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## Existential Considerations to Disrupt Rigid Thinking in Social Studies Classrooms

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## Existential Considerations to Disrupt Rigid Thinking in Social Studies Classrooms

*Nicholas Jacobs, Cathryn van Kessel, & Bretton A. Varga*

### **Abstract**

This article engages with both terror management theory (TMT) and Carl Jung's notion of the shadow to explore why and how students and teachers can exhibit rigid thinking in social studies classrooms when perspectives divergent from their own are presented. Emerging from research interested in exploring preservice teachers' implementation of TMT in their classrooms, this work offers one approach for a radical contextualization of the emotionality of learning to understand opportunities, challenges, and experiences of affectively difficult moments within social studies' classrooms. After offering a theoretical framework through which to approach the data from our research, we use this lens to understand how and why defensive compensatory reactions might emerge within the classroom. We then explore how these reactions potentially relate to hostility, before investigating how educators might help students illuminate such threat and defense cycles and therefore disrupt potential rigid polarization. The paper concludes by offering implications towards further thought surrounding the mitigating of defensive reactions in the classroom.

*Keywords:* Terror management theory, shadow, social studies, teacher education, difficult knowledge

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## Introduction

*As a lesson that engages with the harmful legacies of Indian Residential Schools in Canada' unfolds, students' eyes roll and heads are lowered to their desks. A hand goes up: 'Why are WE learning this? This has nothing to do with ME.' Murmurs ripple through the class: some students are visibly uncomfortable, some try to make themselves invisible, and others look appalled. The preservice teacher freezes: 'How did this happen? What do I do now'?*

As educators, we need a variety of emotional as well as cognitive tools to discuss affectively 'difficult' knowledge (Britzman, 1998, 2013) and contentious topics and issues (Li-Chung Ho, 2017). In order to add to these areas of inquiry, the focus of this paper is to engage theoretically with un-considered approaches seeking to better understand teacher/student rigidity within the context of engaging with divergent perspectives. Rather than falling into the trap of assuming that students resist only because they have an individual moral flaw, the authors invite readers of this paper to (re)think deeply about the unconscious factors in play. Our radical contextualization bridges experimental social psychology, analytical psychology, and psychoanalytic theory and puts this approach in conversation with the experiences of social studies preservice teachers. Resistance to multiple perspectives can be explained, in part, by *terror management theory* (TMT), which is based on the work of Ernest Becker (1973, 1975), as well as Carl Jung's understanding of the *shadow* (Jung, 1959/1969a, 1959/1969b; von Franz, 1978/1980).

According to TMT, humans have suppressed the knowledge of their own mortality in order to effectively engage/navigate/survive in a multifaceted society, and one of our coping mechanisms is to rigidly adhere to our worldview (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015). From an analytical psychology perspective, unconscious structures of the psyche help to suppress or defend against such death awareness, leading to the unintended consequences of projecting and perceiving evil in the external world that humans might be failing to acknowledge within themselves (Jung, 1959/1969a, 1959/1969b; von Franz, 1978/1980; Corbett, 2018). Despite the distinct differences between the theoretical underpinnings of TMT and Jung's notion of the shadow, as authors we feel that this philosophical amalgamate could be considered a radical approach when applied to social studies education by offering a complex, existential framework from which preservice teachers may begin to consider the (radical) context of worldview rigidity.

As evident from participants in prior studies, students (particularly those from conservative backgrounds) can resist topics that unsettle their sense of reality and self-esteem (e.g., exposing the myth of meritocracy), like racism (Bolgatz, 2005; Harlow, 2009; Kleinman, Copp, & Sandstrom, 2006; Kumashiro, 2002; Tatum, 1992). Further, some teachers are wary about commenting on contemporary issues like xenophobia (Hostetler & Neel, 2018), and these aversions to contentious topics

have been noted in countries not only in northern North America (United States and Canada) but also around the world, such as Taiwan (Misco & Tseng, 2018).

