

Terror Management Theory in Cards Against Humanity

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Abstract

This essay explores the behavioral psychology concept of Terror Management Theory within the context of the popular party game, Cards Against Humanity. I use examples of answers in the game to demonstrate that the players' behavior fits the principles of the theory and show further connections between terror management, humor, and anxiety. I further add to the conversation by suggesting that the popularity of this game, which is mostly limited to college students and young adults, is a result of greater levels of death anxiety among the millennial generation. These findings reveal a need for further research surrounding the intense fear of death among the millennials and the coping mechanisms employed by college students to deal with that fear.

Introduction

“But before I kill you, Mr. Bond, I want to show you _____

_____.” “**A micropig wearing a tiny raincoat and booties!**” Few games could replace the classic dorm night-in staples of “Truth or Dare” and “Never Have I Ever,” but lately a new form of entertainment has begun to occupy the laundry-covered, linoleum floors of college residence halls. College students all over the U.S. have adopted the card game, *Cards Against Humanity: A Party Game for Horrible People*, as their new too-cold-to-go-out pastime. In a few short months, *Cards Against Humanity* (CAH) became the most popular party game among college-age kids. The incredible thing about the game's popularity is that the company behind the twisted game did little to no advertising. There were no commercials on TV advertising it, no posters put up at Target entrances, and no tabling. *USA Today* cites one of the creators of the game, Mark Temkin, as stating, “I think college students are pretty tapped into pop culture;; we don't advertise Cards Against Humanity and it's only available online, so it has to spread through word of mouth...” (Prottas 1). The game's success is entirely based on its ability to connect with college-age kids and make them want to play this game over and over again.

As the R-rated version of the classic children's game *Apples to Apples*, CAH consists of cards referencing everything from politics to pop culture to historical events. The cards contain major figures such as **Barack Obama, Oprah, John Wilkes Booth, and Gandhi** as well as movements like **women's suffrage** and world problems like **AIDS**. Additionally, at any given time, the cards in play could also include anything ranging from **vigorous jazz hands** to **German dungeon porn** to **helplessly giggling at the mention of Hutus and Tootsies**. The game is packed with highly sexual and offensive ideas meant to be combined for the purpose of humor beyond just the initial shock value. Suddenly, people you have never even heard curse are making jokes about Auschwitz. In fact, everyone playing the game is laughing hysterically and cracking jokes that they would never even come up with in any other situation. One reviewer noted: “It reveals people's dirty sides regardless of previous interaction because this is a side of people that others rarely see and it makes everything that much more funny...” (Prottas 2). What accounts for this consistent, complete change in personality? What allows us to universally become horrible people, as the game makers suggest, within a few minutes of playing CAH? Is it just that the game allows you to

use “**Pacman uncontrollably guzzling cum**” and “**Miley Cyrus at 55**” in the same sentence? Or is there more to it than that?

In this essay, I will discuss the psychological effects of Cards Against Humanity. I will apply the behavioral psychology concept of Terror Management Theory to the game. I will argue that the structure and formatting of the game reminds the players of death and supplies them with opportunities to react to that by discrediting and undermining the “other.” I will connect Terror Management Theory to humor as a coping mechanism and point out that using “sick” humor at the expense of other groups seems to be a way to cope with the effects of Terror Management Theory. Finally, I will explore Terror Management Theory as it relates to the generation Y college students. I show these connections both inside and outside of the contexts of the game.

Introduction to the Theory

While many theories seek to explain human behavior in relation to death, one theory that has continued to evolve is Terror Management Theory (TMT). Developed by social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski in the 1990s, the theory states that humans react to mortality saliences, or reminders of death and mortality, by strengthening their defense of their own cultural world views and degrading alternative world views (Rosenblatt 690). Through a series of social experiments, Greenburg and his associates found that stimuli like a television clip of a funeral can trigger a reaction where a person needs to “reassert their faith in their worldview by bolstering their worldview through derogation, invalidation, or seeking to harm the different other...” as expert Michael Salzman puts it (177). Once reminded of mortality, an individual will demonstrate uncharacteristic antagonism towards individuals or groups he or she does not identify with. In a political context, the individual will often advocate greater punishment or more violence toward that group. Simultaneously, the person will place a greater value on their own identity within a group.

