

Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

FROM TERROR TO TOLERANCE
The Mortality Management Model

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Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

FROM TERROR TO TOLERANCE

The Mortality Management Model

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Existential Anxiety, a *chronic* stressor, can be construed as the “ultimate universal”.

As stated (and empirically proven) by the Terror Management Theory (e.g. Greenberg et al 1997), one of the main functions of Culture is to buffer against Mortality Awareness, an exclusively human attribute.

Various cultures create their world-views by construing reality in particular ways, while rendering alternative world-views threatening.

The resulting Cultural Diversity is another stressor, *acute* by comparison, especially when Mortality Salience is high (e.g. Rosenblatt et al 1987), leading to Culture Shock.

Lack of Cultural Diversity, however, is just as *acutely* stressful: a consideration made timely by Globalization (e.g. Salzman 2008) – resulting in what can be termed “Uniformity Shock” (Williams 2009).

When the aforementioned chronic and acute stressors converge, both individual and social Cognitive Capacity comes under challenge, and two opposing routes open up.

The paper delineates these, by putting forward the Mortality Management Model.

One route is a *vicious circle*, recreating and increasing Existential Anxiety, resulting in increased Other-Culture Intolerance. This happens as the result of Cognitive Simplification, via Negative Terror Management Strategies, namely Cognitive Errors and the Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy (Williams 2007). It is proposed that Fundamentalism is the cognitive product of these combined, with Terrorism being its behavioural correlate (cf Salzman 2008).

The other potential route is *forward-pointing*, towards greater Other-Culture Tolerance. This is achieved by retaining Cognitive Complexity, allowing for Positive Terror Management Strategies, as described by e.g. the Acculturation Complexity Model (Tadmor et al 2009), via Culture Learning, Diversity Training, and Intercultural Dialogue, resulting in Multi-Cultural Personality Development (Tadmor 2008), and a Multi-Cultural Buffer against Mortality Awareness through Species Orientation.

Given that the present cultural-political climate is clearly the product of the Vicious Circle Route, while any meaningful future belongs with the Route Pointing Forward, mindfulness of the respective processes' workings is imperative.

The paper offers new perspectives on where, on the process-map, Globalization, Fundamentalism and Terrorism fit.

It also introduces new concepts like the Reverse Mortality Salience Hypothesis (Williams 2004), the Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy (Williams 2007), and the term “Uniformity Shock” (Williams 2009), as well as applying research on Cognitive Errors and Pro-Self/Pro-Social attitudes to explain connections and consider antidotes.

The Mortality Management Model is a system-creating attempt at capturing how theories, hypotheses and concepts connect to provide the uniquely comprehensive explanatory power of the work, to date, ultimately derived from the Terror Management Theory - a theory increasingly recognised as one of the most influential of our day.

Keywords: Existential Anxiety, Terror Management Theory, Cultural Diversity, Intercultural Dialogue