Although resistance to these topics can be obvious (e.g., agitated body language and/or words), it can also take the form of avoidance through claims of irrelevance to the other topics at hand (Neary, 2019). Resistance, in whatever form, entails that, '[t]eachers of such students may have to develop a third approach that is proactive in ensuring marginalized perspectives are shared... but careful to lay necessary groundwork so that all students are open to ideas that challenge their own' (Parkhouse & Massaro, 2019, p. 29). Given that theoretical and empirical research involving emotions is sparse in social studies (Sheppard, Katz, & Grosland, 2015), this project provides one (of many) possible emotionally-informed approaches to (re)frame thoughts, feelings, and behavioural responses that arise from aspects of historical content and contemporary topics of political and social consequence. TMT and Jung's notion of the shadow can help navigate the difficult terrain of worldview rigidity. Nevertheless, throughout all aspects of this inquiry, we—as researchers—remain mindful that our own subjectivities are irrevocably entangled with the application(s) of TMT and our own shadows. As such, we continue to grapple with the assorted ways our ethos/pathos (perpetually) (re)shape the existential coordinates of this work and the awareness of our own finitude. We remain optimistic that by leaning into the discomfort of these forces outside of our control and/or awareness, we will challenge readers to reflect upon their own sense of becoming within an existential context.

After outlining Becker and Jung's theoretical positioning(s), we will briefly survey some of the relevant scholarship on teaching difficult knowledge and contentious issues. We will then proceed by exploring examples shared by research participants through the theoretical lenses of Becker/TMT and Jung's conception of the shadow. It is our hope that these theoretical tools will traverse the current (and limited) terrains of teacher preparation relating to student engagements with complex and contentious (social) issues.

### **The Roots of Defensive Behavior**

The awareness of our existence comes alongside the awareness of our inevitable absence, resulting in an existential paradox: 'he [sic] is out of nature and hopelessly in it...he [sic] sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he [sic] goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever' (Becker, 1973, p. 26). Any evidence that extends our lives beyond our death, either literally or symbolically, therefore, eases the weight of any suggestion that humans are nothing more than a neatly packaged fleshy container of atoms. Psychically, an aspect of this paradox lives out within the un/conscious dimensions of our beings in that humans consciously strive towards all that they believe to be good, right, and proper, while an aspect of doing so involves a denial

of all that is ‘dark, shadowy, and imperfect’ resulting in ‘considerable tension between my drive toward perfection and my acceptance of my being, with its particular shadows and flaws’ (Jacoby, 1994, p. 105).

### ***Rigidity and Cultural Worldviews***

According to Becker (1975), evil is that which threatens our (i.e., humans’) sense of existential permanence. All organisms have a self-preservation instinct and thus they lash out against anything that threatens them. Because humans hold the capacity to anticipate death, we can fear death even in the absence of an immediate threat. To manage that anxiety, humans have to devise ways of ‘transcending the world of flesh and blood... by devising an ‘invisible project’ that would assure [our] immortality’ (Becker, 1975, p. 63). Humans can cultivate a variety of personal immortality projects to leave an enduring imprint on the world (e.g., having children, building monuments, accumulating academic citations): ‘The hope and belief is that the things that man [sic] creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count’ (Becker, 1973, p. 5). In addition to personalized attempts to thwart our finitude, we, as humans, also ground ourselves in powers borrowed from those beyond us: parents, social groups, societies, and nations. As such, we manage our existential anxiety through the construction of anxiety buffers, such as our cultural worldviews—humanly-created, shared, symbolic conceptions of reality that promote a sense of kinship/significance. Terror management theory (TMT; Pyszczynski et al., 2015) has added empirical support to Becker’s theories regarding the ways in which humans defend against the awareness of our inevitable end (e.g., Burke et al., 2010, p. 185).

Cultural worldviews, in particular, serve as a powerful form of protection from impermanence (Schimmel et al., 2007). Our ideologies and symbols will live on: ‘Societies can be seen as structures of immortality power’ (Becker, 1975, p. 63). Our worldview protects us from our existential fear both literally and symbolically. In a literal sense, our worldviews can relieve our anxieties about what happens to us after we die (e.g., an afterlife, reincarnation, redistribution of bodily atoms, etc.). Worldviews also provide us with symbolic immortality because when we are part of a culture, we are part of something larger than ourselves. To this point, the construction of everyone’s personal narrative (i.e., where we come from and what we wish to endure after us) can be largely informed by our place in the world and is an essential component of all teaching, learning, knowing, and be(coming). Although our worldview group(s) can provide us with beautiful relations, there is a terrifying aspect: A different worldview reminds us that ours might be arbitrary, and thus at least for a moment we lose our shield against our fears of impermanence. People can therefore ‘use one another to assure their personal victory over death’ (Becker, 1975, p. 108). Becker also talks about fetishi-

zation as localizing all of one's fear and anxiety into a single, manageable source. Humans often scapegoat marginalized groups (e.g., in conversations about undocumented migrants) but can fetishize any group as the embodiment of evil (e.g., the opposing political party) (as a result of constructs generated from our associated culture). Defensive behavior can be somewhat banal, such as decreased reading comprehension of worldview disconfirming information (Williams et al., 2012), but it can also be destructive (e.g., contributing to war and genocide).