TMT is based on the research of Greenberg and his colleague, Ernst Becker, who theorized that humans have an innate fear of death and a cognitive need to avoid thoughts about the subject (Navarrete 373). Becker argued that the reason for this fear is humans’ unique need for self-preservation by finding meaning in their lives through constructing set realities and ideologies they can believe in. Because of humans’ ability to think in this abstract way, we have acute anxiety about death. TMT describes the defense mechanism humans have created to protect themselves from death anxiety.

More recent scholars such as Michael Salzman expanded on Becker’s ideas when they explained that culture provides the frame for Becker’s construction of reality (Salzman 174). They asserted that culture is a context by which people can regulate and predict their lives. By strictly adhering to the beliefs, rules, and traditions of a culture, humans achieve “symbolic immortality” (Salzman 176). In this way, people feel they can live on after their bodies have died through the continuance of the existence of their world view. This is why the thought of death provokes a fierce defense of culture. Because humans feel a need for stability and control over their lives, they create a reality where that exists by maintaining a set worldview that is usually informed by race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, political party, and other factors. When they are reminded of death, their attachment to

that worldview and sense of belonging with groups that share the view deepen and their defense mechanisms are engaged.

Psychologists and scholars have continued to develop the theory of TMT by conceptualizing the motivations and implications of this culture-defending behavior. The theory has become a popular research topic because of the implications it has for intolerance and discrimination against minorities. Skeptics criticize the theory for being overextended because it has been applied to a large variety of situations ranging from coping with tragedy to binge drinking (Paulhus and Trapnell). However, in a world where humans are acutely aware of death due to mass media and events such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the War on Terror, this topic continues to stay relevant.

TMT and Humor

Freud first introduced the idea of humor as a coping mechanism for tragedy, one of his more widely accepted theories (Salzman 178). He coined the term “gallows humor” to describe the type of humor made about death or tragedy. He suggested that by purposefully making jokes about these events, we perceive that we regain control over our lives. Since then, many researchers have expanded on that theory. At this point, most scholars accept the idea that humor provides a safe forum for humans to explore the concept of death and deal with mortality. We use it to examine death, just as we do for so many difficult scenarios (Elgee 487). Expert Neil Elgee even adds: "Humor is a major means by which we keep repressed from immediate consciousness a morbid and paralyzing preoccupation with the spectacle of death. We use humor to free ourselves from the slavery of death" (487). By Elgee's standard, we use humor in the same way we use Greenburg and associates' defense of a worldview. Both are used to defend ourselves from experiencing the anxiety at bay in our subconscious.

Specific studies relating TMT with humor have been published only in the last three years and the research around the topic is still very new. However, they are very important to the field. First, Charles Hackney demonstrated the existence of a correlation between mortality salience and humor by having college students assess the comedy of three jokes after exposure to a mortality salience and comparing them to a control group (Hackney 1). The college students exposed to the mortality salience picked the joke most closely associated with mortality as most funny, where their control group counterparts varied in their choices. The joke was also about an execution, which potentially exhibits the college students' desire for greater punishment of an outsider group, which correlates to the behavior portrayed in Terror Management Theory.

Where Hackney studied mortality salience and humor appreciation, Christopher Long and Dara Greenwood researched the connection between mortality salience and humor production (Long and Greenwood) as compared to pain and humor. Humor production is related to TMT because it is often focused around culture and can reinforce a person's membership in a group, both of which play a role in the theory. Long and Greenwood tested 104 college students, some who were primed with death reminders and some who were part of a control group and were not. Of those exposed to a death reminder, some of them saw the word “death” flash on a screen as they were pairing other words that flashed on screen together. Others were asked to respond to open-ended questions like “Please briefly describe the thoughts and emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.” After being primed with a death salience or a pain salience, the students were asked to

write captions for comic images that were given to them. A group of six Psychology students rated each caption on a scale ranging from “extremely unfunny” to “extremely funny” based on what they individually found humorous. They found that students exposed to a mortality salience produced funnier captions than those who were exposed to a pain salience or no salience. This finding demonstrates that thoughts of death ignite humorous and creative tendencies in individuals that may not have been triggered otherwise. This suggests that humor could be a coping mechanism for a mortality salience.

Back to the Cards

Like the participants in Long and Greenwood’s study, the players of Cards Against Humanity also have to produce their own humor. The cards in the game provide prompts and possible responses, but it is up to the players to combine the cards in a way that is as humorous as possible. The players themselves actually have to create the humor based on what is in front of them.

