Ageism: Denying the Face of the Future
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Ageism


Ageism, like all other forms of prejudice, undoubtedly has a variety of causes and serves a variety of functions. Ageism can most simply be defined as negative attitudes or behaviors toward an individual solely based on that person's age. Defined this way, negative attitudes toward people because they are young would qualify as ageism. However, throughout this chapter and consistent with the spirit of this book, we will use the term ageism to refer specifically to negative attitudes and behavior toward the elderly, focusing exclusively on this most troubling and consequential form of ageism.

In the United States, once a person is categorized as elderly, the nonelderly are likely to apply a host of negative stereotypes to the aged (e.g., Kite and Johnson 1988), assume attitude and value differences, and expect that the elderly have very different economic and social interests than they do (e.g., Bytheway 1995; Palmore 1999). In Tucson, Arizona, there are vivid examples of ageism, in part because the elderly population is particularly substantial. Because of the warm weather, beyond native residents who grow old, there are lots of permanent resident retirees who have escaped colder climates, in addition to their temporary winter counterparts, known as "snowbirds." The most salient stereotype is that the elderly create consternation and congestion on the highways with their slow driving, more often than not in the left lane. And in the political spectrum, the elderly are despised for being narrowly focused on reducing taxes at the expense of education. Of course, other, probably more harmful manifestations of ageism undoubtedly abound in Tucson as well as elsewhere—phenomena like age discrimination in hiring and forced retirement (Esposito 1987) and negative depictions of the elderly in the mass media (Palmore 1999).

These examples surely suggest that the many causes of ethnic prejudice discussed by Allport (1954) and researched over the past half-century
most likely apply to age prejudice as well. However, certain special aspects of ageism suggest some unique causes for this type of prejudice. Although the young may view the elderly as an out-group, the truth is that the elderly used to be young and that the young, barring premature death, will one day be elderly. Thus, the relationship of the nonold to the old is unique. If the elderly are viewed as an out-group, they consist of an out-group that used to be part of the nonelderly’s in-group, and one that the nonelderly will someday join if they are lucky enough to survive that long! These complexities do not apply to relations between blacks and whites or the French and Germans. They also do not apply to religious differences, except in the rare case of conversion, or relations between the sexes except for the rare case of sex change operations.

Another complexity concerns the nature of the threat posed by the elderly. National and ethnic out-groups often pose economic threats, such as competition for jobs and material resources, but this does not seem to be a major concern people have regarding the elderly within their own culture. Out-groups can also be threatening because they may claim superiority to one’s own group. For example, some of the animosity among Germany, France, and Great Britain over the years may stem from each culture’s perceiving that the other one claims to be superior. In this way, out-groups may threaten an individual’s self-esteem. Indeed, as we have suggested elsewhere (Greenberg et al. 1990), this may help explain the widespread prejudice against Jews, who have long claimed to be the chosen people. It seems unlikely, however, that the elderly pose a threat to the self-esteem of the nonelderly in this manner.

**The Elderly and the Threat of Death**

Terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986), based on the writings of Ernest Becker (1962, 1973, 1975), proposes an even more fundamental way that out-groups can be psychologically threatening. The theory proposes that individuals’ faith in their cultural worldviews provides them with psychological equanimity in a threatening universe where death is the only certainty. By subscribing to different worldviews, members of out-groups either explicitly or implicitly imply that one’s own worldview may not be valid. This psychological threat is posited to be a major contributor to prejudice and discrimination.

This threat may play a role in ageism, but probably a minor one. In most cultures, the elderly are staunch supporters—in fact, key represen-
tatives—of the mainstream worldview. To the extent they are, they should provide psychological comfort rather than distress. The one exception is when the elderly are viewed as holding on to an antiquated worldview that is no longer compatible with the views held by the young of the particular culture. In many cultures, there may be some element of this generation gap, but at the same time, the elderly generally are likely to be quite supportive of the traditions and fortunes of the culture and there appears to be “general agreement between generations about our basic value system” (Palmore 1999, p. 15). Thus, this type of threat to one’s worldview may contribute to some ageism, but only under a limited set of circumstances.

Terror management theory suggests yet another threat that may commonly contribute to ageism, one that is fundamentally tied to the elderly. The elderly represent the threat to the young of their own fate: the prospects of diminishing beauty, health, sensation, and, ultimately, death. These threats are recognized in aspects of most, if not all, cultures, albeit perhaps most clearly in Western cultures. In the Shakespearean comedy *As You Like It*, in one of the most well-known passages in English literature (“all the world’s a stage”), the melancholy philosopher Jacques refers to the seventh and final stage of life as “second childishness and mere oblivion / sans teeth, sans taste, sans everything.” John Keats (1820/1991), in two of the most revered poems in the English language, echoes this negative view of aging. In “Ode to a Nightingale” (pp. 34-35), he laments the human knowledge of our fate:

Where palsy shakes a few last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed desairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Similarly, in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (p. 37), Keats exalts the scene portrayed on the urn because those portrayed will never grow old or perish:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair...
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man.
Ironically, Keats never had to cope with these problems of aging because he died at the ripe old age of 26, having met that one inevitable fate with which aging is linked all too soon.

