

## Escaping the self: identity, group identification and violence

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## Escaping the Self: Identity, Group Identification and Violence

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### Abstract

This article draws on the early work of Erich Fromm. In *Escape from Freedom* Fromm (1969 [1941]) directly addressed the psychological mechanisms of escape modern individuals employ to protect themselves from feelings of ontological insecurity and existential estrangement. The article builds on Fromm's analysis by discussing the significance of his escape mechanisms for understanding the dynamic psychological attractions of identifying with entitative groups. Fromm's work will be discussed in relation to Hogg's recent work on uncertainty-identity theory. The aim of the article is to examine the advantages of combining Fromm's psychoanalytic analysis with Hogg's uncertainty-identity theory and to highlight the potential this approach has for understanding why groups engage in violent and destructive behaviour.

### Key words

Erich Fromm; uncertainty-identity theory; identity; violence

### Resumen

Este artículo se inspira en las primeras obras de Erich Fromm. En *El miedo a la libertad*, Fromm (1969 [1941]) abordó directamente los mecanismos psicológicos de evasión que los individuos modernos emplean para protegerse de los sentimientos de inseguridad ontológica y distanciamiento existencial. Este artículo se basa en el análisis de Fromm exponiendo el significado de sus mecanismos de evasión para entender las atracciones psicológicas dinámicas de identificación con grupos entitativos. Se analizará la obra de Fromm en relación con la obra reciente de Hogg sobre la teoría de incertidumbre identitaria. El objetivo del artículo es examinar las ventajas de combinar el análisis psicoanalítico de Fromm con la teoría de incertidumbre identitaria de Hogg, y destacar el potencial que tiene esta aproximación para comprender por qué los grupos adoptan un comportamiento violento y destructivo.

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**Palabras clave**

Erich Fromm; teoría de la incertidumbre identitaria; identidad; violencia

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## 1. Introduction

The question of why people may choose to surrender their individuality is fully addressed in the work of Erich Fromm (1969). Fromm was a prolific writer (e.g. 1949, 1959, 1964, 1973, 1976, 2008) who was concerned with authoritarianism, freedom and conformity throughout his work. These themes were addressed in detail in his first book *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1969) and much of his subsequent theoretical work directly built on these original insights. This article identifies the relevance of Fromm's psychoanalytic analysis of existential doubt and insecurity to Michael Hogg's (2007, 2014) social-psychological research on self-uncertainty and group identification. My intention is to show how Fromm's psychoanalytic theory can make an important contribution to Hogg's uncertainty-identity theory. Incorporating the insights of both approaches has the potential to address the complex motivations that lead people to identify with groups that engage in destructive, violent and anti-social behaviour.

## 2. Freedom, anxiety and modernity

*Escape from Freedom* (Fromm 1969), also published as *The Fear of Freedom* in the United Kingdom, analysed the interaction between psychological and sociological factors that allow people in modern society to be increasingly independent and critical, but at the same time to be more isolated and insecure. To understand why people have become increasingly anxious Fromm made a useful distinction between primary and secondary bonds. Primary bonds are the ties that existed in pre-modern society before the process of individuation. In pre-modern society peoples' sense of identity was clearly dictated by family membership, social role, birth order and place of birth. These unquestionable ties provided a strong sense of belonging. Fromm argues that people no longer live in a secure, familiar and closed social world. As a consequence people are now living with high levels of insecurity and experience deep feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty. *Escape from Freedom* provides a detailed analysis of how modern individuals search for new secondary bonds to replace the primary bonds that once provided a strong sense of ontological security.

The existential predicament Fromm describes in *Escape from Freedom* has been recognised by many writers, philosophers and social theorists. Existentialist philosophy directly confronts an array of dilemmas concerning responsibility, death, anxiety and freedom. Camus (1986), Heidegger (1962), Kierkegaard (1985), Ortega y Gasset (1962) and Sartre (1998) have all explored issues concerning existential doubt, uncertainty, absurdity and feelings of insignificance (see Cooper 1999 and Macquarrie 1980). An awareness of our freedom and the anxiety this awareness produces is vividly explored in Sartre's (1963, 1964) novels, plays (Sartre 1973a, 1990) and philosophy (Sartre 1973b, 1998). Sartre (1998) captured the subtle strategies people employ in an attempt to evade responsibility and escape their freedom (also see Hardie-Bick and Hadfield 2011). The burden of being fully responsible for our own actions and beliefs is often escaped in what Sartre terms 'bad faith' and demonstrates how people attempt to take refuge from the responsibilities of creating and defining their own values (Hardie-Bick 2011). This is why Sartre controversially argued that we are 'condemned to be free' (Sartre 1973b, p. 34).

There are further similarities that can be found in the work of Beck (1998, 1999), Giddens (1991, 1994) and Bauman (2000, 2001). These theorists have also addressed core existentialist themes concerning choice, freedom, anxiety and responsibility. This literature refers to how people must now precariously negotiate a range of possible options and possibilities rather than relying on traditional norms and expectations. The concept of individualisation is central to Beck's (1998) work on the risk society. The loss of tradition and the dissolution of previous social forms such as inflexible class positions and fixed gender roles means that peoples' life

course is now increasingly flexible and open (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996). Such reflexive, 'do-it-yourself' or 'tight-rope' biographies involve a proliferation of new demands and create increasing levels of insecurity and anxiety. Giddens and Bauman have written at length on de-traditionalisation and individualisation and reflected on how individuals are forced to constantly negotiate among a range of plausible options. In highly individualised modern societies people spend much of their time agonizing over the choices and possible goals available. As Bauman (2000) states, it is this sense of 'incompleteness' and 'underdetermination' that creates new forms of risk, insecurity and anxiety.