### ***The Shadow***

Existing as an unconscious structure within the psyche, 'the shadow' has the capacity to hold psychic energy that the ego (the conscious aspect of one's psyche) is unaware of, or unable to acknowledge, within oneself (Jung, 1959/1969a, 1959/1969b). While it is important to acknowledge that although the shadow is neither good nor evil in itself (and that qualities considered to be both 'good' and 'evil' reside within it), for the purposes of this paper we will only be taking into consideration those aspects that might be understood as evil. The evil someone is readily able to see in others can therefore originate within their own capacities. This process occurs when the flaws perceived by an individual remain unacknowledged by the ego and instead are projected upon others. Projections protect the ego from having to acknowledge any form of evil within the psyche so that 'the conscious mind is then able to free itself from the fascination of evil and is no longer obliged to live it compulsively' (Jung, 1959/1969a, §477).

This theory proposed by Jung (1959/1969a, 1959/1969b) and further explored by von Franz (1978/1980) helps to understand how this might occur within systems in society—that a collective shadow exists among groups of individuals, effectively denying aspects of themselves and projecting them onto external groups that are then perceived as evil. The offending group then becomes the container for the shared projections of the group labeling them as the Other (Corbett, 2018). For example, witch-hunts involve a notion of negative group projection, inevitably leading to a sense of collective contagion. In this way, evil is created by being cast onto an opposing group, thus deflecting/mitigating culpability and accountability through the location and naming of evil in the other. In short, evil becomes comfortably located within the Other, and not us. In Canada, this process might take the form of (although rightfully) criticizing those in the United States for separating parents and children seeking asylum at the border, while denying the forcible separation of Indigenous children from their parents in Canada via Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and current 'child welfare' systems.

In simultaneous acknowledgement of both Becker/TMT and Jung, the naming and confrontation with one's own experience of worldview threat thus fosters nonconventional capacities towards the recollection of one's shadow projections—an experience rife with the potential for unease, yet ripe with opportunities

for personal growth. Therefore, a greater ability to identify/acknowledge such un/conscious processes in the classroom creates space for understanding political/social polarization and teaching of contentious issues, in the hope of decreasing intellectual rigidity toward opposing views.

### **Context of Rigid Thinking**

Rigid thinking can occur as a reaction when students and teachers are confronted by content they find troubling. ‘Controversial issues’ are defined by Li-Chung Ho et al. (2017) as being ‘topics into the curriculum that could be seen as inappropriate or objectionable by parents, administrators, or the larger public’ (p. 322). This framing is helpful when considering worldview threat and associated defensive compensatory actions (i.e., such issues are objectionable because they pose an existential threat) but at the same time, we posit that pedagogical/curricular modalities stigmatizes engagement with controversy. Recent research suggests that broaching controversial issues—such as divergent perspectives on governmental policies relating to social issues—is both problematic and challenging for teachers, especially during times of heightened political polarization (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Journell, 2017). Such polarization results in issues that have once been considered closed (e.g., the necessity of a wall separating borders, the absence of large-scale white supremacist ideologies) to move towards being considered once again. The process of moving back and forth between open and closed topics within the curriculum is understood by Hess (2009) as ‘tipping,’ and when such tipping occurs, a dangerous message is sent ‘that legitimizes the topic’ which is ‘culturally significant given the ways in which schools are reflective of society writ large’ (p. 113).

That which reinforces our worldview is a type of ‘lovely knowledge’ (Pitt & Britzman, 2003), and a form of difficult knowledge would be that which is worldview threatening. Our worldviews, created through the threat-and-defense cycles of our un/conscious awareness of our mortality, make knowledge easier to create and perpetuate. Humans can hook into the world through the lens of our own perspectives and grab tightly onto the ‘lovely knowledge’ that fits within our ever-reinforcing worldview. An ability to elucidate from where difficult emotions originate among students and teachers is an act towards raising awareness where greater capacities for learning might occur (van Kessel et al., 2020). Educators must then consider the question of how, if at all, is this threat-and-defense cycle posited by TMT a process of learning? To take seriously the claim that, ‘learning begins in the loss of a loved object’ (Britzman, 1998), it is understood that all real learning *must* be difficult and engage with the world of unsettling emotions. Our work proceeds in acknowledging the interplay between difficult knowledge as understood by Britzman (1998, 2013) and through a lens of TMT, recognizing that it is the carefully cultivated and nurtured worldviews that provide us such ex-

istential comfort that must be lost, in order to undertake the significant experience of learning that exists on the other side of easy. The present study understands the place of difficult knowledge as a stage for learning to occur, with an aim similar to the modest proposal put forth by Britzman (2013) who understands that an encounter with difficult knowledge and learning might develop a new level of courage to, 'learn from the enigmas of the emotional world' (p. 112), here understood as the emotional place existing amidst a shattered worldview.