THE MORTALITY MANAGEMENT MODEL

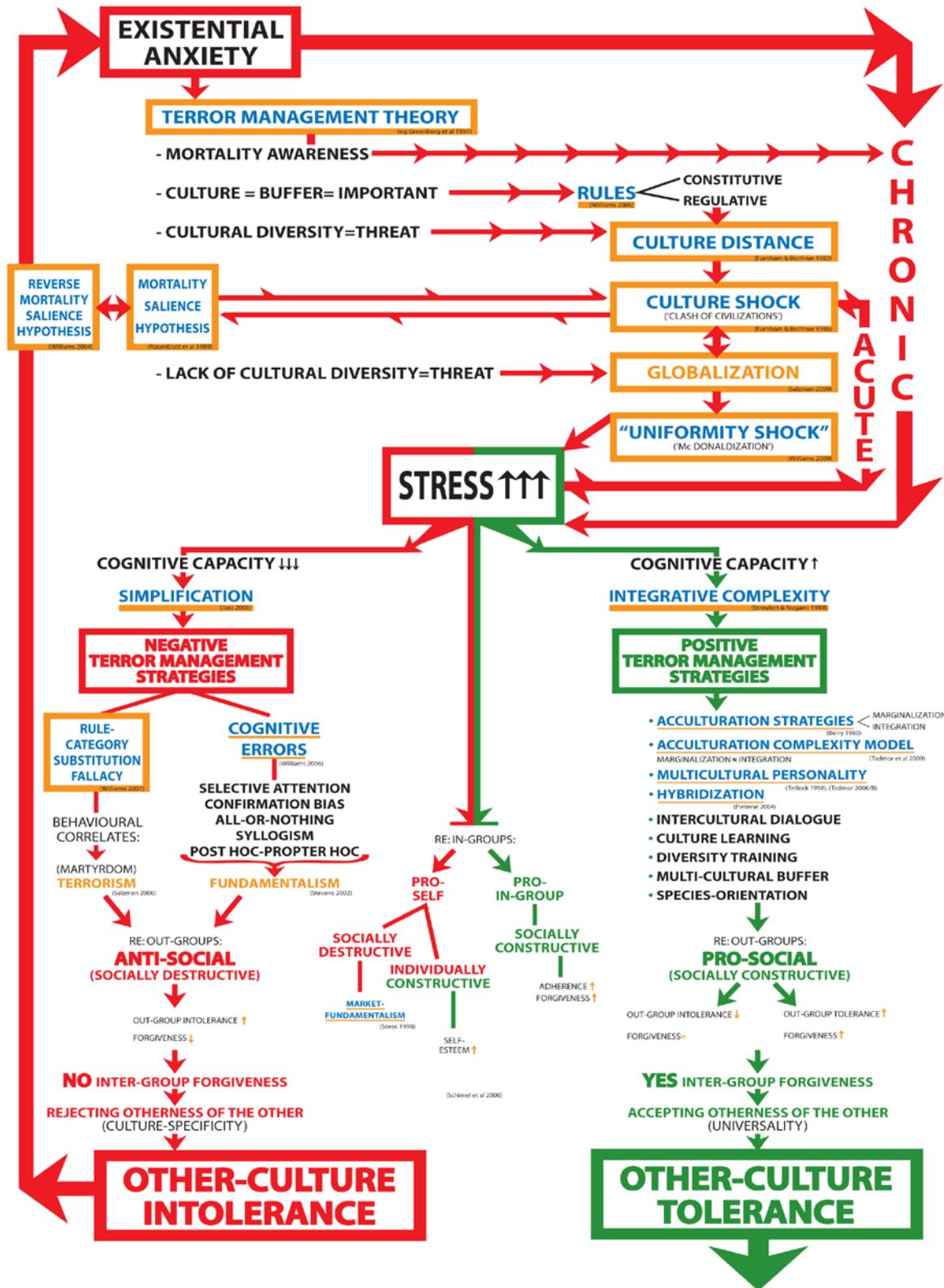


Fig. 1: The Mortality Management Model

Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

Arguably, at its widest and most general, psychology deals in no less than human existence itself: its universal and culture-specific features as well as its idiosyncrasies.

It is certainly universally true that people are born, they live, and then they die – while the cognitive potential of the human mind allows them to be aware of all that, through the capacity for self-reflexion.

Mortality awareness can, therefore, probably be construed as the “ultimate universal”: a feature that unites humankind – how we deal with it, however, is another matter: that varies from culture to culture.

Culture can be thought of as “an ongoing process of construing reality in a shared, systematic way, in constant interaction with a set of behaviours” (Williams 2006).

If we believe that “culture is construed continuously” (Said 2005), we should also agree that “cultural diversity is not a problem: it is a resource” (Berry 2006).

However, the fact that various cultures create their world-views by construing reality in particular ways, renders alternative world-views threatening (Becker 1971): if other readings are conceivable, our own might not be fool-proof afterall...

Culture is that important because one of its main functions is to buffer against mortality awareness (Solomon et al 1991), thus keeping **existential anxiety** at bay.