Evidence of the linking of aging with death is also apparent in distinctly non-Western cultures. Indeed, the evolutionary anthropological philosopher Susanne Langer (1982) has argued that it is precisely the dawning awareness by our ancestors that aging leads to death that magnifies the problem of death. Her argument is that death by lion, boulder, or even evil spirit can be avoided, but death as a natural consequence of the aging process to which we are all subject makes death a permanent, unavoidable constant, which burdens us psychologically like nothing else. People may face a variety of reminders of death over the course of their daily lives, such as news stories and television shows about murders and natural disasters, car and plane accidents. But people can feel that they have qualities or can engage in actions that allow them to avoid these problems. However, when the young see a very elderly person, they see a fate that is their inevitable destiny if they are lucky enough to avoid the many hazards that can cause an earlier death. Thus, from this perspective, the elderly may be the most threatening reminder to people of their inevitable mortality.

In these and many other examples from anthropology, literature, painting, and film, aging is associated with a variety of negative consequences, the most psychologically important of these being death. Because of these widespread associations, the elderly are likely to bring to mind these very threatening prospects for ourselves. Terror management theory (Greenberg et al. 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 1991) was developed to explain how we humans cope with the knowledge of our own vulnerability and mortality, and so it may be useful to review the theory and associated research and then draw implications from this work to understand how people defend against the threatening aspects of knowledge of and experiences with the elderly and the consequences of such defenses for attitudes and behavior toward the elderly.

**Terror Management Theory**

Terror management theory was based on the writings of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1962, 1973, 1975), and neither the theory nor this chapter should be taken as an adequate substitute for the rich analyses Becker put forth. Terror management theory was formulated to pull together Becker’s essential points, supplement them as needed, and provide a basis for investigating empirically how the problem of the awareness of death affects a wide range of human behaviors.

Becker sought to synthesize knowledge from all the academic disciplines concerned with people to understand why human beings behave the way they do. Particularly prominent among the influences on his theorizing were Søren Kierkegaard, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Alfred Adler, Erving Goffman, Gregory Zilborg, and Norman Brown. The analysis of human behavior that he formulated can be viewed as an existential psychodynamic one, quite similar to those of contemporaries Robert Jay Lifton and Irvin Yalom.

Becker noted the common heritage shared by humans and other animals and focused especially on the notion that all animals are driven to survive, or have an instinct for self-preservation. We most likely evolved out of our ape ancestors into a unique species. According to Becker, what makes us the unique and thriving species we are is our highly developed cerebral cortex, most different from our ape relatives in the elaborate nature of our prefrontal lobes. While our closest cousins, the great apes, number around 100,000 worldwide, the human population is continuing to grow beyond 6 billion, and it is our intellectual prowess, made possible by our highly evolved cortex, that is probably most responsible for our advantage.

So for Becker, to understand human behavior, including ageism, we have to understand that humans are animals with basic organismic needs but with unique intellectual tools for satisfying those needs. Among the intellectual capacities that Becker proposed as critical to our nature are the capacity for language and symbolic thought, the capacity for conceptualizing subjective experience in terms of past, present, and future—facilitating our ability to learn from experience and plan ahead—and the capacity for self-awareness. These capabilities in combination allow humans an unprecedented capacity for self-regulation and regulation of external circumstances—to delay and modify reactions to impending stimuli, to communicate with others as well as the self about mentally stored information and hypothetical possibilities, to plan out potential courses of action and monitor our progress toward goals, and to imagine and make modifications to the external environment. These regulatory advantages have enhanced our inclusive fitness far beyond that of the other species most similar to us and have played a major role in our reproductive success—our ability to survive and thrive in virtually every environmental niche on earth.
Thus, as a species, we owe much to the intellectual capacities made possible by the evolution of our cerebral cortex. Unfortunately, this inheritance we all share does not come without its burdens. To be aware that one exists as a material creature in the world with a future full of possible threats and with death as one’s only certainty is, as the existential philosophers have made clear, a very heavy burden indeed. Stephen Jay Gould (1997) has referred to this knowledge as perhaps the most important spandrel (i.e., accidental by-product) of the evolution of our intellectual capacities. Becker argued that this knowledge makes us unique as a species in our potential for anxiety and constitutes a threat we cannot simply face squarely and undaunted. If we are in fact driven to survive and programmed to react with fear and defense to threats to our survival, how do we deal with the knowledge that mortality is our only certainty?