Despite the similarities that exist between Fromm, existentialist philosophy and modern social theorists such as Bauman, Beck and Giddens, Fromm argued that feelings of existential uncertainty and anxiety are not concerns that most people are consciously aware of. As Craib (1998) recognised, it is possible to 'think we are doing one thing, and we can actually be doing that thing, but we can also be doing something else, which we do not know about' (Craib 1998, p. 157). There are important aspects of our behaviour that escape our conscious awareness (also see Freud 1936, 1976, 1984, 2005, Jung 1961, Bollas 1989, Craib 1989, 1994, and Layder 1997) and this was precisely what Fromm aimed to identify and analyse. Fromm believed that some of the most powerful factors that motivate people to think, feel and act in particular ways may not even be acknowledged, let alone consciously understood. Like Sartre, Fromm investigated peoples' fears, plans, hopes and anxieties, but he did not believe that people are always aware of what motivates or drives them to behave in particular ways. According to Fromm, Sartre's discussion of bad-faith and self-deception failed to appreciate and incorporate the insights provided by psychoanalysis and dynamic psychology (see Sartre 1998, p. 47-70). Fromm argued that Sartre's rejection of unconscious processes meant that he could only provide a limited form of existential analysis. Fromm describes Sartre's philosophy as 'brilliant', but as he failed to appreciate Freud's (1936, 1976, 2005) insights concerning unconscious motivation, his work on human psychology could only ever remain 'shallow' and 'superficial' (Fromm in Evans 1966, p. 98-100). Fromm believed it is both possible and necessary to explore unconscious mental processes. This could be achieved by taking a psychodynamic approach:

Only a psychology which utilizes the concept of unconscious forces can penetrate the confusing rationalizations we are confronted with in analysing either an individual or a culture. A great number of apparently insoluble problems disappear at once if we decide to give up the notion that the motives by which people *believe* themselves to be motivated are necessarily the ones which actually drive them to act, feel and think as they do (Fromm 1969, p. 136).

As a practicing psychoanalyst, Fromm was able to develop his psychodynamic theory by analysing the dreams and phantasies of his patients during analysis. He argued that one of the main benefits of the psychoanalytic method is that researchers are able to explore the unconscious strategies people employ to overcome feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and insignificance.

### 3. Uncertainty-identity theory

Similar themes concerning modernity, uncertainty and identity have been addressed by the recent work of Michael Hogg. Hogg's social psychological research has explored issues in relation to leadership, self-categorisation, ideology and extremism (e.g. Hogg 2001, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2014). Hogg's uncertainty-identity theory is influenced by Tajfel's (1969) research on social categorisation and prejudice. Tajfel emphasised the importance of understanding the social context of intergroup behaviour. Rather than focusing on interpersonal processes, he argued that discrimination is produced by intergroup conflict and created by the behaviour of those who strongly identify with their own distinct group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Hogg developed uncertainty-identity theory to provide a more detailed

understanding of the social identity processes that motivate people to identify with groups. Whilst his initial research specifically focused on feelings of uncertainty, motivation and group identification, the empirical focus of uncertainty-identity theory now incorporates a wide range of issues in relation to the social structure, attachment and membership of different groups (Hogg 2007).

There are two main arguments associated with uncertainty-identity theory. First of all, Hogg argues that feelings of uncertainty in relation to who one is and what one should believe motivates people to engage in behaviours that reduce uncertainty. Secondly, he states that the processes of categorising oneself, together with other people as members of a group, serves to reduce self-uncertainty and provide a validated social identity. The experience of having a stronger social identity reduces uncertainty by enhancing self-esteem and provides a framework for understanding how one should think and behave (Hogg 2014).

Uncertainty-identity theory focuses on how feelings of uncertainty in relation to the self can motivate people to identify with social groups in order to manage, protect and reinforce their previously uncertain sense of self. This theory rests on the assumption that feelings of uncertainty concerning attitudes, values, beliefs and feelings are uncomfortable. People will do their best to manage, avoid or significantly reduce these uncertainties. Hogg does acknowledge that some forms of uncertainty are challenging, exhilarating and enjoyable (see Lyng 1990, 1993, 1998, 2005). As Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1988, 2002) research with artists, climbers, athletes, composers and surgeons has demonstrated, there are many people who deliberately seek out challenging situations to test their own individual boundaries (also see Hardie-Bick 2015a). Whilst there are situations that are both pleasurable and uncertain, Hogg (2007) is making a broader existential argument. Uncertainty matters when feelings of uncertainty undermine our sense of self. He states that if people do not have the resources to deal with existential uncertainty they will tend to experience anxiety and uncertainty in relation to who they are and how they should behave. These issues are particularly salient during times of crisis such as unemployment or divorce:

We are particularly motivated to reduce uncertainty if, in a particular context, we feel uncertain about things that reflect on or are relevant to self, or if we are uncertain about self *per se*; about our identity, who we are, how we relate to others, and how we are socially located. Ultimately, people like to know who they are and how to behave and what to think, and who others are and how they might behave and what they might think (Hogg 2007, p. 73).