The game is made up of white cards and black cards. In each round, a player selects a black card which has a prompt with a question like, “**What’s there a ton of in heaven?**” or “**What did Obama drop on the children of Afghanistan?**” Each of the other players selects one of the seven white cards they have in their hand as the best responses to those questions. The players answer anonymously by putting the cards face down in front of the Card Czar, the person who drew the black card. The Czar reads each person’s answer out loud and decides which answer best fits the prompt. The player who put down that answer wins the round and gets to keep the black card.

Let’s play a round. We are circled up on the floor with a few other hallmates with a pile of white cards and a pile of black cards in the middle of the circle. You are the Card Czar. You deal each of us seven white cards. Then you draw a black card. This is the first prompt. The card says, “ : **That’s how I want to die.**” Now it’s up to me and the other players to fill in the blank with one of our white cards. The seven white cards I have in my hand are, “**50,000 volts straight to the nipples,**” “**The Care Bear Stare,**” “**Surprise Sex,**” “**Funky Fresh Rhythms,**” “**Serfdom,**” “**Stephen Hawking Talking Dirty,**” and “**Not Wearing Pants.**” I select “**50,000 volts straight to the nipples**” as the best beginning to the sentence so I put the card face down in front of you. You also receive white cards from the rest of the players. Now you have to pick which card you think is the best answer. Your choices are, “**50,000 volts straight to the nipples,**” “**Unfathomable stupidity,**” “**Giving birth to the Antichrist,**” “**Switching to Geico,**” and “**8 oz. of sweet Mexican black tar heroin.**” You like my answer the best and choose that card as the winner of the round, so I get to keep my black card, “ _____: **That’s how I want to die.**” Then we begin the next round. The first player to accumulate 10 black cards wins the game.

By my count, there are roughly 56 white cards in Cards Against Humanity out of 440 that act as mortality saliences. These are either cards that explicitly refer to death, like “**a windmill full of corpses**” or “**civilian casualties,**” or cards that one would likely associate with death like “**Auschwitz**” or “**hospice care.**” 56 is a conservative number, given that I did not include cards that referred to aging, historical figures unless they are directly associated with death (i.e. **John Wilkes Booth**), or things that could potentially, but not necessarily cause death (i.e. **Alcoholism**). My argument relies only on cards that would immediately lead most people to think of death, therefore causing them subconscious death anxiety.

With 56 death cards out of 440, each time a player draws a card he or she has a roughly 13% chance of drawing a mortality salience. This number may not seem very high, but when combined with the possibility of another player answering with a mortality salience and exposing the entire group to it, there is a high chance of one or more of the players experiencing death anxiety at any given time. There are also prompts that require players to draw two or three cards from the deck on one turn, doubling or tripling the probability of drawing a death reminder card. Additionally, there are 10 black cards that are also direct reminders of death, such as “_____ : **That’s how I want to die.**” and “**That’s right I killed _____ . How you ask? _____ .**” Because these represent 1/9 of the black cards in the box, there is approximately an 11% chance that any of those cards will be drawn on any given turn and expose the entire group to death-related anxiety.

There are 103 total cards that refer to an “other,” a group that has a different world view from the majority of the people playing the game. This category includes any card from “**brown people**” to “**Republicans**” to “**Asians who aren’t good at math.**” However, other cards seem to fit into this category, including, for example, any figures who are clearly leaders of these groups or representative figures of that culture. This meant that the number includes cards like “**Stalin,**” “**George W. Bush,**” and “**Tom Cruise.**” These people are consistently associated with a school of thought and a view that would differ from a lot of the people playing the game. Cards that represent differing religious ideologies also belong to the “other” cards as they also represent a different world view for a lot of people. This adds cards like “**Mohammed, praise his holy name,**” “**God,**” and “**The Holy Bible**” to the number. Some dispute may arise at where to draw the line at what defines an “other” or a differing perspective. However, the list is limited to cards containing clear references to a specific group and figures or texts that would clearly be associated with those groups. With 103 “other” cards out of 440 cards, there is a 23.4% chance that a player will draw an “other” card on any given turn. That chance increases if the players encounter a “pick two” or “pick three” prompt. While some players in the game may belong to a certain group like “**Italians**” or “**Gays,**” the vast majority of the cards will not apply to them.