In *The Denial of Death* (1973), Becker concluded that this existential paradox—being driven to live but knowing the only certainty is death—creates the potential for paralyzing terror, a potential we carry with us at all times. The way we control or manage this potential for terror is by using culturally based mechanisms to deny death. The core of death denial, or what we refer to as terror management, is a cultural worldview that allows individuals who are socialized within a given culture to view reality as stable, meaningful, and permanent. At the most fundamental level, these worldviews allow us to mature cognitively over the course of development without having to view ourselves merely as animals purposelessly clinging to a clump of dirt hurtling through space destined only to decay and death. And so we live embedded in a world of symbols and meaning, full of clocks and calendars, cultural myths and histories, nations and deities, soccer games and art exhibits. And the fact that the content of these worlds of symbols and meanings varies so much from culture to culture suggests that they are all ultimately social constructions, or as Becker preferred to call them, fictions.

Along with imparting meaning and value, each of these fictions provides possibilities of death transcendence through literal and symbolic forms of immortality. Literal immortality is provided by concepts such as an eternal soul, heaven, nirvana, and reincarnation. Symbolic immortality is provided by enduring cultural achievements and other enduring indicators of our existence, such as that great novel we are all going to write or the scientific discovery we are going to make, offspring, estates, memorials, and tributes. It is also provided by identification with entities that will endure indefinitely, such as family lines, cultural institutions, nations, and great causes. In this way, all cultural worldviews provide ways by which we can feel that our existence will continue beyond our death.

Becker argued that this cultural worldview lays the groundwork for psychological equanimity but is not sufficient. These worldviews are constructed such that qualification for protection and ultimately death transcendence requires meeting standards of value that confer significance as contributors to this meaningful reality. This structure is an extension of the original way in which we as children attain and sustain our security: by living up to the standards of value of our parents, which qualifies us for their continued love and protection. The transition from the parents as the security base to the culture, which Becker refers to as the primary transference process, begins as the child comes to the realization that the parents are fallible and are unable to protect him or her from all the evils and dangers in the world, including death. As a result of this realization, the child extends his or her security base by investing in the standards, values, and prescriptions of the broader culture. This transition is typically quite smooth because the parents, who were once the child’s sole source of protection, also serve as agents of the culture and its standards.

The culture then extends the linkage, "valued boy or girl equals safe and secure," throughout life by prescribing good qualities and valued social roles by which one can attain and sustain a sense of personal significance, which we refer to in everyday parlance as self-esteem. This significance means we are more than animals; we are cultural beings—people with names, positions, and permanence. Depending on one’s cultural worldview, an individual could, for example, feel secure by being a good Christian, a good basketball player, a good warrior, or, in 1936 in Germany, a good Nazi. Each culture provides a variety of such roles by which self-esteem and a sense of security and death transcendence could be attained and sustained. And as the examples illustrate, the same attributes and behaviors that could make an individual in one culture feel good and secure could have the very opposite effect on an individual within a different culture. This observation highlights a key implication of this analysis: that self-esteem is predicated on faith in a particular cultural worldview, and each one in its own unique way imbues reality with meaning and the possibility of perceiving oneself to be of enduring value.

In formulating terror management theory, we have summarized Becker’s analysis in the following way. The juxtaposition of an innate desire for survival and the awareness of our vulnerability and inevitable mortality creates a potential for paralyzing terror. Humans manage this...
potential terror by sustaining faith in a cultural anxiety buffer consisting of (1) an individualized but culturally derived view of reality that imbues life with order, meaning and permanence, and standards of value that qualify the individual for death transcendence (cultural worldview), and (2) one’s value within the context of that worldview (self-esteem).

Our next step was to assess basic hypotheses derived from the theory. The first hypothesis we tested was that self-esteem serves as an anxiety buffer. Indeed, what first attracted us to Becker’s work was the fact that his analysis explains why people want self-esteem and defend it so vigorously when it is threatened. The extant literature on self-esteem is highly consistent with the anxiety-buffer notion. First, a large body of evidence has shown that self-esteem is negatively correlated with anxiety and anxiety-related psychological and behavioral problems. Second, experimental research has shown that threats to self-esteem arouse anxiety and that this anxiety motivates a variety of defenses to minimize, counteract, or compensate for the threat. Third, defense of self-esteem in turn reduces anxiety.

To assess the anxiety-buffer hypothesis more directly, we designed a series of studies in which we manipulated level of self-esteem in the lab, exposed participants to threat, and measured anxiety. Across three studies we found that using both physiological and self-report measures, participants whose self-esteem had been raised experienced less anxiety in response to threat than did participants whose self-esteem had not been raised (Greenberg et al. 1992). Subsequent studies also showed that both individuals whose self-esteem was raised experimentally and individuals with naturally high self-esteem are less likely to engage in defensive responses to reminders of death (Harmon-Jones et al. 1997). Thus, the evidence provided clear support for the idea that self-esteem serves the psychological function of protecting people from anxiety.