If individuals are unable to develop a strong sense of self-identity, which in turn helps to shield them from existential uncertainty, then certain experiences in life can be experienced as threatening, overwhelming and uncontrollable.

#### **4. Group identification and entitativity**

One of the most effective ways of combatting uncertainty is by identifying with a group. As research on identity-politics has shown, people can strongly identify with the 'we'/'they' demarcations of their chosen in-group in return for a strong sense of empowerment and belonging (Hetherington 1998, Croucher 2004, Bernstein 2005, Delanty *et al.* 2008, Casey 2014, Eschle 2014). The way people articulate their identity can provide a powerful sense of community and resistance (see Elliott 2014). Nevertheless, as Sen (2006) and Young (2007) have argued, the way people express their identity can also lead to extreme forms of violence and conflict. Sen's (2006) notion of 'singular affiliation' is particularly relevant to debates concerning identity and violence. Having a singular affiliation describes those who identify with their in-group to such an extent that they ignore all other affiliations and loyalties (also see Glover 2000). Not only is this widespread assumption 'deeply delusive' but such loyalty can 'also contribute to social tension and violence' (Sen 2006, p. 21).

Despite living with increasing possibilities concerning human flexibility and biographical reinvention, people still desire a firm sense of identity and belonging. This, Young (2007) suggests, is the paradox of identity. Even though peoples' sense of self-identity has been disembedded from the constraints of tradition and culture, people continue to seek out stability to protect themselves from experiencing uncomfortable feelings of insecurity, meaninglessness and self-uncertainty. Raising similar concerns to Sen (2006), Young argues that the sense of belonging provided by a rigidly defined identity is 'constituted by negativity' and 'inevitably accompanied' by the demonization and 'denigration of the other' (Young 2007, p. 141). Hogg's research on uncertainty-identity theory makes an important contribution to these ideas. His theory helps to elucidate the popularity of over-identification by specifically focusing on the psychological attractions of creating and reinforcing a firm sense of 'them' and 'us'. Hogg's research explains how the process of categorising others as either in-group or out-group members provides individuals with clear guidelines concerning who they are, how they should think, what they should feel and who they should aspire to be (see Hogg 2007). These guidelines can be seen as providing a powerful antidote to the existential uncertainties experienced in late modern society.

Uncertainty-identity theory maintains that self-uncertainty is significantly reduced by strongly identifying with groups. Hogg recognises that not all groups are capable of reducing self-related uncertainty. Drawing on Campbell's (1958) work on entitativity, Hogg makes a distinction between low and high entitativity groups. Entitativity refers to the extent a group is perceived of as an entity and describes groups that share particular interests, perceptions, beliefs and values. Loosely structured low-entitativity groups have unclear internal structures whereas high-entitativity groups are organised, structured, hierarchical, cohesive and distinctive. Research has shown that those identified as belonging to entitative groups are often viewed as sharing psychological characteristics and that 'observable markers of entitativity' may result in 'negative judgements of social groups' even though perceivers have 'little other information about them' (Dasgupta *et al.* 1999, p. 998). This distinction between high and low entitativity groups has influenced researchers to explore the social and psychological attractions of self-identifying with groups perceived as a cohesive and unified entity.

Hogg argues that entitative groups are most equipped to reduce uncertainty as they are unambiguous, well structured, have clear boundaries, common goals and distinctive group attributes. Members of entitative groups have a strong affiliation with the group and share similar interests and values (Dasgupta *et al.* 1999, Lickel *et al.* 2000, Wood 2014). This claim is supported by empirical studies that reveal the relationship between uncertainty and group identification (see Grieve and Hogg 1999, Hogg 2012). Cottee and Hayward's (2011) insightful research on terrorism provides a clear example concerning the existential attractions of belonging to high-entitative groups. Together with the desire for excitement, adventure and feelings of heroism, there are other existential frustrations that motivate people to engage in violent terrorist acts. As the authors note, terrorism should be understood as both an existential *and* political problem. Embracing a guerrilla or insurgent identity is a 'life-mode' or 'way of being' that provides a sense of meaning and purpose. Terrorist organisations provide recruits with all embracing existential narratives that explain how the world works, who the enemy is, who they have to defend, who their comrades are, what they should believe in and what they should be willing to die for. Understanding how terrorist groups offer a strong sense of identity, meaning and solidarity for their recruits 'may well be part of what motivates people to join them' (Cottee and Hayward 2011, p. 973).

Research on street gangs further illustrates the relationship between self-uncertainty and group affiliation. A gang refers to a group of 'recurrently associating individuals with identifiable leadership' who identify with or claim 'control over territory on a community, and engages in violent or other forms of



illegal behavior' (Goldman *et al.* 2014, p. 814). Whilst there has been important sociological, criminological and anthropological research on gangs (Whyte 1943, Cohen 1955, Miller 1958, Bourgois 2003, Venkatesh 2009, Klein *et al.* 2006, Papachristos *et al.* 2013), it is interesting to note that social psychological research on the social processes of gang dynamics is surprisingly limited (Goldman *et al.* 2014, Wood 2014). Rather than focusing on social disorganisation (Thrasher 1927) cultural deviance (Cureton 2002) or street capital (Harding 2014), Goldman *et al.* (2014) make an important contribution to the research literature by specifically examining the significance of social identity processes that motivate people to join a gang and adopt a new social identity. Whereas some individuals do continue to be involved with gangs throughout their lives, the focus of their research directly addresses the social psychological processes that initially attract young people to join gangs and participate in anti-social and often violent behaviour.