The Mortality Management Model (cf . Fig.1) aims at capturing the ways socio-psychological processes combine as mortality awareness and cultural diversity are juxtaposed.

It is proposed that there are two essentially different routes to consider.

One is a negative feedback-loop, resulting in other-culture intolerance while rendering existential anxiety ever-escalating – the other route, however, is pointing forward, towards greater other-culture tolerance.

In the following, the Model’s key-concepts, hypotheses and theories are going to be discussed in detail.

Existential Anxiety

“Man has the capacity for being aware of himself...as a consequence...also aware of ...the ultimate nothingness of death. This is innately feared.” (Ford et al 1963)

Existential anxiety comes from several sources (Tillich 1952), the bottom line being that we are all aware that one day we shall die; when we confront this inescapable reality, we face up to existential anxiety.

Existential anxiety, the ultimate concomitant of mortality awareness, is also an exclusively human attribute.

The terror evoked by the inevitability of death does appear to be inherent in the human condition.

Cultural constructions of reality are designed to serve as a psychological defense against this most basic of all human fears.

Fear of death, whether latent or manifest, is the **ultimate chronic stressor** common to us all.

Terror Management Theory

Increasingly recognised as one of the most influential theories of our day (Salzman 2003), Terror Management Theory (e.g. Greenberg et al 1997) considers the **relationship among cultural world-views, the terror inherent in human existence, and self-esteem**.

It proposes that the cultural anxiety-buffer consists of an accepted cultural construction of reality (i.e. a cultural world-view) we have faith in and adhere to - providing us with culturally construed self-esteem (i.e. the belief that we are of value in the context), thus protecting us from the fear of death.

TMT’s hypotheses have been empirically tested by well over a hundred studies in just under a dozen countries, confirming the following conclusions:

-only humans can cognitively reflect upon themselves, construct meanings, and consider mortality (the ultimate terror)

-culture serves as a psychological defense against mortality awareness and existential anxiety

-culturally constructed self-esteem provides protection against the fear of death

-this is why cultural diversity is threatening

-reminding people of death increases adherence to the norms of their own culture, and

-mortality salience increases intolerance towards alternative cultural world-views.

Mortality Salience Hypothesis

This central hypothesis derived from TMT states that if faith in the cultural world-view and self-esteem protect one from fear of death, then reminders of this ultimate anxiety will increase our need for these psychological structures.

Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

Empirical studies have demonstrated that mortality salience increases positive reactions to those sharing our world-view while strengthening negative reactions to those whose world-view is different (e.g. Rosenblatt et al 1989).

It would appear, therefore, that the more we feel that our life is in danger, the less we tolerate other cultures. Or, to put it even more stringently, **an increase in mortality salience will result in increased other-culture intolerance.**

However, another set of empirical studies seem to suggest that the above contention is reversible.

Mobility, Culture Distance and Culture Shock: The Reverse Mortality Salience Hypothesis

It is relatively easy to see why, when feeling threatened, it can be adaptive to reaffirm ties with our own culture while separating ourselves from other cultures.

Given that the current cultural-political climate is partly the product of derivatives of the above (hyped 'international terrorism', saber-rattling foreign policies, etc), it is no more difficult to see the potential dangers present either.

With the hugely increased global **mobility** of our day, one paradigm to be witnessed was named "**Clash of Civilizations**" (Pieterse 2004). According to this, cultural differences pose a virtually un-bridgeable gap between groups. The antidote would clearly be a multi-cultural buffer – however, to date, what migration seems to be evoking instead is rampant **culture-shock**.

Cultural similarities foster a feeling of familiarity – **cultural differences** alienate, as measured by the well-known index of **culture-distance** (providing empirical confirmation to the hypothesis that cultures' relative location on this dimension is a major determinant of the extent to which culture-shock is experienced, as well as that of the ease with which the respective cultures can be learned through contact /Furnham and Bochner 1982/).