The second basic hypothesis we tested concerned the fear of death and people’s investment in their cultural worldview. Another attribute of Becker’s analysis that we found appealing was that it provides an organizing framework for understanding many aspects of human social behavior that are typically studied as independent phenomena. From the terror management perspective, altruism and aggression, tolerance and prejudice, conformity and asserting uniqueness all can be viewed as resulting from attitudes and behaviors designed to sustain faith in one’s worldview and sense of self-worth in the context of that worldview.

The key notion, of course, is that we attempt to preserve these psychological structures because they protect us from our potential terror of death. The difficult empirical issue was how to assess this notion. The problem is twofold. First, because this potential for terror is posited to drive behavior from outside consciousness, we could not rely on self-reports to assess its existence. Second, following Zillbarg (1943), Becker argued that we all have this potential; it is an organismic annihilation anxiety, the emotional manifestation of the instinct for self-preservation. Consequently, for Becker, this terror potential is not a variable but a constant. Thus, it cannot be measured or altered.

The solution we arrived at was to posit that if the theory was valid, then perhaps conscious reminders of death would motivate actions to bolster faith in the cultural worldview. In other words, making the constant potential for annihilation anxiety more accessible to consciousness should drive us to push the troubling thoughts back into the unconscious by means of strengthening our cultural armor. Over eighty studies, conducted in seven countries, have since assessed and found support for variants of this hypothesis (for a review, see Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski 1997). In the first such experiment (Rosenblatt et al. 1989), we had municipal court judges fill out a series of questionnaires and then make a judgment on a hypothetical case in which they needed to set bond for an alleged prostitute. For a randomly chosen half of the judges, we embedded in the questionnaires two questions about their own death. In this way, we manipulated mortality salience. Our reasoning was that if we made mortality salience high for judges, they should be more motivated to bolster their worldview by treating an apparent violator of that worldview, an alleged prostitute, especially harshly. And that is precisely what we found. The judges reminded of their own death set an average bond of $455, whereas the judges not reminded of their own death recommended an average bond of $50.

Since that study, researchers have manipulated mortality salience in a variety of ways (ranging from proximity to a funeral home to subliminal death primes) and assessed judgments and behavior toward a wide variety of targets (e.g., pro and anti-U.S. essayists, Germans and Turks, Christians and Jews, Republicans and Democrats, American and Japanese auto manufacturers, thieves and heroes). The consistent finding has been that mortality salience increases positive reactions to those who uphold or validate the individual’s worldview and negative reactions to those who violate or challenge the individual’s worldview (which we refer to as worldview defense). Research has also found that these effects are not mediated by negative affect or arousal and are not replicated by thoughts of a host of other potentially aversive future events (e.g., one’s next important exam, dental pain, social exclusion).
Recent research has found other theory-consistent effects of mortality salience. Mortality salience-induced worldview defense is reduced when individuals have particularly strong cultural anxiety buffers or subscribe to worldviews that emphasize tolerance and is increased in those with weak anxiety buffers or who have particularly rigid worldviews (see Greenberg et al. 1997 for a review). In addition, mortality salience makes it difficult for people to violate cultural norms and increases people’s perceptions that they are similar to others, unless their uniqueness has recently been called into question (Greenberg et al. 1995; Pyszczynski et al. 1996; Simon et al. 1997). Mortality salience has also been found to increase self-esteem striving in the following ways: engaging in risky driving in those who base their self-worth in part on their driving (Ben-Ari, Florian, and Mikulincer 1999); focusing on bodily appearance in those who think well of their bodies (Goldenberg, McCoy, et al. 2000); and shifting identifications toward successful groups and away from unsuccessful groups (Dechesne et al. 2000). Thus, mortality salience motivates bolstering of the self-esteem component of the cultural anxiety buffer as well as the worldview component.

Another set of studies has tested a mortality salience hypothesis based on Becker’s argument that the recognition that we are animals reminds us that we are material beings subject to decay and death. This research has shown that mortality salience increases people’s aversions to stimuli and activities that remind them that humans are animals. For example, mortality salience reduces people’s interests in the physical aspects of sex and increases disgust reactions to body products (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, et al., 2000). Mortality salience also increases people’s preferences for an essay extolling human uniqueness over one extolling our similarities to other animals (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, et al. 2000).