They identify two of the most significant explanations for the attractions of gang membership. First of all, they claim that young people are attracted to join gangs for social reasons. For example, they may have a friend or a family member who is already involved with a gang. Secondly, they suggest that many youth believe they will be protected and feel safer if they join a gang. Although research demonstrates that gang affiliation increases the likelihood of being the victim of violent crime (Peterson *et al.* 2004), and despite people knowing about the risks involved in gang activity (Howell and Egley 2005), it is often assumed that being affiliated with a gang will provide members with protection and a sense of security (Venkatesh 2009, Wood 2014).

Goldman *et al.* (2014) provide a detailed analysis of the social psychological processes that motivate gang members to actively engage in dangerous and illegal activities. Their central premise is that gangs 'are very much about social identity processes, and that communication as an identity construction, projection, and management process plays a central role in gang dynamics' (Goldman *et al.* 2014, p. 815). Drawing on a range of contemporary research on gangs (e.g. Decker and Curry 2002, Bourgois 2003, Alonso 2004, Peterson *et al.* 2004, Del Carmen *et al.* 2009, Alleyne and Wood 2010, Bliss-Holtz 2011, Hennigan and Spanovic 2011) Goldman *et al.* (2014) discuss how gangs are high-entitative groups that provide members with a sense of belonging, feelings of power and offer the chance to improve their social status. They suggest that gangs can serve to reduce the existential uncertainties that accompany social exclusion and marginalisation (also see Hogg 2014). Gang members often have to live with the inherent dangers that accompany gang life, but extreme violence 'may seem a small cost for the benefit of inclusion and a sense of belonging' the gang provides (Goldman *et al.* 2014, p. 822). As Hogg (2007) argues, having the chance to live with a rigidly defined sense of identity is especially appealing for individuals who experience high levels of uncertainty and insecurity.

## 5. The fear of uncertainty

Hogg argues that entitative groups are ideally suited to uncertainty reduction. In relation to the question of *why* people try to reduce feelings of uncertainty, Hogg (2007) constructs a similar argument to Fromm. Drawing on Dunn's (1998) work on identity and the postmodern paradox, he notes that certainties and absolutes offered by ideologies have become especially appealing in a world of moral and behavioural relativism. He cites Baumeister's (1987) work on identity and cultural change to show how social relations are no longer fixed and stable as they were in pre-modern society. As Baumeister states, individuals now have to constantly make choices, even though 'there are no clear rules for choosing' (Baumeister 1986, p. 25). Hogg is arguing that prescribed group memberships and social relations have become increasingly fluid. We are now living in a far more individualistic society:

By the 1950s, these stable identities had been almost entirely replaced by a more atomistic individual-orientated status society....producing the postmodern paradox in which people with today's less structured self yearn for community and the collective affiliations of times past (Hogg 2007, p. 93-94).

As I have shown, the argument that modernity increases uncertainty has been put forward by many social theorists and is central to Fromm's argument in *Escape from Freedom*. Hogg (2007) references Fromm's (1949) *Man for Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* during his discussion of uncertainty and motivation, but it is important to recognise that this was published after *Escape from Freedom*. In his forward to *Man for Himself* Fromm explains how his current focus on ethics, values and human potential is a continuation of the themes addressed in *Escape from Freedom*. Fromm's earlier work is especially relevant to Hogg's research as this is where he specifically examined a range of issues in relation to insecurity and self-uncertainty. Fromm's insightful analysis shows how individuals may prefer to escape personal responsibility and resolve self-uncertainty by strongly identifying with something or someone who is conceived as being powerful. The strategies Fromm identified will now be explored in greater depth.

## 6. Mechanisms of escape

Fromm focuses on two strategies used to escape uncertainty in modern societies. Authoritarianism is the first escape route Fromm (1969) identified. This involves submitting to a charismatic leader and is the mechanism of escape that captured the psychological attractions of fascism. Automaton conformity is the other main escape route and involves uncritically conforming to group norms and behaviour. This route specifically refers to the compulsive conformity common in modern democracies. Both mechanisms of escape provide a sense of security and stability and help to alleviate feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and isolation. This section concentrates on Fromm's analysis of authoritarianism, the escape route that captures most of Fromm's attention in *Escape from Freedom*. The following section on loyalty and violence discusses both authoritarianism and automaton conformity in relation to empirical research on gang affiliation. Both of these escape routes resonate with themes addressed in the uncertainty-identity literature.

Authoritarianism describes how individuals give up the independence of their individual self and fuse their self with somebody or something to acquire the strength the individual is lacking. The most distinct forms of this mechanism are found in the striving for submission (masochism) and domination (sadism). Masochistic strivings refer to feelings of inferiority, powerlessness and insignificance whereas sadistic strivings involve the desire to have control, to feel superior and to physically and mentally hurt other people. Fromm notes that both trends often exist side by side in the same individuals.

