

Final report

Expert Meeting *The motivational foundations of ingroup support and worldview defense*, June 12-15, 2012, University of Salzburg
Organizers: Eva Jonas, Johannes Klackl

Summary

The main goal of this expert meeting was to talk about what actually drives the human need to be part of ideologies, cultures and groups and to defend these entities in the face of threat. Since the late 80s, Terror Management Theory (TMT) was the dominant theoretical framework to explain these behaviors: people are aware of their mortality and use cultural values, groups and ideologies to overcome the terror inherent in this knowledge (we will refer to these resources as worldviews in the present report). By living up to the standards of the worldview, people are able to reach symbolic immortality (being part of a group or collective that persists beyond one's death) or sometimes even literal immortality (i.e., religion).

Indeed, hundreds of studies were able to show that after being reminded of their mortality, people tend to judge criminal offenses and moral transgressions more harshly than being primed with another unpleasant, but not death-related topic, such as physical pain. Also, after mortality priming, people tend to follow social norms and exhibit an increased preference for members of their own groups (for a review, see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010).

In the last few years, researchers asked whether the same defensive behaviors could be obtained after primings that are completely unrelated to death, such as uncertainty (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001), uncontrollability (Fritsche, Jonas, & Fankhänel, 2008), meaninglessness (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), or unpleasant emotion (Holbrook, Sousa, & Hahn-Holbrook, 2011). Many studies were indeed able to show that it is not necessary to remind people of their own death in order to boost worldview-defensive behaviors. Thus, death is not the only stimulus that can elicit worldview defense. Researchers must consider the possibility that worldview defense might not only protect the human mind from worries associated with mortality, but also from other existential concerns. The present expert meeting revolved precisely around this issue. We invited a renowned TMT expert (Tom Pyszczynski) and several experts holding 'alternative' explanations (Ian McGregor, Travis Proulx, Immo Fritsche, and Colin Holbrook) and tried to figure out how to advance research in this domain. In addition, we invited neuroscientists (Markus Quirin, Kyle Nash) as contributors who should help to figure out how to use state-of-the-art neuroscientific techniques to aid in the research process. A full list of speakers is provided in Annex 2.

In the course of four days of the meeting, we were able to reach several important goals, which will be summarized in this report.

The issue of identifying basic human motivations (see above) was the subject of our second major discussion.

Discussion 2: In Discussion 1, we discussed that frustrations of various human motives could lead to anxiety. But what exactly do we mean by motivation? Our impression was that the various experts were concentrating on different motives: For instance, Terror management Theory (Tom Pyszczynski) views the need for self-preservation as the motivation underlying worldview defense, Immo Fritsche/Eva Jonas's control restoration account postulates the human need to be in control of the environment as the central motive. Travis Proulx's approach highlights the importance of epistemic control, or understanding why things in the world happen the way they do. However, we were not satisfied with this 'motivation zoo' and concluded that we needed a model of human motivation that includes all main human motives and does not just randomly pick out some motives of interest.

We are currently still in the process of continuing this discussion after the meeting. Our preliminary model is formed by three independent motivational dimensions (Control, Understanding and Identity, see Figure 2). Each motive has two domains: Control can be exercised by individuals themselves (self) or by groups (other). The need for understanding/meaning can be achieved by limited/heuristic/impulsive information processing or extensive and systematic information processing. The need for identity can be seen in a concrete context (in which a person's values can be flexible) and an abstract context (in which the consistency of a person's values becomes important). Importantly, if one motive is threatened in one domain (e.g., control in the self-domain), individuals are predicted to either re-establish control in the other-domain of control motivation or to strive towards satisfying motivational goals in the two remaining axes of the model (= idea of fluid compensation).

Assessment of the results and impact of the event on the future directions of the field

Joint Publication

So far, we have found common grounds regarding the driving force of worldview defense (i.e., discrepancy and anxiety, see Discussion 1) and the motivational space for our generic model of worldview defense (Figure 2). We are currently in the course of writing a joint review paper and Mark Zanna has signaled that he will be interested to consider it for publication to the *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (http://www.elsevier.com/wps/product/cws_home/708135). We hope that most, if not all, researchers who took part in the expert meeting will participate in this project. In this paper, we will not only inform social psychologists about the multitude of alternative approaches that aim at explaining the phenomenon of worldview defense but also outline the common process underlying our approaches (see Discussion 1). Next, we will discuss neuroscientific perspectives on threat and worldview defense (see Figure 1). Third, we will attempt to review the different empirical findings from the different research approaches to threat and to integrate them into a joint model (see Figure 2). It is our impression that this paper would be a valuable contribution to the literature, because especially researchers who are new to the field tend to be overwhelmed with the number of existing theoretical accounts and sometimes have a hard time understanding the differences and commonalities of these approaches.