Recent research has also shed light on the sequences of psychological processes activated by thoughts of mortality (for a review see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 1999). The initial response to mortality salience is to get such thoughts out of consciousness by rationally convincing oneself that death is far into the future, distracting oneself from the threat, denying one’s vulnerability to death, or physically removing oneself from salient reminders of death. We refer to this type of defense as proximal because it is an immediate way to address the present problem of scary thoughts in consciousness. Once such thoughts have receded from consciousness, bolstering of the worldview and self-esteem is increased, presumably to quell the deeper unconscious problem of our knowledge of our ultimate mortality. We refer to these defenses as distal defenses because they are not rationally related to the present problem, but rather symbolic means of quelling an unconscious concern. What the research essentially shows is that following mortality salience, further death-related thoughts are immediately suppressed, but such thoughts gradually increase in accessibility, motivating the distal defenses, which then bring the accessibility of death-related thought down to its baseline level.

**Terror Management and Ageism**

The body of research on mortality salience suggests that some manifestations of ageism may result from the tendency for the elderly to arouse thoughts of death in others. If the elderly do indeed arouse thoughts of death in others, then a variety of defenses may be engaged to address it. Both proximal and distal defenses in response to the elderly may contribute to ageism. As noted earlier, proximal defenses protect against the immediate, conscious awareness of death, and distal defenses serve to keep unwanted thoughts of death far away at the level of the unconscious.

**Proximal Defenses in Response to the Elderly**

First we consider proximal defenses. Perhaps the most direct way to assuage this threatening aspect of the elderly is through physical distancing—that is, by avoiding them. If they are not around, they cannot arouse death-related thoughts. The elderly can be avoided by staying away from places where they are likely to be found—for example, senior citizen centers, bingo parlors, nursing homes, golf courses, Florida, and Rolling Stones concerts. Another way to avoid the elderly is to keep them out of the workplace. Age discrimination is one of the most clearly documented and economically and socially harmful consequences of ageism (e.g., Esposito 1987). Although there may be a number of factors contributing to age discrimination in hiring, including negative stereotypes about the competence of old people, one such factor is likely to be simply not wanting old people around to remind other employees of their own fate. At a more personal level, people may seek to place elderly relatives in retirement homes or nursing communities, in part to reduce the extent to which the elderly will become a salient aspect of their lives, and thus a salient reminder of their own potential to grow old and closer to death. Indeed, elderly relatives may be an especially strong reminder of old age and death to the extent that we perceive ourselves as sharing many personality and genetic characteristics with them. This similarity may
contribute to the perception that we ourselves are vulnerable to the same fate (e.g., Schimel et al. 2000).

In addition to physical distancing, people may also use psychological distancing to minimize the threat of the elderly. This strategy could take two forms. The first is to view the elderly as very different from oneself. One way to do this is to view elderly individuals not as individuals but as "old people" or, even worse, refer to them with derogatory terms like old fart, geezer, old timer, blue-hair, coger, old hag, fossil, or dinosaurs. Indeed, Kite and Johnson (1988) found that in studies where the elderly were evaluated in a general way without individuating information, they were viewed in a particularly negative light.

The second way people psychologically distance themselves from the elderly is to view an elderly person, or all old people, as very different from them, with different attitudes, interests, and personality traits. Research has shown that people are prone to exaggerate the differences between themselves and others who have characteristics or conditions that they fear having themselves. One example is people with cancer. Pyszczynski et al. (1995) found that student participants rated their own personality as very different from another student if that student was reported to have cancer. Similarly, Schimel et al. (2000) found that people see their personalities as very different from someone who engages in actions that they fear they themselves may be capable of committing. In the same way, people may tend to exaggerate their differences from elderly individuals to deny their own susceptibility to the aging process and increasing proximity to death. In fact, we have found support for this phenomenon in a recent study in which, after a mortality salience manipulation, we asked college students to indicate their own attitudes on a variety of topics along with their beliefs regarding the attitudes of teenagers and elderly people. Those participants who were reminded of their own mortality viewed the attitudes of elderly people as especially different from their own. As noted by Simone de Beauvoir (1972) among others, one disconcerting result of this may be the treatment of the elderly not as "real people" but as "different, as another being" (pp. 2–3).

According to terror management theory, these distancing strategies should be most pronounced in those most actively troubled by their own mortality. Terror management research has shown that people with a shaky faith in their worldview such as the mildly depressed, the neurotic, and people lacking high self-esteem show the strongest defensive reactions following mortality salience (Goldenberg et al. 1999; Harmon-Jones et al. 1997; Simon et al. 1996). Thus, people whose faith in the worldview is most tenuous and people with low or unstable, fragile self-esteem should be most likely to distance from and derogate the elderly. Consistent with this hypothesis, Schweibert (1978) found a positive relationship between an individual’s level of death anxiety (as measured by Templer’s Death Anxiety Scale) and ageist attitudes (as measured by Kogan’s Attitudes Toward Old People Scale). A similar relationship between a tenuous worldview and increased death anxiety can be seen in the Kafir children of South Africa (Langer 1982). These children possess a form of gerontophobia (fear of growing old) whereby they ward off old age by physically plucking hairs from their chin and praying to ancestral spirits to keep them from growing old. Interestingly, this tendency appears only in those children who have not yet absorbed the religious doctrines instilled by ritual. Thus, until the Kafir children have been securely embedded in the meaningful value system of their culture through ritual, they feel vulnerable to the curse of old age and engage in their own compulsive rituals to alleviate their fears.