Cards Against Humanity literally hands you the two major components of Terror Management Theory: a reminder of death and an alternative world view. The only thing the player has to do is fill in the behavior. Terror Management Theory can occur within the game in two ways. The first is that the player draws a death card to put in his hand or someone else plays a death card. Let’s say our player picks up the card “**The inevitable heat death of the universe.**” This card is an instant reminder of death. It even contains the word “death.” Our player now feels a subconscious fear of death and anxiety about dying. He may not actively be aware of it, but it is there and he must do something to deal with that anxiety. The next black card that is drawn is “**After months of practice with _____ , I am finally ready for _____ .**” Our player takes two cards from his hand and answers “After months of practice with *Muhammed (Praise be Unto Him)*, I am finally ready for *72 Virgins.*” Our player has dealt with his reminder of mortality by making a joke about Muslim beliefs. By creating humor surrounding the promiscuity of one of the foremost figures of Islam, our player has undermined and discredited another cultural perspective. The same idea would be true had our player answered “After months of practice with **The South**, I am finally ready for **Racism.**” Our player would be capitalizing on the stereotype that all people in the South are racist and thereby demeaning Southerners’ cultural perspective.

Terror Management Theory can also occur in another way. This is if the Card Czar draws a black card that reminds him or her of death. In this case, Terror Management Theory occurs more rapidly. The black card has a prompt such as, “**That’s right I killed _____ . How, you ask? _____**” that will instantly remind people of death. In this case the players are all equally exposed to a mortality salience and all experience a subconscious fear of death. Our player may submit something like, “That’s right I killed **the Pope**. How, you ask? **Praying the gay away.**” Assuming our player is not Catholic or gay, she has made a joke about world views that are not her own. While she likely did not mean it offensively, she is undermining the gay perspective by making a joke about that group. She is discrediting another culture that is different from her own. No doubt the response time will be varied and not every player will submit a response that makes fun of another cultural point of view. However, psychology insists that this behavior will likely occur, if not during this round, then shortly thereafter.

Group Dynamics As One’s Own Cultural Worldview

So far, I have argued that Cards Against Humanity creates an environment where players experience TMT because they are exposed to a death reminder, subconsciously feel anxiety about death, and then react to that anxiety by using the game to make jokes about other world views. However, people who experience Terror Management Theory not only discredit other world views, but cling harder to and defend their own world view. In the early 1990s, Greenberg and associates determined that people who experience a mortality salience displayed greater loyalty to both religious and national identities (Hackney 54). They also demonstrated uncharacteristic hostility toward people who had different political ideologies. I would argue that the players of Cards Against Humanity are unlikely to make jokes about a group they identify strongly with. Jewish students playing this game after synagogue are probably not going to play the **Mecha-Hitler** card. But while playing the game, they may begin to feel a stronger sense of attachment to the Jewish culture and tradition.

Within the context of Cards Against Humanity, your group may not just refer to your basic biographical information – race, ethnicity, gender, *etc.* In addition to strengthening one’s loyalty to those groups, the player will form a greater bond to the other players participating in the game. The player will also feel a greater defense of the collective identity and world view shared by that group. One *USAToday College* article about CAH explains: “‘It’s a bonding experience,’ says Laura Krause, a sophomore psychology major at Northeastern University. ‘In a weird way it also kind of shows you who your true friends are;; like someone picks your answer card because they think it was funny, and you just think ‘yeah, she’s a homie’” (Prottas 1). A group of college students at a particular university has a unique view of the world that they are bringing to this game. The players of this game are also taking risks by making jokes about controversial topics in front of their peers. Because of this, the players participating in the game will begin to form a collective identity throughout the course of the game. This identity also informs their world view and they will be equally as defensive of this group when reminded of death as they will be of the groups that represent their background.

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

It is generally accepted by scientists that humor is an effective coping strategy for people in a variety of scenarios. Making jokes allows people to process traumatic events and deal with them emotionally (Kuipers 74). However, these ideas have usually been applied to external traumas like Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, and the war in Iraq. It is conceivable that humor could be applied to internal trauma as well.

So far, this paper has presented two separate theories: Terror Management Theory, which argues that people react to death reminders by diminishing other cultures, and the theory of humor as an effective coping mechanism. We have seen that when presented with a mortality salience in Cards Against Humanity, a person will often respond by making jokes about other groups. Not only do other participants generally agree with the player, but they also laugh just as hysterically. CAH quickly becomes a circus of continual reminders of death that are dealt with by using the “other” cards to make jokes that demean a particular group. Eventually, everyone playing the game will be an active example of Terror Management Theory. Every player has been reminded of death and every play deals with it in the same way.