Migrants are dispossessed of their old culture before the process of acculturation is complete, ending up often as much culturally frustrated as they are considered frustrating by their hosts, with the result of interrelated physical and psychological problems.

The common root of this is not "trauma", as migration need not be forced, but the **loss of "home"** (Papadopoulos 2003): this is what all migrants seem to share.

Home means **predictability** (the result of familiarity) and **controllability** (making us competent; autonomous but belonging ; with good-enough self-esteem) – in other words, knowing what **rules** govern our culture and how to apply them.

Without home a fundamental lack develops, in addition to the other losses displaced people are conscious of. The disorientation and confusion that accompanies a massive alteration of a familiar place is experienced as bodily sensations as well as emotional reactions. (They are inter-related, because familiar spatial routines are etched onto the nervous system and the musculature. The sudden loss of the exterior world that conditioned the motions is perceived as a loss of self /Fullilove 1996/.)

This merging of the physical and the psychological seems to be behind the finding that migrants do appear to experience **more physical and mental problems than natives**, but that their help-seeking behaviour is slanted towards the medical, often on hypochondriacal bases (Still 1961, Ward et al 2001).

Given that the language of human unhappiness appears to be somatic, **hypochondriasis** can be construed as "getting practical" about existential anxiety: an attempt at postponing mortality via hyper-vigilance about health.

Migration, with the inherent culture-shock, results in feeling intolerant of and ill-tolerated by the other culture, with somatization making the transitory nature of health (so, ultimately, that of life) more salient.

This process is the **reverse of** the one proposed by the **Mortality Salience Hypothesis**: this time it would appear that the less we tolerate/feel tolerated by other cultures, the more we feel that our life is in danger.

Or, to put it even more stringently, **an increase in other-culture intolerance will result in increased mortality salience** (Williams 2004).

Happily, increased mortality salience, unlike mortality awareness and existential anxiety, is not a chronic but merely an **acute stressor**.

Globalization, Lack of Cultural Diversity, "Uniformity Shock"

As suggested by the Terror Management Theory, one of the main functions of culture is to buffer against mortality awareness.

That makes culture very important: safeguarding our culture above all else appears to be a priority.

Historically, **globalization** appears to have resulted in a decrease in cultural distinctiveness, thus reducing the level of culture's buffer-function.

Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

Albeit globalization “has raised the absolute standard of living worldwide” (Friedman 2000), it is “threatening cultural and biological diversity and promoting the rise of global mono-culturalism” (Marsella 2005). By divorcing individuals from their socio-cultural roots (Salzman 2008), cultures become homogenized, which, for the aforementioned reasons to do with culture’s functions, creates psycho-social distress.

Lack of cultural diversity, therefore, is also **acutely stressful**.

This process, often called “**McDonaldization**” (Pieterse 2004), creates what could be termed “**Uniformity Shock**” (Williams 2009). Loss of the traditional sources of culturally derived meaning (Salzman 2008) threatens national identity : individual cultural buffers are also rapidly losing power.

Attempts to re-instate this power (as seen with the increase of nationalism and fundamentalism, for instance), however, are increasingly proving to be untenable and/or aborted.

Increased Stress

As following from the above, the chronic stress of existential anxiety now can be seen as exacerbated by two potential acute stressors: the (ill-managed) presence or the (overwhelming) absence of cultural diversity.

Mindfulness of both their workings together is imperative, and especially timely in the present cultural-political climate.

By the time **chronic and acute stressors combine**, the overall stress-level is going to be high enough to result in really profound **socio-cognitive changes**.

Early studies of juxtaposing cultures have concentrated on the negative psychological consequences (e.g. Park 1928). By now, however, there is agreement that being exposed to different cultures can also have a positive effect both on psychological functioning and on general well-being (e.g. LaFromboise et al 1993), not unlike the way Post-Traumatic Growth operates (Kulcsar 2006).