**Distal Terror Management Defenses in Response to the Elderly**

By reminding people of their own death, old people may also activate in others distal terror management mechanisms. Such distal defenses include increased self-esteem striving, increased negative reactions to those who challenge one’s worldview, and increased positive reactions to those who support one’s worldview. Thus, after exposure to the elderly, people may try to enhance their self-esteem by derogating the elderly and engaging in downward social comparison with them. To the extent that an individual perceives the elderly as holding different attitudes and values from themselves, following exposure to old people, derogation of the elderly may also serve to bolster the individual’s faith in his or her worldview.

Similarly, elderly people, particularly given the negative stereotypes of them, may threaten the durability of the ways in which people feel good about themselves. Old people may serve as a reminder that many of people’s bases of self-esteem will not endure. For example, the young person whose self-esteem is based largely on good looks, athleticism, driving ability, sexual prowess, or verbal acumen may consider, when exposed to an elderly person, the transitory nature of these qualities. This of course would threaten such an individual’s basis of terror management. Such a threat may be especially strong when individuals see photos of elderly people taken when they were young, exuding health and youthful good looks.
As death may be more salient in general for the elderly, we would also expect that distal terror management defense mechanisms be activated within the elderly themselves. In particular, if the dominant worldview is one pervasive with negative stereotypes about aging and the elderly, then the older generation’s increased exposure to death-related thoughts may make them even more susceptible to buying into those negative stereotypes, thus compounding the harmfulness of ageism. Levy (1996) demonstrated that activating negative stereotypes about the elderly tended to decrease memory performance and views of the aging in elderly persons. Additionally, Levy (unpublished manuscript) recently demonstrated the destructive effects of ageism where negative stereotypes primed in elderly participants lead to worsened memory task performance and also a decrease in the will to live. This last assessment was measured by asking participants whether they hypothetically would choose to prolong their life with a certain treatment, even if it meant great financial costs and a heavy time commitment from family members. As Levy has noted, this dependent measure may have also served as a mortality salience manipulation, further compounding the effects of negative ageism.

**Characteristics of the Elderly That May Moderate Defensive Responses to Terror**

More complex reactions to the elderly can also be predicted from terror management theory. Although the elderly may generally remind people of death, old people who are particularly healthy or convey that they have lived a full life with meaning and value continuing beyond death may not do so, and even under conditions of mortality salience, could be viewed quite positively. Healthy old people offer the hope that through exercise and diet, one’s life expectancy can be greatly extended and enjoyed well into the elder years. Additionally, elderly individuals who appear healthy and fit may reduce people’s tendency to use proximal defenses against death to the extent that health and fitness also reduces the salience of death and decay.

Similarly, the elderly person coping well psychologically gives hope that the younger individual too can face proximity to death with equanimity. For example, an elderly person who feels good about his or her life, enduring accomplishments, children, and grandchildren may reinforce paths toward death transcendence rather than threaten them. As Menaker (1982) summarized Rank’s view, what we are all looking for is identification with the continuity of life, and so people who are approaching death while conveying such identification may reinforce our faith in our own ability to do so.

Conversely, the elderly person lacking health or meaning may be particularly threatening. Such people may remind the rest of us of the possibility of nameless animal death and absolute annihilation. If some die in this way, we may too, and perhaps it is no different for anyone. In a related manner, the physical problems associated with aging (such as incontinence, loss of teeth, and diminishing senses) may serve as vivid reminders of our animal and therefore mortal nature, something we spend much of our lives trying to deny. Perhaps this is why “old” is often viewed as “ugly” or “disgusting.” As Kite and Johnson (1988) reported in a meta-analysis, one of the clearest and most consistent findings across studies is that the elderly are rated as less physically attractive than nonelderly people.

Additionally, people are often repulsed by the thought of the elderly engaging in sex. Perhaps because the elderly remind us of our animality, the thought of their having sex, an activity also likely to remind us of our animality, provides a potent threat. Goldenberg and others (1999), for instance, have shown that the thought of sex when people have been reminded of their animality is particularly threatening. As Goldenberg, Pyzczynski et al. (in press) have also proposed and shown, one way to minimize such a threat is to react to it with disgust and contempt, effectively asserting one’s distance from such activities and facilitating denial of one’s animality. Consequently, this reaction may manifest itself in the disparaging and ageist labeling of older people who are interested in sex as “dirty old men and women” (Palmore 1999, p. 4). This negative image of elderly desires is echoed by de Beauvoir (1972), who writes that “if old people show the same desires, the same feelings and the same requirements as the young, the world looks upon them with disgust: in them love and jealousy seem revolting or absurd, sexuality repulsive and violence ludicrous. They are required to be a standing example of all the virtues. Above all they are called upon to display serenity: the world asserts that they possess it, and this assertion allows the world to ignore their unhappiness” (pp. 3–4)—and, we would add, allows us to ignore our own impending decay, unhappiness, and mortality.

