signature Pedagogy for law enforcement professional education.

Application of Terror Management Theory

In applying the concept of TMT, Maskaly and Donner examined ways in which a person resolves conflicts in order to create a positive, self-affirming worldview through the diminishment of uncertainty (and fear of death). It is important to note that normality formation is a constant process. In order to normalize (and integrate) what seems to be a life threatening situation, Maskaly and Donner suggest that one can:

1. Adopt (convert) one's worldview to match the demands of others and merge belief systems (become the enemy)
2. Deride the worldview of the "other" and seek their annihilation (kill the enemy)

Either condition is readily adopted when a person is "terrified" and aware that indecision will result in death. Thus the need to defend his/her worldview (and their living presence in it) tends to be "zealously" acted upon.

In the case of a hazardous profession like law enforcement, evidence suggests that the fear of death (extent of mortality salience) is directly related to the level of force police employ in meeting non-compliant actors (a hostile man with a gun). Maskaly and Donner argue that police administrators can decrease police instigated use-of-force by employing the insights of both SLT and TMT in tandem. Both modalities explain how police create archetypical culturally normative behaviors that amplify PO perceptions that everyone who is not a police officer is potentially dangerous. They also argue that this is one of the most destructive aspects of a police agency sub-culture formation.

Police officers are daily reminded to "stay safe" and armor themselves (vests, cameras, guns). Mortality salience (fear of death) coupled with traditional law enforcement policies and procedures tend to create a world view that derides the criminal and accepts their "annihilation" (think arrest or neutralization). Unfortunately, there is also a concomitant lumping of ethnically similar citizens in one's community to the significantly smaller population of criminals one is forced to deal with. Doing so tends to diminish the self-worth of all involved.

Maskaly and Donner further argue that police sub-culture values adopt this worldview because accepting accommodation to a criminal culture is deemed unacceptable. For the PO separation of good from bad people is sometimes very hard (and fraught with danger). Also, the PO is not the criminal and must not accept any tendency towards becoming one. He/she must deny (and annihilate) that possibility. Thus the authors note that shooting the "other" can become psychologically reinforcing of the positive self-image one holds for one's self.

Observations

Police education and field training are designed to replicate "real world scenarios" and test trainee reactions to hypothetical (controlled) situations. Gun range electronic simulations and periodic re-certification of firearm expertise tend to diminish the mortality salience (fear of death) in favor of rational thought. The problem with this is that the "real world" police find themselves in is oftentimes neither rational nor safe. The need for police to understand that when dealing with the public one's internal cultural norms (police sub-culture) and their own sense of mortality can foster cognitive dissonance. This condition can lead to the de-humanization of the "other" thus delegitimizing the need to be overly concerned about the application of use-of-force. Deadly force, legally applied, is more than mere self-preservation, it is a statement belief. Police training seeks to mitigate the consequences when the trigger pulled. But the act is fraught with unintended psychological consequences for both the officer, yes...and most assuredly the victim!

Summary

It is the best interests of law enforcement to constantly challenge their culture, institutional norms and personal preconceptions. The use of deadly force has become a touchstone issue with political and social decision makers. Addressing perceptions of police use-of-force is only one aspect of a complicated and psychologically sensitive set of evolving issues. In the case of higher education, the concepts addressed in this essay can lead to investigation and creation of course(s) of study that critically examine the pedagogic/andragogic underpinning of law enforcement training and administrative education. The findings generated by this inquiry could revise law enforcement's Signature Pedagogy.

By changing the context of police self-awareness we change the culture. We imbed the fact that modern law enforcement education fosters in the individual officer adaptability, self-awareness and trauma-informed responsibility in meeting their core Mission: TO SERVE AND PROTECT.

References

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