As Subedi (2008) aptly noted, 'teaching about differences is complex and messy' (p. 413). Notably, teaching about the nexus of privilege and oppression can be particularly fraught, and yet productive and respectful engagements are vital in social studies education (Parkhouse & Massaro, 2019, see also Parker, 2006). For students who are underserved, marginalized, and oppressed, open exploration of these difficult discussions can be empowering (e.g., Rubin, 2007), but there is a danger of them becoming subject to ridicule and stereotyping (Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003; Subedi, 2008). For students of privilege, defensive feelings or those mired in guilt regarding privilege are unhelpful, and so educators need to recognize them as such so that these learners can allow themselves to feel implicated (e.g., Crowley, 2019; Segall & Garrett, 2013), work toward feelings of responsibility linked to structural thinking (Crowley & Smith, 2015), and thus take appropriate action toward equality (Swalwell, 2013).

### Research Participants and Context of Study

The participants in this research were eight senior-level preservice social studies teachers who were taught and then attempted to employ TMT concepts in their classrooms during their practicum placements in a major urban location in Western Canada. Follow-up individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants in order to understand opportunities, challenges, and experiences of affectively difficult moments within their classrooms through a TMT lens. As researchers, we then reflected on the data through the lens of Becker/TMT, but then realized the value of adding Jung's notion of the shadow in relation to how affectively difficult topics emerge and are worked through (or not) within the classroom. *Italicized font has been used below to indicate quotes from research participants.*

Research participants were teaching in their respective classrooms during a time of increasingly heated public discussions about the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. Polarization makes talking about longstanding issues even more fraught; for example, comments made in 2017 defending the cultural and physical genocide of Indigenous peoples in Residential Schools by Canadian Senator Lynn Beyak inspired some of her supporters to write letters making racist and hateful statements about Indigenous peoples. This situation has been further exacerbated by Senator Beyak publishing those letters on her taxpayer-funded website,

which she has refused to remove despite a direct order from the Senate Ethics Office. Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister, Carolyn Bennet, stated that Beyak ‘doesn’t seem to understand how these letters have affected residential school survivors, but really all Canadians. To many First Nations... they see them as inciting hatred’ (Tasker, 2019). In this context, many of our research participants found it challenging to teach about Residential Schools. To develop ‘nuanced forms of political [and social] thinking’ (Journell, 2017, p. 7) teachers must situate complex topics in a non-transactional way that promotes discourse between ideologically divergent perspectives. As such, the research reported in this article provides a means for educators to foster healthy dialogue(s) about complex, multifaceted issues, disrupt positional rigidity, and disarm the stigma behind their (contentious) introduction to students. In this way, we hope not only to add to the existing scholarship on naming the problems associated with teaching contentious issues, but also to provide a framework for understanding why these issues arise.

### **Contextualizing (Student) Reactions with Becker and Jung**

The theories utilized within this work allow one to consider what existential and psychological realities underpin the emergence of contentious issues in the classroom and how such dynamics play out within and between students/educators. If educators are able to grasp the radical conceptualizations of existential foundations and how they (re)appear in the classroom, they might perhaps gain valuable insight into how to handle unique issues in the classroom. Students and teachers have an opportunity to metacognitively anticipate threat-and-defense cycles if they are taught about worldview threat before, during and after engagements with troubling content. Thus, this project adds to current social studies research about the psychodynamic difficulties of learning about different perspectives, and (lack) of teacher training in this area (e.g., Garrett, 2017). The following section explores the above mentioned realities and dynamics in the context of defensive compensatory student reactions, hostility, awareness and anticipation of threat-defense cycles, and considerations towards the resulting unsettling of such rigid polarization.