**Implications of Terror Management Theory for Reducing Ageism**

This chapter seems to paint a bleak picture of the situation in which the elderly reside. As reminders of death, they are likely to arouse a host of proximal and distal terror management defenses, largely directed at derogating, avoiding, and psychologically distancing from the elderly. These defenses and resulting negative attitudes and behaviors can then obviously have a profound effect on the older population and their quality of
life. Although we hope that this analysis is useful in helping to account for the pervasive nature of ageism and many of its particular manifestations, we are also hopeful that the analysis suggests at least some broad approaches to combating ageism.

**Cultural Valuing of the Elderly**

Based on the terror management literature, three avenues for ameliorating negative reactions to the aged may be fruitful. The first is to foster social norms and values supportive of respect for and cherishing the elderly (Palmore 1999). Of course, this is no great insight and no easy thing to accomplish. However, if individuals internalized worldviews in which personal value was based in part on treating the elderly well, then reminders of death would encourage intensified positive treatment of the elderly rather than negative treatment of them. Indeed, some collectivist cultures possess such norms of valuing and respecting the elderly. For example, in China there is a value known as filial piety, whereby younger children and adults are expected to respect the elderly for their wisdom and include them in important family decisions (Hwang 1999; chapter 10, this volume; Sung 1998; Yue and Ng 1999). The young are also expected to give financial blessings back to their parents as they prosper in their careers (chapter 10, this volume; Yue and Ng 1999). To the extent that people in collectivist cultures believe that the elderly should be valued, respected, and cared for, we would hypothesize that reminders of mortality would promote positive reactions to the elderly in these cultures.

The way collectivist cultures include the elderly in the social network might also reduce the extent to which contact with the elderly increases death anxiety. In collectivist cultures, the elderly are included in social activities and given important roles within the family network, such as counselors and advice givers. Thus, the process of growing old is not associated with becoming obsolete but as gradually taking on new and important roles. To the extent that elderly persons are viewed as an ongoing part of the social network, they are not as potent a reminder that death is around the corner. In these cultures, the elderly may even instill a sense of longing in adults approaching old age for the day when they will fill these roles and receive filial piety from other family members.

Conversely, in Western culture, there is a subtle form of segregation of the elderly from mainstream society. Once the elderly reach retirement age, it is common for them to enter retirement homes or move to regions of the country where they can live out the remaining portion of their lives in comfort. Although this segregation is often in the service of allowing the elderly to enjoy their remaining years, the separation of the elderly in this way may also be a form of proximal defense against thoughts about old age and death. Separating the elderly and preventing them from being a functioning part of society may propagate the belief that the elderly have entered a stage of life where they are now useless and obsolete (Esposito 1987). To the extent that the elderly are viewed as obsolete, they may also be seen as being closer to death. Thus, there may exist a cycle of psychological defense and increased fear of the elderly in Western cultures: the more the elderly remind us of our own mortality, the more they are separated from society, and the more they are separated from society, the more they become potent reminders of death. From this perspective, enhancing social norms about caring for the elderly and providing important social roles for them within the social network could reduce many forms of ageism that result from our fear of aging and death.

This shift in social norms would also serve to reduce costs of ageism on the nonelderly that may not be immediately apparent, such as the loss of emotional support from the older generation, the loss of their wisdom and guidance gained from life experience, and the guilt suffered as a result of ignoring the elderly and responsibility to them. It has even been suggested that problems such as "lack of adequate child care, juvenile delinquency, and high crime rates" are in part due to "the neglect of...elder resources" and the failure to include and incorporate them fully into the lives of the nonelderly (Palmore 1999, p. 7).

**Bolstering Terror Management**

A second direction is to buttress people's worldviews and senses of value. If people are effectively managing their own terror, they should be far less threatened by exposure to the elderly and should be better able to acknowledge their similarities to and obligations toward the elderly. This requires social changes toward more compelling worldviews that offer more secure and accessible bases of self-worth.

**Death Awareness**

The third direction is to have people become more aware of their own fears of death and aging. If people could face up to their own fears, acknowledge them, and perhaps reinforce productive ways to incorporate their mortality into their worldviews and strivings for self-worth, they should be far less threatened in general, and in particular should be less threatened by and more empathetic to the elderly.
Implications for Education

All three of these directions for improvement are difficult to achieve, particularly when we think of them at a society-wide or global level of change. However, we could use the school system to attempt to shift worldviews to be more favorable to the elderly and could similarly encourage students to face up to their own fears of aging and mortality and develop ways to cope with them. Family life and health education classes that potentially could deal with such issues often avoid the topic of old age and death altogether, because it is deemed by some as inappropriate and even harmful (Weeks and Johnson 1992). Consequently, much as with parenting, we could do much more within the educational system to prepare people for their lives and for nondefensively relating to other people and their own futures as well.