Research collaboration

One remarkable thing about the present expert meeting was that proponents of nearly all important theoretical accounts came together. Despite all the existing controversies our discussions were extremely constructive. During the course of the meeting, the participants formed several ideas about joint research projects. We (Eva Jonas, Dmitrij Agroskin and Johannes Klackl), for example, formed a very promising research cooperation with Ian McGregor (Toronto, Canada) and Kyle Nash (Basel, Switzerland). Our first joint research effort will be the use of EEG to further study the role of prefrontal brain asymmetry for the emergence of worldview defense. We will combine the EEG know-how in Salzburg (Johannes Klackl, Dmitrij Agroskin) with the possibility of acquiring large samples of participants in York (Ian McGregor, Kyle Nash) and investigate new research questions combining our two theoretical approaches to understanding the psychology of threat. In August 2012, we will configure EEG hardware in Salzburg that will subsequently be sent to York to gather experimental data. Our joint goal will be to combine our EEG and social psychological knowledge to more extensively test our common hypotheses.

Another important product of the expert meeting was the emergence of two symposia submitted to the next SPSP Conference in New Orleans

(<http://spspmeeting.org/2013/Wecome-to-SPSP-2013.aspx>). Immo Fritsche organized one symposium with the title 'Explaining non-conscious effects of threat on cultural worldview defense: Common ground and divergent approaches'. Travis Proulx submitted a symposium entitled "Is there a common mechanism underlying the threat-compensation literature? Evidence for inconsistency compensation as core motivation". The plan is that most participants from the Expert meeting participants will present their research during these symposia and meet in New Orleans to maintain cooperation.

Tom Pyszczynski's contribution was extremely valuable, especially when it came to formulating new research goals. He critically noted that it is also necessary to demonstrate, for each alternative account, whether boosting the alleged resource against anxiety (Fritsche/Jonas: personal control; Proulx: meaning; McGregor: goal congruence) reduces peoples' need to engage in worldview defense after a threat to the same resource. Second, defending worldviews before being threatened with anxiety-eliciting threats should reduce the need to defend one's worldviews in response. Third, interindividual differences related to the availability of the resources (Fritsche/Jonas: self-efficacy, Proulx: epistemic needs; McGregor: clarity about plans for the future) should be related to how strongly people react toward threats to these resources. The expert meeting contributors agreed on taking these suggestions seriously and to put their explanations to a more thorough test.

Annex 1: Programme of the meeting

	Tuesday 12 th	Wednesday 13 th	Thursday 14 th	Friday 15 th
	Conception of worldview defense	iV/dV combinations	Neuroscientific perspectives	Synthesis
09:00-09:45	Eva Jonas <i>Three foci in understanding the psychology of existential threat.</i>	DISC	Markus Quirin <i>The IPANAT: Measuring the potential for experienced anxiety? Defensive vs. integrative coping with mortality threat? The role of action orientation</i>	DISC
10:00-10:45	Tom Pyszczynski <i>TMT, existential threat and human motivation: Death changes everything.</i>	Johannes Klackl, Markus Quirin, Kyle Nash (iv-dv-summary only)	DISC	DISC
11:00-11:45	Ian McGregor <i>Anxiety and reactive approach motivation: A Frustration → Obsession hypothesis.</i>	Discussion of iV/dV combinations	Kyle Nash <i>Anxiety and reactive approach motivation: Neural evidence.</i>	DISC
	LUNCH	LUNCH	DISC	LUNCH
13:15-14:00	Immo Fritsche <i>About the „we“ and „what“ of mortality salience effects.</i>	Discussion of iV/dV combinations	LUNCH	DISC
14:15-15:00	Travis Proulx <i>The meaning maintenance model: ‚The Five As‘.</i>	Discussion of iV/dV combinations	Johannes Klackl <i>How can neuroscience contribute to the study of existential phenomena?</i>	DISC
15:00-15:30	COFFE BREAK	COFFE BREAK	COFFE BREAK	COFFE BREAK
15:30-16:15	Colin Holbrook <i>Worldview defense and unconscious alarm.</i>	Discussion of iV/dV combinations	DISC	DISC
16:30-17:15	Dmitrij Agroskin <i>Worldview defense as terror management and control restoration.</i>			

Annex 2: Full list of speakers

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Final notes

Aaron Kay was not able to attend the meeting due to a serious illness. His physician did not allow him to travel, which is why the expert meeting took place without Aaron Kay. We spent no money on accommodation or meal costs, but unfortunately, he was not able to get the money for his flight refunded. We are, of course, willing to reveal the relevant email correspondence, if required.

We asked Ian McGregor to join the meeting a few months before, but he refused because of too many work and family obligations. He spontaneously decided to attend one week before the meeting. Because Aaron Kay was getting sick at the same time, we decided to do an exchange: we used ESF grant money reserved for Aaron Kay to cover his meals and accommodation costs. However, Ian covered the travel costs for himself. His participation was a true gain for the meeting and we feel that we would not have arrived with such satisfying conclusions without him.

References

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