According to the above, therefore, changes in socio-**cognitive capacity** (mirroring those in individual cognitive capacity) can be either a **decrease** or an **increase** – pre-defining their respective, positive or negative, ultimate outcomes, accordingly.

The significance of a useful amount of cognitive capacity is explained by the overwhelming need to manage mortality awareness, by now together with its cultural consequences.

It is important to recognise how very strong the motivation for finding these **terror management strategies** really is.

Even more importantly, the globally increased awareness and juxtaposition of various cultures, now more stringently than ever, necessitates mindfulness of the difference between **functional** and **dysfunctional** terror management strategies and their respective concomitants.

Negative Terror Management Strategies

The Yerkes-Dodson Law (in: Powell 2000) states that a certain level of stress improves performance, but if stress is extensive, performance begins to deteriorate.

Paradoxically, therefore, it is when we need to increase our cognitive output the most (to cope with the increased stress) that we find not enough capacity at our disposal to live up to the challenge

Indeed, when the stress intensifies, we tend to try and save capacity by looking for “labour-saving devices”: simplifying our thinking rather than sharpening it up.

The resulting temporary gain (relief), however, is soon counteracted by the long-term loss of the complexity of our thinking.

The same happens on a socio-cognitive level, albeit on a larger scale, resulting in a **simplification** of the highly complex social environment.

When the chronic stress of mortality awareness/existential anxiety is compounded by the acute stress of increased mortality salience, stress is undoubtedly at its most extensive.

It is at such times that world-views with a very clear vision of an orderly world-structure become appealing above all else (e.g. fundamentalism, communism /Salzman 2006/).

Unfortunately, their clarity and simplicity is due some **socio-cognitive errors**, which are very **similar** in nature to those characterising **individuals’ stress-cognitions**.

Cognitive Errors

The topic of individual cognitive mistakes has been extensively written about from ancient times (Seneca, Cicero) to nowadays (e.g. Fine 2006), making it possible to come up with a sizeable, but by no means comprehensive, list of cognitive errors, all sharing the common denominator of reducing something complex to something binary, often with a view to an ultimate.

They are the following:

- Selective Attention** (only noticing what is in-keeping with the rest)
- Confirmation Bias** (noticing but disregarding discrepant material)

Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

- All-or-Nothing Thinking** (ignoring the middle ground)
- Syllogism** (un-distributed middle)
- Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc** (causality-attribution regarding succession).

One random example of “Post hoc...” (“Terrorists look Middle-Eastern - that person there looks Middle-Eastern - he is a terrorist : shoot to kill!”), as in the notorious recent underground-station shooting in London) more than demonstrates the timely relevance of the above.

Clearly, simplification on this scale is untenable: no amount of short-term temporary capacity-economy can possibly compensate for the loss of the complexity of thinking required adequately to address the complex tasks in question.

Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy

It is conceivable to construe **culture as a set of rules** one can either be familiar with or ignorant of.

Rules appear to come in different categories: some create (**Constitutive Rules**: e.g. kicking a ball makes football what it is); others merely modify (**Regulative Rules**: e.g. bad language is penalised on the football-pitch).

Insufficient awareness of the difference in significance between the various types of rules appears to create a bias: a **tendency to over-estimate the incidence of Constitutive Rules while under-estimating the proportion of Regulative Rules**.

Termed the Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy (Williams 2007), this bias fallaciously assumes that all rules deemed important by the individual are indeed equally and enormously important (i.e. **all rules are constitutive**), as well as that any violation of any rules threaten the culture with disintegration (i.e. **all rules must be prescriptive**). As such, this can also be construed as a particular case of “All-or-Nothing Thinking”(see above).

The function of the Fallacy is clearly to ensure that the culture remains intact. However, failure to recognise differences among the significance of various rules results in hyper-vigilance: no form of dissent is deemed tolerable, be it radical change or modest modification. By **ruling out progress** in any shape or form, the Fallacy thus becomes a terror management strategy ultimately doomed to failure.