The aim of masochism is to lose the self and to eliminate the burden of confronting existential doubts and uncertainties. This individual therefore seeks to submit to someone or something they feel to be overwhelmingly strong. The individual self is annihilated and replaced by participating and identifying in something outside of oneself:

One surrenders one's own self and renounces all strength and pride connected with it, one loses one's integrity as an individual and surrenders freedom; but one gains a new security and a new pride in the participation in the power in which one submerges. One gains also security against the torture of doubt... The meaning of his life and the identity of his self are determined by the greater whole into which the self has submerged (Fromm 1969, p. 154-155).

The aim of sadism initially appears to be very different from that of the masochist. The sadist aims to have complete control over another person and to inflict physical or emotional pain. To understand the attractions of sadism Fromm explains that it is necessary to separate sadism from what can be regarded as destructive

behaviour. Whilst destructiveness and sadism are often interlinked, Fromm argues there are important differences. Like sadism, destructive behaviour is caused by individuals who are struggling with deep feelings of existential isolation and powerlessness. One way to resist feelings of powerlessness is by engaging in destructive behaviour:

I can escape the feeling of my own powerlessness in comparison with the world outside of myself by destroying it. To be sure, if I succeed in removing it, I remain alone and isolated, but mine is a splendid isolation in which I cannot be crushed by the overwhelming power of the objects outside of myself. The destruction of the world is the last, almost desperate attempt to save myself from being crushed by it (Fromm 1969, p. 177).

Fromm explains how destructiveness aims to completely destroy the object in an attempt to overcome deep feelings of powerlessness and insecurity. This is very different to the aims of a sadist. Rather than seeking to obliterate the object, the aim of sadism is to incorporate and control. Fromm provides a poignant example to illustrate this relationship of dependence and control:

The sadist needs the person over whom he rules, he needs him very badly, since his own feeling of strength is rooted in the fact that he is the master over someone. This dependence may be entirely unconscious. Thus, for example, a man may treat his wife very sadistically and tell her repeatedly that she can leave the house any day and that he would be only too glad if she did. Often she will be so crushed that she will not dare to make an attempt to leave, and therefore they both will continue to believe that what he says is true. But if she musters up enough courage to declare that she will leave him, something quite unexpected to both of them may happen: he will become desperate, break down, and beg her not to leave him; he will say he cannot live without her, and will declare how much he loves her and so on. Usually, being afraid of asserting herself anyhow, she will be prone to believe him, change her decision and stay. At this point the play starts again. He resumes his old behaviour, she finds it increasingly difficult to stay with him, explodes again, he breaks down again, she stays, and so on and on many times (Fromm 1969, p. 144).

The masochists desire to submit to something or someone stronger is clear, but, as the above example demonstrates, the sadist is equally dependent on the object of their sadism. The sadist does not attempt to destroy their object. The masochist depends on the sadist just as the sadist relies on the masochist, and it is this often neglected relationship that Fromm draws attention to. The aim of both sadism and masochism is symbiosis. Actively dominating, controlling and manipulating others may appear to be the opposite of the masochistic tendency, but psychologically Fromm argues they both arise from an inability to stand the isolation and weakness of their own self. Masochistic and sadistic trends blend together as individuals can submit themselves to a larger power, and at the same time, this larger power provides the strength and status their individual self previously lacked.

## 7. Identity, loyalty and violence

The sadomasochistic tendencies Fromm identified capture some of the psychological attractions of identifying with entitative groups. As research (Goldman *et al.* 2014, Wood 2014) on gang affiliation has shown, gang membership creates in-group identities that shape how they perceive people both inside and outside their group. Joining a gang is seen as providing members with protection, loyalty and a strong sense of identity, an identity that promotes a sense of 'them' and 'us' and justifies the use of violence (Papachristos *et al.* 2013). Stretesky and Pogrebin's (2007) research on gang-related gun violence provides a useful example how gang socialisation shapes members identity and sense of self. Drawing on data from interviews with inmates convicted of gang related gun violence, their research shows that identification, commitment and loyalty are a vital part of gang life. Loyalty may involve participating in a drive-by shooting or physically attacking a rival gang member. Their interviewees stated they were willing to risk being killed

and were willing to kill rival gang members. Any members of a rival gang are seen as justified targets. Here one of their informants is reflecting on drive-by shootings:

It didn't matter who you were. We didn't go after a specific person. We went after a specific group. Whoever is standing at a particular house or wherever you may be, and you're grouped up and have the wrong color on; just because you're in a rival gang. You didn't have to do anything to us to come get you, it was a spontaneous reaction (Stretesy and Pogrebin 2007, p. 106).

Their informants repeatedly claimed that loyal gang members were willing to kill and to risk being killed. The gang is worth dying for:

That's how it is in the hood, selling dope, gang bangin', everybody wants a piece of you. All the rival gang members, all the cops, everybody. The only ones on your side are the gang members you hang with (Stretesy and Pogrebin 2007, p. 98).

Violence against other gangs was often discussed by their participants. Garot's (2007) research on gang identity also highlights sadomasochistic trends. This research, based on participant observation and qualitative interviews, assessed the relevance of gang identity. His research examined the interaction ritual involved when a member of a gang approaches someone on the street and demands '*Where you from*'. This is described as being 'hit up' and having the wrong identity markers such clothes or tattoos often instigates this type of interaction:

In the inner-city setting of this study, to be banged on, sweated, or hit up literally means that one young person approaches another on a street, or in a park, school, flea market, or other public place, and in the local vernacular, tells (not asks) the other, 'Where you from.' Anyone who lives in the locale of this study knows that the instigator is demanding to know the respondent's gang affiliation (Garot 2007, p. 55).

