

# How to be a (Successful) Real Housewife: Advice from Terror Management Theory

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“You’re a slut pig!” shouts a rich woman across the gold-accented dining room to another rich woman (Baskin et al., 2011). Wine glasses smash on the mahogany table. Cuss words are thrown out like candy from a parade float. Salacious rumors are spread by “close” friends. Expensive dinner parties ruined before the main course is served. Welcome to the world of the *Real Housewives*.

The *Real Housewives of Orange County (RHOC)* was the original *Real Housewives* franchise. It first premiered on March 21, 2006. That date would change reality TV as we knew it. *RHOC* birthed nine other American franchises and numerous international variations of the show (McCluskey & Lang, 2021). *RHOC* created this drama-filmed, reality-tv behemoth of a pop-culture phenomenon that attracts millions of viewers per episode. There are seven other American drama-filled variations of the *Real Housewives* on air today, in addition to *RHOC*.

While it may seem like a trashy show that should only be reserved for one’s weeknight guilty pleasure, many scholars have explored the *Real Housewives* franchise and provided a fair amount of discourse on it. As a docusoap, the producers of the *Real Housewives* aim to provide viewers a dramatic glimpse into how wealthy women live their lives. Scenes of yachts, lunches, and shopping sprees are intermixed with confessionals, which allow the Housewives to provide private commentary on the scenes the viewers just watched (Dominguez, 2015). This juxtaposition

between fighting, wealth, and confessionals is the formula of the show. All episodes of the *Real Housewives* look like that.

Many scholars are drawn to the ‘money shot’ that brings the Housewives to an intersection with capitalism. The ‘money shot’ is “the eruption of raw, real emotion on-screen” (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015, p. 111). The ‘money shot’ defines the program and ‘brands’ the Housewives through gifs and memes on social media, blogs, and gossip sites. These branded ‘money shots’ allow Bravo to produce merchandise and other ventures that capitalize on the content that they produce (Dominguez, 2015; Grindstaff & Murray, 2015). The branded money shot has been adapted into the digital money shot. The digital money shot, which takes the form of Twitter wars and posts on social media based on the Housewives’ performance on television, shares the ultimate goal of turning drama into ratings and sales (Arcy, 2018).

*Real Housewives* scholarship discusses the show’s implication for feminism and gender. Although some see the show as problematic, the *Real Housewives* may promote feminist resistance as its format promotes disorder (Levy, 2018). The structure of the show (across all franchises) promotes un-ladylike behavior instead of submitting to gender politics (Levy, 2018). The *Real Housewives* franchises can also be considered “postfeminist” works for the same reason. The women aren’t expected to be perfect housewives: some don’t have kids or husbands, they have nannies and house staff, and they behave badly. In that way, the show is ironic. The Housewives can’t perform as actual housewives or wealthy socialites (Brzenchek & Castañeda, 2017). They are declassée and debase themselves in the public sphere. In many ways, the *Real Housewives* is both feminist and not as it’s a mixture of enforcing and breaking gender stereotypes (Psarras, 2020). The *Real Housewives* also uses neo-liberal femininity and irony to create its platform. It

utilizes neoliberalism's specific brand of femininity to argue that the Housewives will alter themselves according to the market (Brzenchek & Castañeda, 2017).

Across the existing conversations of femininity, gender roles, and the 'money shot,' the most common theme is the Housewives' misbehavior. This reoccurring concern led me to a gap in scholarship: how can we explain the behavior of the Housewives? They say horrible things about each other. They smash wineglasses and threaten each other. The Housewives scream—and even fight—in public. But what motivates this bad behavior? I think that Terror Management Theory (TMT), a behavior psychology concept that attempts to reconcile life and death, could be used to explain their behavior. If TMT is used in the real world to explain human behavior as motivated to avoid death and reminders of it, then TMT can be extended in the context of the *Real Housewives* to explain their behavior. In the world of reality TV, I believe the Housewives will behave in a certain way to survive. They want their contract renewed. If the reminder that they could be fired at the end of the season is always looming in the back of their minds, they will do anything to stay on.

Using TMT as a basis for behavioral analysis, there are three essential behaviors that get Housewives to the next season: bringing it, owning it, and showing it all. In this guide, I will present examples of Housewives who successfully performed those behaviors and those that did not. But first, I will discuss TMT and explain it in greater detail. I will then situate TMT within the context of reality TV and the *Real Housewives* before concluding with TMT's guide on how to be a real housewife.