Fundamentalism, Terrorism

Both the aforementioned **Cognitive Errors** and the **Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy** appear to be aiming at “**keeping things simple and un-changing**”. It is at times of danger i.e. among mortality-salient situations (e.g. war) that simplistic ideologies (e.g. communism) come into their own. Their appeal is due to their reductionism. This is achieved by construing the world and its workings as little more than a slot-machine, where the right input invariably and reliably yields the right outcome.

Fundamentalism is exactly such an ideology: a belief that this one set of religious teachings contains the fundamental truth, which must always be followed, unchanged, to be right and rewarded –or one is wrong and deserves to be punished (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992). Closer examination reveals how this way of thinking is the **combined cognitive product** of the aforementioned cognitive errors and fallacies. Empirical proof that successfully challenging fundamentalist beliefs results in an increased awareness of mortality (Friedman and Rholes in press) spells out the function of the ideology (Salzman 2008). It is also easy to see how the so-called “terrorist sacrifice” grows out of such a world-view: acting out the “right”; punishing the “wrong”; while offering the individual “some form of immortality” (Stevens 2002). **Terrorism** thus becomes the **behavioural correlate** of the cognitive processes delineated above.

Anti-Social, Pro-Self, Pro-In-group

A great deal of terror management research has focused on the **socially destructive ways** people react to **out-group** members when confronted with their mortality. Typically, **out-group intolerance** was found to be on the **increase** (e.g. McGregor et al 1998), while **forgiveness** on the **decrease** (e.g. Greenberg et al 2001).

Even if a step is taken towards more ideological neutrality, as with **market fundamentalism** (Soros 1998), according to which the common interest is best served by everybody fending for themselves, the idea of a community is as good as illusory, while the individual is reduced to **pro-self** mode in virtual isolation. If, however, we acknowledge money as the new immortality ideology (Becker 1975), then it can be seen how success in competition (Salzman 2008) might just provide the **increased self-esteem** that could make “pro-self” an **individually constructive** way to be.

When it comes to **in-groups**, increased mortality salience has been found to foster greater **adherence** to group-norms as well as an increase in within-group **forgiveness** (Jonas et al 2002).

Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

Even with all the provisos and variations, the bottom line of the above remains essentially **no inter-group forgiveness**. Any dissent from the in-group's status quo is hugely threatening and undesirable – the end-result is **other-culture intolerance**: the ultimate **non-acceptance of the “otherness of the other”**.

This, in turn, creates the basis for the constellation described earlier in the **Reverse Mortality Saliency Hypothesis**: an increase in other-culture intolerance will increase mortality saliency, leading to an **increase in Existential Anxiety**.

The **process**, thus perpetuated, has finally gone full circle – ready to **repeat** itself **ad infinitum**.

Hopefully, however, this is not the only outcome possible.

The rest of the paper will attempt to delineate the other, more positive route, - re-starting from the Stress increased as the result of the combination of Mortality Awareness and Culture that buffers against it.

Positive Terror Management Strategies

The ultimate problem with Negative Terror Management Strategies appears to be the general tendency to falling into the trap of gaining temporary stress-relief through undue simplification.

Any potentially positive terror management strategy has, therefore, to be capable of retaining the **complexity** inherent in the set-up, - which, it appears, is eminently possible.

Integrative Complexity

Research into the effects of cross-cultural experiences on individuals' **cognitive** skills reveal the benefits of multi-culturalism (e.g. Fowers & Richardson 1996). One such gain is **integrative complexity**: the **capacity** to consider competing perspectives, called differentiation, as well as forging conceptual links among these perspectives, called integration (Suedfeld et al 1992).

A useful way of achieving this is adopting two of the four so-called **Acculturation Strategies** (Berry 1980): **marginalization** (individualist subtype /Bourhis et al 1997/) or **integration**, as they have been found to be equally integratively complex, when seeking empirical validation for the **Acculturation Complexity Model** (Tadmor et al 2009). The Model states that those who cope with cultural contact by internalizing the values of two groups, thus becoming bi-cultural, are reliably more complex in their reactions than those with only the values of one group.