Why someone is hit-up depends on how known they are in the area, the local gang boundaries and the clothes they are wearing. Earnest, one of Garot's respondents, describes how he was attacked for wearing the wrong clothes:

They put mace in my eyes...It was two guys, they came up to me and then they just told me, 'Where you from, homie?' I said, 'Nahh man, I don't gangbang.' 'Why you dressed like that?' 'Cause I want to, man.' They just took out like a little black bottle man and sprayed it in my eyes (Garot 2007, p. 64).

Shawn, another respondent in Garot's research, faced similar problems when he moved to a different neighbourhood. Shawn was affiliated with a gang known for wearing blue. He moved to an area where gang members are known for wearing red. Shawn describes his experience of walking down the street after moving:

I knew there was gonna be some trouble now, cause they had on red...There were four or five of them. So he walked up to me, he was like, 'Blood, where you from'? I say, 'I don't bang.' He was like, 'You look like you bang to me, you havin' all that flu,' which is blue. And uh, I was like, 'Nah man, I don't bang.'... He was like, 'I don't know but it seem like you bangin' to the fullest.' And so his homeboy took a swing at me (Garot 2007, p. 64).

As the author notes, demanding '*Where you from*' is a resource for performing identity, upholding gang boundaries and maintaining group antagonism. Not only can entitativity shape the attitudes and behaviour of the group, but such findings demonstrate how entitative groups are very capable of engaging in threatening, hateful and violent behaviour against those perceived to be outsiders (Dasgupta *et al.* 1999). In addition to this, the above quotations highlight the relevance of the other main escape route identified by Fromm. Automaton conformity, also referred to as covert authoritarianism (see Evans 1966), describes how people willingly accept and uncritically conform to group norms and behaviour. Fromm believed this escape route to be particularly relevant in modern democracies where people have become cogs in large bureaucratic machines:

To put it briefly, the individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be (Fromm 1969, p. 184).

Fromm describes how thoughts and feelings can be unconsciously influenced by external pressures. The insecure self seeks meaning, reassurance and validation by conforming to group expectations and by looking for the continuous approval of others. Again, this is relevant for understanding gang dynamics. Gang members conform to and internalise the beliefs and values of the gang and display their membership by adopting particular language, wearing certain clothes and displaying other external symbols of membership such as hand signals and tattoos (Klein *et al.* 2006). As Garot (2007) noted in his research, individuals make and challenge claims to a unique identity based on these socially recognised categories. Conforming to these values and maintaining the right identifying features demonstrates membership and maintains the boundaries of the gang. Gang members are likely to actively embrace the gang's social norms and accept the in-group and out-group biases in order to be accepted. Such acceptance creates 'them' and 'us' categories, provides a firm sense of belonging and offers a more secure social identity.

Fromm's work on both sadomasochistic trends and conformity provide important insights for understanding identity, gangs and violence. Although Fromm himself felt that authoritarianism would gradually be replaced by automaton conformity (see Evans 1966), his analysis of both symbiotic sadomasochistic bonds and conformity remain relevant for understanding of how individuals adapt to living in highly individualistic societies with high levels of income disparity and inequality. Without a sense of security and belonging, people often seek connection through symbiotic bonds that provide a sense of identity and self-esteem. Identifying with a gang allows individuals to submit themselves to a group they feel is overwhelmingly strong (Knox 1994). They are able to sacrifice their own individuality by willingly accepting and internalising the beliefs, values and attitudes expected from them as committed members of the gang (Klein and Maxton 2006, Wood 2014). At the same time, by submitting themselves to the gang they also feel stronger and superior to others. Members strongly identify with the gang and often feel justified killing or attacking others who do not share their identity. These masochistic and sadistic trends that Fromm originally identified, together with the conformity required of gang members to show their commitment and loyalty to the gang, are escape routes that provide a sense of belonging and security.

Fromm's psychodynamic approach attempts to identify the unconscious factors that motivate people to think and behave in particular ways. As I have previously mentioned, Hogg does not engage with Fromm's work on escaping uncertainty, but he does note certain similarities between uncertainty-identity theory and terror management theory (Hogg 2007). Like Fromm's work on existential estrangement, terror management researchers also highlight the importance of unconscious factors for understanding fear, anxiety and human motivation. The next section provides an overview of this research and examines Hogg's argument in relation to the similarities between terror management and uncertainty-identity theory together with his criticism of their research.