#### ***Defensive Compensatory Student Reactions***

Responses from students often read as disengagement, such as the head placed on one’s desk, can challenge educators and reinforce reactions and assumptions that occur amidst contentious issues. Without taking into account how such avoidance is “infused with energetic psychical investments” (Garrett & Alvey, 2020, p. 20), and, in the case of this research study, may stem from a threatened worldview, educators might be negatively reinforced towards avoiding contentious issues in the future, problematizing or pathologizing the students who

perform such disengagement, or otherwise. Perhaps teachers avoid contentious issues from the outset when there is a perceived difference between the positionalities and commitments of teachers in relation to their students, as is apparent from Engebretson's (2018) study. At times, this resistance can cloak itself under supposedly more banal excuses, such as when *Many students blatantly expressed 'Why are we learning about this again? We have already learned this.' 'What does this have to do with us? Our families weren't even here living in this country when this stuff happened.'*

These resistances may reflect a psychic defense against the acknowledgement of one's own role in the creation, perpetuation, and maintenance of cultural systems reinforcing any such forms of evil. It is important to note that rigidity is not just limited to worldviews and responses. *Our families weren't even here living in this country when this stuff happened* and similar responses that treat the past as a singular and locked in reality from the past, incapable of informing our present and futures, is an example of temporal rigidity where the students see the past as closed. Although beyond the scope of this present work, the above example evokes a curiosity not only towards the role death might play in demarcating historical actors/occurrences, but also towards whether teaching and learning history should be subjugated to such boundaries, and how these boundaries might perpetuate polarization educators attempt to avoid.

### **Hostility**

Another reaction is derogation, an example of which is seen in this research *When approaching Indigenous history and topics (like colonization and residential schools) ... some students roll[ed] their eyes.* Any act of derogation or annihilation is a form of aggressive projection of one's own capacities for evil onto some other, whether it be an individual or group of individuals. The creation and/or maintenance of any binary opposition can thus be understood as the creation of a container into which one's projections can neatly be held—a 'hook' in the object on which one hangs a projection as one hangs a coat on a coat hook' (von Franz, 1978/1980, p. 3)—providing a sense of existential ease against the weight of one's mortality. The nature of projections in relation to one's shadow is that they 'change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face' (Jung, 1959/1969b, §17).

Death is 'the basic fear that influences all others, a fear from which no one is immune, no matter how disguised it might be' (Becker, 1973, p. 15). Outright hostility is probably the most obvious sign that a student is in worldview threat and has implications relating to one's insecurity. *When I was talking about Cold War and...doing Aboriginal [studies]...people started getting angry when other people were challenging the normal view of society and so we had kind of the divide between the First Nations kids as well as the European kids because in that*

*class we challenged the Grand Narrative.* Culture embraces the idea that there is one truth (your truth)—the metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984), and thus others must be wrong. Adhering to and perpetuating the metanarrative simultaneously serves as a worldview wherein one finds their identity, while also being a defense against the full reality of one's finitude. To disrupt one's understanding of the metanarrative is thus to suggest the way 'you' see the world is not as it is—your projections are falsified by me and turned back upon you. This process leads to a confrontation with one's unmetabolized psychic energies, i.e., a tear in one's comfortable worldview leading to a closer encounter with one's inevitable end. To remain unaware of such processes within oneself leaves this system continually at play, finding new hooks on 'others' onto which our coats can be hung via projection from our shadow. Yet, to acknowledge and recognize such patterns within oneself is to move towards a greater level of self-knowledge and consciousness (Jung, 1959/1969b), and an opportunity to come to new terms with the recognition of our inevitable demise.

### **Awareness and Anticipation of Threat-Defense Cycles**

Our first goal as teachers, then, is to help students illuminate their threat and defense cycles. Teachers can ask leading questions and then describe worldview threat: *'Why did you...'* or *'What was your first gut reaction to this?'* or, like, *'Why did you feel that way?'* *'Well this is why people act so strongly'* thus suggesting 'that underneath the most bland exterior lurks the universal anxiety' of death (Becker, 1973, p. 21), *when, you know, somebody will just say something like 'oh isn't that bad' and then you just have sharks going after chum.'* *And so I kind of told it in the way that using modern day current events and kind of related it back to internationalism and technology and how we put ourselves into these corners even though we're supposed to be a global village... yet the rigidity persists. A couple of them understood it and they were like 'oh wow, that makes sense' and then they brought up stories how in their family their family reacts when you try to challenge their views and this leads to a 'disavowal of any personal dignity or freedom—on the one hand; and freedom and independence, movement away from the others, extrication of oneself from the binding links of family and social duties—on the other hand'* (Becker, 1973, p. 100). *And I have one girl uncomfortably laugh for five minutes because she was having an internal crisis because she was realizing because she did this [i.e., reacting defensively]. They actually came up to me when class ended (cause they don't talk during class at all)...and just like 'oh like these are examples of things that happen in my life.'* This task of building awareness likely needs to be explicit: *like 'we're going to talk about things that are a little bit different... and people have really different viewpoints on things. [W]hen we move through our curriculum this year you might find yourself with some things you aren't agreeing with and things that I say you might not agree with or with things that*