The end-product of this particular way of development is what can be described as **Multi-cultural Personality**, characterised by intellectual flexibility, open-mindedness, and heightened imagination (Tetlock 1998), as well as more managerial success, creativity, and ambiguity-tolerance (Tadmor 2006, 2008).

But having the potential intellectual capacity to cope with the acute end of culture-contact stressors, is, admittedly, merely the lesser of the two-tier challenge facing mankind.

Post-Traumatic Growth

Acknowledging the chronic stressor, the inevitability of mortality, while resisting the simplificatory effect of the concomitant stress, might not, at a glance, appear to be feasible – however, that is exactly what is known by the term **Post-Traumatic Growth**.

According to its definition (“experiencing a positive change as the result of successfully overcoming the difficulties posed by serious life-crises” /Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004/), Post-Traumatic Growth can and does follow from coping with challenges of the magnitude commensurate with the existential questions considered here.

Positive Psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), for instance, advocates the acceptance of mortality, uncertainty and inevitable restrictions, as part of **wisdom**, which, in turn, is associated with the **“flow”** (Csikszentmihalyi 1991), potentially leading, among other things, through **absorption** (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974), to **creativity** (Kulcsar 2001), all of which the individual can certainly benefit from.

Pro-Social

Mortality awareness, luckily, does **not** appear to sentence us necessarily to **existential solitude**: on the contrary. While in the past **individualism-collectivism** (Triandis 1994), **idiocentrism-allocentrism** (Hofstede 1980), so **“pro-self”** and **“pro-social”** (Kulcsar 2005), were considered to be polar opposites, by now they have been empirically proven to be **significantly correlated** in both sexes (Watson et al 1998).

Mortality saliency has also been recently shown to have **pro-social effects** (e.g. Jonas et al 2002).

In those valuing open-mindedness and tolerance, while **forgiveness** remained **constant**, **out-group intolerance** was found to **decrease** (Greenberg et al 2002) – while in those high in trait-empathy both **out-group tolerance** and **forgiveness increased** (Schimmel et al 2006).

Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

It would appear, therefore, that empathic individuals deal with existential anxiety by adhering to pro-social values. This has no less than global significance, as it leads to **inter-group forgiveness** (Schimmel et al 2006).

As it is evident from the above, the search for the so-far elusive **pan-cultural model of human social behaviour** is going from strength to strength.

Any such model, however, will have to account for the following apparent paradox.

If mortality awareness is indeed the ultimate terror inherent in human existence, mankind has **unity**: we all share that predicament.

If culture serves as a psychological defense against this ultimate terror, we have **plurality**: all cultures are different.

The obvious solution would be the aforementioned **multi-cultural buffer**: the continued existence of pro-social values and psychological universals do suggest that there is enough common ground for such.

It is a mute point, however, how to cultivate that successfully in practice.

A solution might be what the so-called **Hybridization Model** (Pieterse 2004) proposes: a version of globalization where cultures mix and integrate, without the need to give up cultural identity (Salzman 2008).

The ultimate **Speies Orientation** might be fostered through projects as straightforward as Minnesota University's "Study Abroad for Global Engagement".

Positive terror management strategies are aimed at **increased other-culture tolerance**, in the atmosphere of "**democratic plurality**" (Collins 1992).

As well as mindfulness of the processes delineated above, this might be achievable through **Culture Learning** and **Diversity Training**, leading to increased **Difference Appreciation**, that would result in an in-kind **Intercultural Dialogue** (Gergen 2001).

In summary, the Mortality Management Model, while delineating, as one of the alternatives, a negative feedback-loop resulting in increased other-culture intolerance, proposes another way, leading to increased other-culture tolerance.

Delighting in the "otherness of the other" might be our best, if not only, chance to appreciate being integrated in humanity – probably the only secular way of coping with existential anxiety...

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Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

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Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance

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Kinga Williams: From terror to tolerance