## **Background**

Terror Management Theory, originally proposed by Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg (2015) in responses to gaps they saw in the field of social psychology, argues that humans face the

inevitability of death every day, which is terrifying. This knowledge of mortality creates anxiety, which can be all-consuming. This anxiety, therefore, influences our behavior (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015). As organisms evolutionarily hardwired to survive, it is imperative that we come up with strategies to ignore this anxiety and carry on with life. Much of human behavior is thought to be aimed towards reducing this death anxiety through self-preservation. Such anxiety-reducing strategies include belief in cultural worldviews, like religion, which give the believer a meaning in life and provides something to base their self-esteem or worth on (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). These cultural worldviews also provide the promise of immortality, which is almost the ultimate anxiety reducing behavior (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). To put it succinctly, TMT attempts to explain human behavior through the lens of death. If we, as humans, know we are going to die, then almost all of our behavior is focused—subconsciously and consciously—on ignoring that fear/anxiety.

TMT rests on two main hypotheses: 1) the anxiety-buffer hypothesis and 2) the mortality salience (MS) hypothesis. These hypotheses are the main forms of behavior that humans engage in to order to manage their terror around death. The anxiety-buffer hypothesis states that as anxiety is a normal reaction when thinking about death, then self-esteem will act as a buffer for that anxiety. Behaviors that increase self-esteem will be favored and behavior or situations that increase anxiety will be avoided. This hypothesis is supported by a myriad of studies (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Similarly, the mortality salience hypothesis explains that reminders of death are psychologically negative (Juhl & Routledge, 2016). This hypothesis rests on the assumption that if an individual is reminded of death and their demise, they will engage in defensive behaviors like clinging to their cultural worldviews or an increased, conscious commitment to them. This hypothesis has also been supported by a plethora of scholarship (Jonas & Fritsche, 2012; Pyszczynski et al., 2015).

**Extending TMT**

Naturally, when our anxiety-buffer is broken and we recognize our mortality, death thoughts should increase and become more accessible to the conscious (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Scholars have built on the anxiety-buffer and mortality salience hypothesis with the death thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis.

The DTA hypothesis posits that humans will sometimes encounter situations that increase DTA. These situations will drive behaviors that increase self-esteem and restore one's worldview to decrease DTA and protect from death thoughts creeping into the consciousness (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). In situations that increase DTA, humans use two main methods of defense: proximal and distal defenses. Proximal defenses are more explicit. They are said to be dealt with on the same level of the threat that increased DTA (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). These defenses include rationalization and distraction. Distal defenses are more subconscious than their proximal counterparts (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Examples of these behaviors are the bolstering of self-esteem and a renewed commitment to one's worldview or religion. Proximal defenses are thought to be activated immediately after increased DTA while distal defenses occur more regularly at the subconscious level (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). We have different levels of defense to protect ourselves against the anxiety that succumbs us in the face of death-thoughts.

**Influence of TMT on Social Norms and Behaviors**

As death is all around us, TMT influences our various social behaviors. Scholars have used TMT to study how death and the anxiety around it impacts our social behavior surrounding things like grief, God, or going out with friends. TMT can explain (some of) death's influence over social behavior.

TMT explains death's influence on behavior surrounding death and end-of-life as it is tied to culture. Death is a big part of life and customs vary widely depending on the culture. In Greek and Chinese cultures, the knowledge of death is seen detrimental to patients. Families often choose to hide terminal diagnoses when elderly members are diagnosed (Johnstone, 2012). In many western cultures, terminal diagnoses are confronted head on. Patients have a right to know. These cultural beliefs and practices showcase the difference in behaviors surrounding grief (Johnstone, 2012). Religion can be used to explain similar behaviors. It is often the cultural worldviews or belief systems that TMT maintains we participate in to ward off death-anxiety (Hui, Chan, Lau, Cheung, & Mok, 2014; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Religion dictates the self-esteem-bolstering behavior that we participate in to increase our worth in life. Studies show that individuals often use religion after MS events (Hui et al., 2014). Reaffirming religious beliefs—that provide the promise of immortality—help to get rid of anxiety brought on by thinking about death. TMT explains our devotion and commitment to these beliefs and behaviors outlined by religious practices when experiencing grief.

TMT also has influence on other social behaviors, even if they aren't directly tied to death or grief. For example, TMT can explain and support some of the social behavior surrounding drinking but studies have found that some results don't fit in with TMT (Jessop & Wade, 2008). Binge-drinking can cause moments of MS. TMT would argue that therefore binge-drinking behaviors would be avoided. Occasionally, binge-drinking behaviors are continued, even if the drinker is knowledgeable on the possible mortality risks (Jessop & Wade, 2008). Those behaviors depart from the mainstream. TMT can't explain death's influence on social behavior in that situation. In short, TMT seems to go both ways: it can and can't explain all our social behavior in the face of death. We might engage in healthy behaviors and we might not.