Some schools, however, have developed elective courses designed to teach about the dying process and death. When taught with sensitivity and compassion, these courses seem to be extremely meaningful for the students who take them. Weeks and Johnson (1992), documenting one class, mentioned that although the course is often initially met with reluctance, there have been “no negative reactions” received by the school since the course’s inception in 1973. Instead, there has been only positive feedback as students have had “an opportunity to clarify their values and come to terms with their feelings regarding death and quality-of-life issues. They learn specific facts about legal matters pertaining to dying and burial, begin to understand the complex psychological dynamics of grief, and learn to deal with many different types of losses more effectively” (p. 271).

In addition, students in community service programs (and sometimes paying jobs) aid elderly men and women with chores and shopping and in the process form relationships with the aged “clients.” Not only have these programs proved immensely beneficial to the elderly in need of basic services and human contact, but they are rewarding for the youthful participants as well. Indeed, they often come to treasure the relationships developed, as do the elderly. Furthermore, these programs appear to de-mystify old age for many young men and women, revealing the elderly as human and as individuals (Shanks 1976).

Conclusion

Providing these types of experiences is a step in the right direction in terms of aiding the younger generation in confronting and coping with fears about the elderly and their own aging processes, altering our social norms, and viewing the elderly as individuals instead of in a general or generic and hurtful way. But what the terror management analysis suggests is that whatever we do to try to promote more accurate and positive attitudes and behaviors toward the elderly, we have to do so in a way that is cognizant of the role of the fear of death in attitudes and treatment of the elderly. With a more sober and realistic understanding of our own fears and reactions to the elderly, we may be better able to understand aging as something we are all prone to but nevertheless can combat.

Movement in a positive direction can occur with attempts to buttress both young and old people’s sense of value in this potentially lonely and horrifying universe, and with the realization that the young can learn a great deal from the old about coping with aging and life’s limitations and also about how courage, meaning, and passion might be preserved and remain “strong enough to prevent us turning in upon ourselves” (de Beauvoir 1972). With the recognition of the fact that one day the young will be old and will want to be treated with dignity, de Beauvoir writes, “Let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state. And when it is done we will no longer acquiesce in the misery of the last age; we will no longer be indifferent, because we shall feel concerned, as indeed we are” (p. 5).

We are concerned about our future and our fate, and so it would be a mistake not to try to understand better the elderly for whom death is most likely closest (as is often painfully apparent) and to understand better ourselves and our own fearful yet natural responses to aging and death. Imagine the benefits if we could all value, cherish, and emulate the wisdom and strength of the elderly in dealing with something that, to our detriment as well as theirs, we try so hard to deny.

References

This work was supported in part by National Science Foundation Grants SBR-9212798, SBR-9312546, and SBR-9601474.


3

**Implicit Ageism**

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In a chapter entitled “Age and Human Society” in the 1935 *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Walter Miles chronicled everything a social scientist would want to know about the topic. Yet this all-encompassing treatise, beginning with the insight that “Men are not all equal partly for the reason that they cannot all be born at the same time” (p. 596), had nothing to say about the inequality that old age elicits through the two central psychological processes of attitude and belief: negative feelings and thoughts toward those who are so marked. Even at the time of Miles’s writing, equivalent treatments of other social groups, such as women, African Americans, and Jews, included a discussion of the content of the prejudices and stereotypes of the day, the processes by which they operate, and their consequences (Dollard 1937; Lasker 1930; Plewa 1986). Fifty years later, Roger Brown’s textbook *Social Psychology* included an extended discussion of stereotypes and prejudice as they related to race, gender, nationality, and sexual orientation. Again, age prejudice was absent from the presentation. It appears that the recognition, even among social scientists, that age can serve as a potent attribute from which psychological and social benefit or harm can radiate has been slow in coming. However, as this book and others over the past decade attest, the notion that age is a social category worthy of attention for the study of stereotypes and prejudice is recently but firmly in place now (for reviews see Hummert 1999; Palmore 1998).

Beliefs about the elderly as unable to contribute to society, and hence as dispensable members of a community, and attitudes toward them of dislike and distancing are prevalent (Kite and Johnson 1988). Social scientists have focused on the effects of negative beliefs and attitudes to examine discrimination toward the aged in a variety of spheres, including everyday conversations (Hummert and Ryan 1996; Williams and Giles 1998), politics (Sigelman and Sigelman 1982) and the workplace (Butler...