## 8. Unconscious defences

Influenced by the work of Ernest Becker, terror management theory investigates the pervasive role that mortality awareness has on everyday behaviour. Taking an interdisciplinary approach to examine what motivates people to 'act the way they do' (Becker 1971, p. vii), Becker argued that the root cause of human activity stems from the unconscious strategies people use to deny or symbolically transcend death (see Hardie-Bick 2012, 2015b, Lippens 2015). In *The Denial of Death* (Becker 1997) and *Escape from Evil* (Becker 1975) he directly addressed the

often devastating implications that arise from our awareness of our 'individuality within finitude' (Becker, 1997, p. 26). As far as we are aware, human beings are the only animal who have to cope with the knowledge that they live in a body that will eventually die. This is the existential predicament that humans have to struggle with and his work specifically addresses how people protect themselves from the terror of their 'inevitable death' (Becker 2005, p. 219). Inspired by Becker's work on mortality awareness, terror management theory has carried out numerous social psychological experiments that support Becker's initial theory (Greenberg *et al.* 1986, Solomon *et al.* 1991, 1998, Pyszczynski *et al.* 2003). Terror management theory identifies two main defences that people employ to protect themselves in order to cope with their knowledge of their own impending death. Proximal defences refer to how people will try to distract themselves from thinking about death and 'push the problem of death into the distant future'. Proximal defences describes how people manage to live with the knowledge of their own death by immersing themselves in everyday routines and projects (also see Bauman 1992). Distal defences are rather different as they do not 'have any logical or semantic relation to the problem of death' (Solomon *et al.* 2015, p. 171). Distal defences are unconscious defences that allow people to believe they will 'endure in some literal or symbolic form' after they have died (Solomon *et al.* 2015, p. 171). People can therefore believe in a world of meaning and feel they have made a positive and significant contribution to upholding their cultural worldview. Both the proximal and distal defences work together. When someone has a direct reminder of their mortality, perhaps by the tragic death of a loved one or a close friend, proximal defences are at work. However, it is the distal unconscious defences that ensure consciousness is not continuously flooded by thoughts about death and dying. By believing we can make an important contribution to 'a meaningful cultural scheme' the distal defences ensure that 'we are not preoccupied with our ultimate fate beyond what our proximal distractions can handle' (Solomon *et al.* 2015, p. 172).

The core proposition of terror management theory is that people need to live in a world of meaning and believe they are valued contributors to their shared cultural worldview. Living with a sense of meaning and value can be understood as the 'twin shields against the fear of extinction' (Solomon *et al.* 2015, p. 189) and an impressive amount of creative social psychological experiments have now been carried out to test their theory (Rosenblatt *et al.* 1989, Arndt *et al.* 1997, Florian and Mikulincer 1997, Harmon-Jones *et al.* 1997, Dechesne *et al.* 2000, Greenberg *et al.* 2001). Experiments on mortality salience require an experimental group to consider and reflect on their own death before making judgements about people who either support or undermine and challenge their cultural worldview. For example, the first study addressing mortality salience involved twenty two municipal court judges in Tucson, Arizona (Rosenblatt *et al.* 1989). The judges completed personality questionnaires and believed they were participating in a study investigating their personality traits, attitudes and bond decisions. In addition to the personality questionnaire, eleven of the twenty two judges were provided with a Mortality Awareness Personality Survey that included the following two questions: 'Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you' and 'Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen when you die and once you are dead' (Solomon *et al.* 2015, p. 12). The remaining eleven judges served as the control group as they were only required to complete the personality questionnaire.

Once the judges had completed the questionnaires the next part of the research involved considering a mock legal case involving a twenty-five year old female sex worker named Carol Ann Dennis. This particular example was used by the researchers as sex work typically challenges and 'violates important moral convictions of the average citizen in our culture' (Solomon *et al.* 1998, p. 27):

According to the report, Dennis was handcuffed and helped into the back of the police car. She was then carted off to the city jail and charged with soliciting for

acts of prostitution. Because she couldn't verify a permanent address, she was waiting to be released on bond (Solomon *et al.* 2015, p. 11).

After reading the hypothetical report, the judges were asked to determine what bond they would set for Dennis. The average bond set by the Judges in the control group was \$50, whereas the judges who completed the mortality survey set an average bond of \$455. Even though participants did not report feeling upset or anxious about their own mortality, the findings show that reminders of mortality unconsciously 'provokes more vigorous reactions to moral transgressors' (Solomon *et al.* 1998, p. 27). Since this initial research over five hundred studies with numerous age groups and nationalities have supported their initial findings concerning mortality salience and how worldviews serve to protect people from the terror of death. Multiple research experiments empirically demonstrate that when people are reminded of their own death, they criticise and punish 'those who oppose or violate' their worldview and reward and praise 'those who support or uphold' their cultural beliefs (Solomon *et al.* 2015, p. 14). Terror management theory therefore lends support for Becker's claim concerning the unconscious role of mortality awareness in our everyday affairs.

Terror management theory is influenced by the work of Becker, but it is interesting to note that Becker himself was influenced by Fromm. Although Becker came to be critical of Fromm's optimism concerning human potential, he was a 'great admirer' of Fromm and shared Fromm's concern with themes of existential isolation and anxiety (see Becker 2005). Both theorists devoted their work to understanding unconscious factors that influence our beliefs, values, thoughts and behaviour. In relation to terror management theory, Hogg acknowledges how their research shows mortality salience to 'increase affiliation and belongingness needs' together with 'group and worldview protective behaviours' (Hogg 2007, p. 109). Nevertheless, whilst recognising the importance of terror management research he also claims that existential anxiety is a 'messy variable':

It certainly involves anxiety about death, but also a significant degree of uncertainty about one's own death and, perhaps most importantly, about what there is after death, the afterlife. Not surprisingly, mortality salience has been shown to increase people's desire for certainty (Hogg 2007, p. 109).