### **The Real Housewives and Terror Management Theory**

TMT rests on the assumption that human behavior is always self-preservative. Humans will engage in behavior that actively works to remove anxiety and attempts to remove thoughts of death from the conscious. In TMT, death is the act of dying. For the purpose of my analysis, TMT must be tweaked: death looks different on the *Real Housewives*. On the *Real Housewives*, death isn't dying. I argue that death is not having your contract renewed or being fired. Death is not making it to the next season on reality TV. If death looks slightly different, then TMT will as well. When considered in the context of the *Real Housewives*, TMT will dictate that successful Housewife behavior is, by definition, similarly inherently self-preservative. It is important to note that some Housewives chose to not continue to the next season. But that is the exception, not the rule.

With mortality on their minds, the Housewives exhibit specific behavior to survive. In this way, TMT can be used to understand the behaviors performed by the Housewives to reaffirm their commitment to survival and ward off reality-TV "death." They will perform and work to make themselves essential to the storyline while winning over viewers. These behaviors will serve as the distal and proximal defenses of the Housewives (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). In the upcoming sections, I will identify the behaviors that successful housewives demonstrate, as directed by TMT, through examples of capable and incapable Housewives. I will only be providing a select few examples across the *Real Housewives of New York (RHONY)* and *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (RHOBH)* franchises.

### **Bring it, but don't be a mean girl**

On the *Real Housewives*, Housewives won't make it to the next season if they passively participate. They must do something to "bring it." Housewives must backstab a friend, start a

rumor, or incite drama. By bringing it, Housewives are reaffirming themselves to their survival, maintaining their relevance, and boosting their self-esteem, which is a key component of TMT. With boosted self-esteem, thoughts of mortality will disappear (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Although bringing it is a fast walk on a hard line and Housewives must be careful not to become a mean girl. Becoming a villain is a necessary role that some Housewives act in to survive but becoming a mean girl threatens their survival. This isn't high school; it is reality TV. No one likes a mean girl. To be a successful Housewife, they must bring it enough to survive but not so much that they kill their reality-TV career.

Romana Singer is a Housewife who brings it as a villain. Singer is one of the original *RHONY* Housewives and has been doing the show since 2008. On the show, she's often dubbed as the "Singer Stinger," indicating her proclivity for insulting her castmates. On season 12 of *RHONY*, she alleged that Leah McSweeney, a freshman Housewife, was bipolar (Bernstein, Cohen, Paparazzo, Shannon, & Ward, 2020a). It is important to note that McSweeney was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, but none of Housewives knew that at the time. The rumor was only revealed as truth at the season 12 reunion (Bernstein, Cohen, Paparazzo, Shannon, & Ward, 2020b). This incident led to an intense reunion fight and drew outrage from fans who thought gossiping about someone's mental health might be too far. Whether it was right or wrong, Singer brought it. She backstabbed a friend and started a rumor in the process. Singer has brought it in earlier seasons, too. On a season 6 trip to the Berkshires, when splashed with water by Kristin Taekman, a former *RHONY* housewife, Singer retaliated by throwing a wine glass at Taekman's face (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2014). As Singer drew blood, she was clearly bringing it. Singer knows how to survive; she is set to star in the upcoming 13<sup>th</sup> season of the *RHONY* franchise.



While it's hard to pinpoint exactly where the line is drawn if the two sides seem to be inappropriate and more inappropriate, Dorinda Medley proved to be an unsuccessful Housewife. Medley, once known for bringing it like Singer, became a mean girl. Throughout season 12 of *RHONY*, Medley sparred with Tinsley Mortimer, another former *RHONY* Housewife, over her on-and-off again relationship with Scott Kluth. At a dinner where Mortimer confirmed her engagement to Kluth while announcing that she would be moving to Chicago to live with Kluth, Medley offered a "turkey baster" to Mortimer and Kluth so they could try to conceive a baby (Bernstein, Cohen, Paparazzo, Shannon, & Ward, 2020d). On a trip to Mexico that same season, Medley brought up Luann De Lesseps's arrest, seemingly unprovoked (Bernstein, Cohen, Paparazzo, Shannon, & Ward, 2020e). These comments proved to cross over into mean girl territory. Medley was fired at the end of season 12.