Because of this, I propose that this type of “gallows humor” is an extension of Terror Management Theory. TMT suggests that when reminded of death, one feels the need to undermine others’ cultural world view. It does not say how or what method is used to do this. However, the case of Cards Against Humanity demonstrates that the undermining of others’ cultural world view, at least among young adults, can be done predominantly through humor. Young adults do not feel comfortable simply making fun of another group of people in every day conversation. They prefer to do it under the pretense of a game. Cards Against Humanity provides a perfect context for these ideas.

We can see other examples in which humor is used as terror management. Following 9/11, many jokes were made about the war in Iraq, the collapsing of the twin towers, *etc.* (Knoll 8). They were almost always centered on al-Qaeda, Muslims, or Terrorists. Events like 9/11 remind people of death and specifically how quickly our lives can end in a matter of moments. Because we are so afraid of death, we react by putting down other groups with a differing worldview.

The bitter grandfather making jokes about the Viet Cong or the North Koreans is also experiencing TMT. At first, these jokes may seem odd or out of place and we roll our eyes at grandpa being grandpa. However, his memories of war are mortality saliences. Whenever he remembers going to war, he remembers how many of his friends and acquaintances died and how easily he could have too. He copes with that fear by making jokes about the group he was fighting. He chooses this group because they are the easiest target and clearly their world view differs from his. Humor is not only a way of coping with trauma, but an extension of TMT. We can’t deal with the idea of death so we make jokes about other cultures in order to help ourselves stay close to our own cultural worldview.

Anxiety

College students in this era are particularly prone to using the type of gallows humor present in Cards Against Humanity because of their inability to cope with anxiety. College students right now, in particular, are vulnerable to anxiety and stress. Many researchers, including Helen Bland,

have identified the college years as one of the most stressful times in a person's life (3). The transition from high school to college is a culture shock to many young adults and having to adjust to a tougher curriculum, life in a dorm, and living without the structure of parental supervision causes a great deal of anxiety in many students. Additionally, the current college generation, the millennials (people born between 1980 and 2000), demonstrate traits that have been linked to greater stress levels, such as being overscheduled and feeling pressure to achieve high academic success. The scientific community recognizes the millennial generation as being far more stressed than previous generations. Not only do they experience greater levels of anxiety, but they have not developed strategies to effectively cope with stress. Because of the lack of structure introduced to them when they enter college, many students abandon any successful coping mechanisms when they leave home. They rely on avoidance techniques like distracting themselves by watching TV or listening to music to deal with stress instead of addressing those feelings and implementing a plan to reduce their anxiety.

College-age kids are also far more prone to death anxiety. In 1996, psychologists Rasmussen and Brem identified an inverse relationship between level of death anxiety and age. People who are younger experience far greater degrees of death anxiety than their older counterparts (Rasmussen 63). Younger people may be less willing to process the idea of their inevitable death where older adults have come to terms with this fate. As very young adults, college students are one of the groups most prone to high levels of death anxiety. Furthermore, Ernst Becker, one of the forefathers of TMT, and his associate David Lester found that death anxiety in college students has increased significantly over time by administering the same survey to college students in 1935 and 1991 (219). They found that the most consistently feared causes of death are cancer and car accidents. It is noteworthy that there are three black cards that reference some type of cancer. Not only are college students more prone to anxiety now, but they are also especially prone to death anxiety and, as a result, the behaviors associated with Terror Management Theory. Their intense fear of death drives their need for a forum to discredit other views and use humor to undermine other cultures in a way that is socially acceptable. Cards Against Humanity provides that forum.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored Terror Management Theory as it applies to the behavior of the players in Cards Against Humanity. I have shown that humor has become an extension of TMT in that it is the way many people, including the players of the game, discredit other cultural perspectives. I then showed that college students have adopted this game where other age groups have not because, unlike those groups, college students at this time have more intense feelings of death anxiety. This anxiety motivates young people to undermine and discredit other world views through dark, "sick" humor. However, what research has yet to address is what exactly is causing millennials to have much deeper fears of death than previous generations. What have they experienced or been exposed to that has intensified this anxiety to this degree? This remains to be seen.

Additionally, strategies need to be found to help college students today deal with anxiety in more productive ways. Cards Against Humanity does not just raise the issue of mental health in young adults. It also raises a question of morality. Regardless of who is playing, the contents of the game are designed to make fun of large groups of people in ways that are often highly offensive. The

fact that **Auschwitz** is even included in the game is proof of that. Is there a moral problem with playing this game? Do we as a society have an obligation to teach young adults to cope with stress in a way that won't offend people? Further discussion is necessary.

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