In addition to studies (Landau *et al.* 2004, van den Bos 2001) that have shown mortality salience to increase the need for certainty, Hogg claims that research on low state uncertainty (Dechesne *et al.* 2000, Jost *et al.* 2004) 'has been shown to reduce the impact of mortality salience' (Hogg 2007, p. 109). Taking these findings into account, he concludes that terror management research can be understood as supporting uncertainty-identity theory's claim concerning group identification and existential uncertainty. Hogg's criticism that existential anxiety is a 'messing variable' may have some merit, but his discussion of terror management theory overlooks a significant achievement of their research. He summarises their main contribution as follows:

The key point is that existential anxiety, fear of death, motivates affiliation and other behaviours aimed at buffering this anxiety. One way in which people can buffer existential anxiety and create symbolic immortality is by constructing, adhering to, and protecting a cultural worldview (cf. ideology) that provides them with a sense of order, stability, and predictability (Hogg 2007, p. 108).

What is lacking from Hogg's discussion is an appreciation of how terror management research has shown unconscious processes to impact on everyday thoughts and behaviour. Even though the participants in terror management research may claim not to be overly concerned about death, researchers found that 'subtle, and even subliminal, reminders of death increase devotion to one's cultural scheme of things' and 'amplify our disdain toward people who do not share our beliefs even to the point of taking solace in their demise' (Solomon *et al.* 2015, p. 211). Identifying the powerful influence of our unconscious minds is a significant

achievement of terror management research and their approach has the potential to generate new avenues of enquiry for uncertainty-identity researchers. As Fromm recognised, people are not necessarily aware of why they behave in particular ways. Fromm believed that people are usually unaware of their existential uncertainty and the strategies employed to achieve and protect a secure sense of self. Hogg's criticism of terror management research implies that it is possible for individuals to be unconsciously motivated to reduce feelings of uncertainty. Exploring this unconscious dimension has the potential to expand the research findings on uncertainty-identity theory and Fromm's theoretical insights have much to offer researchers who decide to take this approach.

## 9. Conclusion

Fromm's work on the different mechanisms of escape people employ to reduce uncertainty provides valuable insights in relation to insecurity and identity. Although often overlooked, Fromm pioneered an approach that aimed to understand the unconscious psychological processes that lead people to engage in destructive behaviour. Fromm's analysis of how individuals escape from or attempt to resolve self-uncertainty has the potential to make an important contribution to uncertainty-identity theory. As I have shown, there are many similarities. Both Fromm and uncertainty-identity theory have addressed the psychological and sociological factors that motivate people to escape uncertainty and both approaches have examined the strategies people employ to experience a sense of security and belonging. The work of both Fromm and Hogg can be seen as providing a cautionary note to the literature on identity-politics. Research on issues including sexual orientation, ethnicity, environmentalism and anti-globalisation often concentrate on the positive consequences of constructing a shared sense of collective identity (see Elliott 2014). This literature highlights how a collective sense of 'we-ness' allows people to feel united in their struggle against social prejudice and intolerance (Croucher 2004, Eschle 2014). Rather than focusing on constructive identity work, Fromm and Hogg are directly addressing the negative side of this process. Forging a rigid and firm sense of 'us' and 'them' may create feelings of solidarity, but their research has shown how this process can also lead to extreme forms of violence and hatred. As I have discussed, creating a firm sense of belonging can also lead to the denigration, humiliation and dehumanisation of others who do not share their own in-group identity.

There are important differences between Fromm and Hogg concerning the relationship between identity and existential uncertainty. Fromm's psychoanalytic method aimed to look beyond people's conscious beliefs, intentions and rationalisations. Central to his approach is the idea that unconscious psychological forces can motivate people to escape from existential doubt and uncertainty. These ideas are further explored in terror management theory. Inspired by the work of Becker (1997), terror management theorists also believe that our thoughts, beliefs, intentions and values are often influenced by unconscious forces and their experiments have highlighted the role of the unconscious in everyday life. Despite initial scepticism concerning their claims of the role of death in life (see Solomon *et al.* 2015), an extensive amount of research now supports their theory concerning mortality awareness. Terror management research has attracted much attention from social scientists, and Hogg has suggested their findings support 'the more general principles of uncertainty reduction through group identification as specified by uncertainty-identity theory' (Hogg 2007, p. 109). Whilst Hogg does not fully explore the unconscious dimension of terror management research, adopting an approach that takes into account unconscious motivation has the potential to open up new possibilities for uncertainty-identity theorists.

Hogg (2007) makes a distinction between epistemic and affective dimensions of uncertainty. This is the difference between knowing that you are uncertain about something, and feeling that you are uncertain. Feeling uncertain can be unfocused



and unlike epistemic uncertainty, we may not know exactly what is causing feelings of uncertainty. Fromm's psychodynamic approach makes a contribution to this literature by considering unconscious motivations. In addition to epistemic and affective dimensions, there are occasions when people are completely unaware of feeling uncertain and insecure. As Fromm states, the motivating forces that drive people to engage in masochistic and sadistic behaviour and conform to the expectations of others are often entirely unconscious. These sadomasochistic trends can be found when human needs of belonging and autonomy are neglected. Incorporating Fromm's sociological and psychoanalytic insights together with the findings of uncertainty-identity theory provides a detailed theoretical analysis concerning the attractions of belonging to entitative groups. Combining the epistemic, affective and unconscious motivations people have to experience a secure sense of belonging has the potential to enhance a critical understanding of a range of destructive and violent behaviour.

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