Singer appears to be an idyllic example of what it means to bring it as a Housewife, as maintained by the reality-TV version of TMT. Singer spreads rumors, starts them, and is not against coming to physical blows to show and reaffirm her commitment to surviving to another season. This behavior is directly connected to TMT because it increases the Housewife's self-esteem, which increases as their time on the show grows longer. Bringing it makes them successful and pushes thoughts of mortality to the side. Singer can sleep well at night, knowing her place on *RHONY* is secure. Medley was ultimately unsuccessful in her attempts to align her behavior with reality-TV TMT. Originally, her provocative comments were self-preservative, but they were too much in the end and she did not survive.

### **Own it**

"You need to own it!" is a phrase commonly brought up on the *Real Housewives*. To survive as a Housewife, they need to be accountable for their actions. Owning it gives their behavior level

of authenticity and honesty, which adds to the Housewife's performance. Viewers like drama, but no one likes a Housewife who won't own up to her behavior. Owning it can be understood as defense against mortality as it increases chances of survival on the *Real Housewives*. In this way, this behavior connects directly to engagement of self-preservative behavior, a core tenet of TMT (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). The Housewives who own it will be more successful at survival than the ones who do not.

During her tenure as a Housewife, Lisa Rinna's go-to catchphrase has been "you better own it!" On season 6 of *RHOBH*, Rinna and Yolanda Hadid faced off. Much of the season 6 storyline revolved around Hadid's struggle with Lyme disease. Hadid had severe symptoms and struggled to participate with the rest of the Housewives. In one scene, Rinna read the definition of Munchausen Syndrome to insinuate that Hadid did not have Lyme disease (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2015). This rumor would plague Hadid for the rest of the season. While Rinna initially failed to own up to her actions, she eventually admitted to her role in slandering Hadid (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). When she copped to it at the reunion, she saved herself. Keeping up with the lie would have violated TMT; it would not have been self-preservative and risked a chance of "death." By owning it, she recommitted herself to surviving on the show. Rinna will be featured in the upcoming season 11 of *RHOBH*.

Season 9 of *RHOBH* brought more drama that surrounded the Housewives. A major storyline that season was #PuppyGate. The scandal involved Lucy Lucy Apple Juice (a dog), Dorit Kemsley, Lisa Vanderpump, and Teddi Mellencamp. Kemsley had adopted a dog from Vanderpump's dog shelter. After multiple biting incidents, Kemsley had to rehome the dog. The

family who the dog was rehomed with placed the dog in a shelter, unbeknownst to Kemsley. In response, Vanderpump allegedly set out to make this incident into an overdramatized storyline.

Seemingly at Vanderpump's command, an employee at the dog shelter brought the scandal to Mellencamp's attention (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2019a). Mellencamp was then, allegedly, supposed to bring that information up to character-assassinate Kemsley. Ultimately, Mellencamp went against Vanderpump and admitted that the entire situation was being blown out of proportion by Vanderpump (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2019b). Vanderpump would go on to maintain her innocence for the rest of the season, but viewers and Housewives alike did not believe her. Owing it can, therefore, be understood as an act of TMT. Housewives who own up to what they did survive and those who do not will face the consequences. Housewives who own up to it can be rest assured that they will live to see another season. Honest Mellencamp survived to season 10, but Vanderpump left midseason.

### **Mention it all!**

To survive on camera, Housewives better show it all—sometimes literally. As *RHONY* legend Bethenny Frankel once said “mention it all!” (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2017c). A successful Housewife will show the good, the bad, and the ugly on camera. Only then can she rest easy knowing she will survive to the next season. This behavior aligns with TMT as it can be understood as a recommitment to the Housewife's cultural worldview, an anxiety-reducing strategy common with TMT (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Reaffirming one's cultural worldview helps bury mortal salience (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). TMT posits that Housewives show it all because it is the best means of survival. More intimacy translates into survival as the Housewives provide almost unlimited content that can be turned into drama. In a docusoap,

personal drama is what attract viewers and creates watchable storylines. Baring it all secures their spot while hiding things pushes Housewives closer to death.

Former Countess Luann De Lesseps, a *RHONY* Housewife, has shown more than most—and that's paid off. On season 10 of *RHONY*, she was arrested for drunkenly assaulting a police officer (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2018a, 2018b). After her arrest, De Lesseps did not hide anything from the camera. She cried in confessionals as video clips of her arrest—including clips of her threatening to kill a police officer—flashed across the screen. She detailed her first stint in rehab. The following season of *RHONY* detailed her relapse, intervention, and second stint in rehab. While cameras were not present during her time in rehab or her intervention, she did not hesitate to talk about it on camera. De Lesseps blew into a breathalyzer several times on the show, clearly not hesitating to show any part of her legal struggles (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2018c). Her willingness to show it all can be understood through TMT as a successful attempt to survive on the show. It's paying off: de Lesseps has been featured on every single season of *RHONY* since production started in 2008 and will be on the upcoming 13<sup>th</sup> season.

Sonja Morgan takes a different, more literal approach to showing it all: she mentions intimate sexual moments and gets naked on camera while on vacation. On the season 9 cast trip to Mexico, Morgan stripped fully nude, on camera, to go swimming (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2017b). More recently, she got fully nude and swam in the pool after a drunken dinner party (Bernstein, Cohen, Paparazzo, Shannon, & Ward, 2020c). Since her start on season 3, Morgan is quick to mention her affairs with 23-year-olds and other sexual matters. This more literal approach to showing it all still aligns with TMT and can be understood as an arguably embarrassing, but self-preservative behavior. Housewives who show it all—literally in Morgan's case—make the cut to the next season. Morgan has been a Housewife for almost ten seasons and

will be on the upcoming 13<sup>th</sup> season of the New York City installment. Mentioning or showing it all aligns with TMT. It leads to successful survival.

Tinsley Mortimer was unsuccessful as a Housewife because she did not perform this behavior. Since her start on *RHONY* during season 9, her relationship status proved to be a significant plot point. She was introduced to Scott Kluth, the man who would eventually become her fiancé by Carole Radziwill, a fellow *RHONY* Housewife (Bernstein, Cohen, Healy, Hoegl, & Shannon, 2017a). While Mortimer was vocal about her relationship in the beginning and even went as far as to cry on camera over still loving Kluth while they were on a break, she ultimately did not show enough of her relationship to survive. During season 12, she refused to speak about her relationship to most of her fellow *RHONY* Housewives. Mortimer barely mentioned Kluth that season until she announced her engagement and subsequent move to Chicago (Bernstein et al., 2020d). Ultimately, she did not show enough and Bravo agreed that Mortimer should leave midseason. Refusing to mention or show her relationship brought her end. Showing it all is a key behavior demanded for survival and anxiety-reduction by TMT. The Housewives that show it all—figuratively or literally—will survive. Those who do not will not survive, as identified by the given examples. A no-holds-barred approach to performing as a Housewife is a key factor in their survival on the show.

## **Conclusion**

TMT attempts to provide an explanation of human behavior through the reconciliation of death and life. Death is all around us and we will, one day, die. There is no escaping that. We will, therefore, engage in behavior that is self-preservative and helps calm the anxiety or fear that DTA or MS can bring. It's not much different on the *Real Housewives*. If death on reality TV is not getting a contract for the next season, then TMT can be used to analyze and potentially explain

their behavioral performance. Housewives will bring it, own it, and show it to survive and calm the nerves they may have around being fired. My analysis explains how TMT can explain their behavior and is bolstered by the many examples of successful and unsuccessful attempts to survive.

Through TMT, we can see the *Real Housewives* in a different light. Yes, I concede that it they are rich women who engage in rich-women activities while doing horrible things to each other. But they act this way in the pursuit of survival. The Housewives don't want to get fired. They engage in behaviors that attempt to ensure that they live to see another season. Moreover, this behavioral performance puts them parallel to the core tenets of TMT: self-preservation and the avoidance of death. The Housewives interact with TMT, even on reality TV.

My analysis proves to be a two-way street. Not only does TMT allow us to see the *Real Housewives* differently, the *Real Housewives* exemplifies how TMT can be used in new ways. While TMT is rooted in behavioral psychology, it has uses in outside application. It is important to explore TMT outside of behavioral psychology and reality, for that matter. TMT can help explain why TV characters, such as the Housewives, perform or behave the way they do. Mortality can impact pop culture just as much as it impacts real life. The intersection of TMT and pop-culture phenomena, like the *Real Housewives*, has yet to be fully realized and it demands further exploration.

Overall, I have found that the *Real Housewives* can both further and be furthered by TMT. TMT provides an explanation for the Housewives' behavior as an attempt to preserve their spot on the show. The *Real Housewives* provide a good foundation to apply TMT outside of traditional spaces, but scholars must take it further. TMT can be used to investigate how the entire genre of reality TV reconciles with mortality. That exploration would further our understanding of TMT

and how we interact with death, on TV or in the real world. While we wait for more analysis, the Housewives will continue to backstab, fight, and gossip to survive on our TV screens.

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