*other people say. And it's important to understand why you have this reaction... and how to not let this reaction control your actions.'*

The next task is then to help students (and ourselves) get ahead of the threat-and-defense cycle; for example, to *introduce them to Residential Schools in relation to their own kind of worldviews and why they have [them, and why] people have such strong reactions to get over Residential Schools*. The hope then is that *the kids don't feel like they're being attacked and 'why am I learning about this?' but they can also have a little bit of that empathetic element*. Awareness of worldview defenses might allow students to dwell in their discomfort without defensive compensatory reactions while also raising awareness that their positionality is not under attack. *Talking to them [Grade 12s] about feminism... [was] an ordeal. But maybe if they already knew about why they were feeling so uncomfortable then they'd be more receptive to it? I just feel like as soon as I bring up that word, unfortunately, it usually is with guys, it's always like a state of like, 'whoa!' Like, 'I feel so threatened and like, uncomfortable.'* So maybe if they understood a little bit of why they were feeling that discomfort, maybe. After all, '[f]ull humanness means full fear and trembling, at least of the waking day' (Becker, 1973, p. 58). Humility, here, is the key. One may not be able to overcome our anxieties arising from worldview threat, but we can accept the struggle for what it is. *In a classroom, this means tackling subjects, topics, or concerns that are or have been typically avoided, brushed over. Our natural human instinct is when we are faced with a threatening situation, we typically fight or flight. I choose to approach the situation with education, knowledge, an open perspective and finally an outlook that will help my students become more positive, progressive and flexible. It is possible to be receptive to new and different ideas. She was just like 'oh god. What is happening here.'* *The environment of the room changes and kind of. They were building on the difficult knowledge and they were actually asking me questions on the difficult knowledge.*

### **Unsettling (Rigid) Polarization**

There is converging evidence that anxiety-induced intolerance can be countered by fostering/rewarding "tolerance" as an aspect of the cultural worldview by making tolerance both a value and a highly accessible option (Greenberg et al., 1992). This established culture of tolerance for opposing views can lead to a more open classroom if radically contextualized along the lines of reflexivity about the sources of their aversion of, or attacks on, opposing views. In that way, perhaps classrooms might move beyond the realm of mere tolerance into one of acceptance or even delight in the process of dialoging across difference. *Students, who at the beginning of the semester either shied away from delivering their opinion, or only had one perspective, now [after learning about TMT] engaged in discussion with educated opinions, confidence and diplomacy. It was wonderful!*

*They expressed confidence, understanding, and flexibility.* Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, Becker (1973) stated: ‘the “good” is the opening toward new possibility and choice, the ability to face into anxiety; the closed is the evil, that which turns one away from newness and broader perceptions and experiences’ (p. 72). The ability to face anxiety that appears to exist in the external world is to confront one’s inner being in a new way—to acknowledge a new and shadowy aspect of oneself that has yet to be faced. In one’s capacity to do so they create space to incorporate this nuanced layer of being into their consciousness and thus it becomes integrated into their awareness. Such a process is indeed challenging and anxiety-provoking, and yet it appears there is considerable capacity for growth and self-knowledge should one venture into these unacknowledged elements within oneself. And, perhaps it is the good-educator who becomes greater aware of such processes, becoming an advocate for such growth not only within him/herself, but also role-modeling such a growth process in the students of their classroom(s).

By recognizing and naming traditionally neglected existential pressures on our adherence to our worldviews, we can increase the likelihood to understand where others are coming from instead of derogating, assimilating, or annihilating them: *I thought the implications of it in the classroom can be like. If you have a student who prescribes to those viewpoints [TMT] would be really effective to use to bring them into an engagement in a civil manner. It is not to make an excuse for somebody, but give a reason like, ‘You have these views and they’re troubling and we can name them as being troubling without calling you a villain, without calling you a bad person.’* When teachers are able to contextualize the ways in which they are implicated by their own threat-defense cycles, they can properly role-model how to work through their own experiences of worldview threat in their classrooms for their students and work towards the unsettling (rigid) polarization.

### **Implications**

Thinking with Becker/Jung, teachers and students can understand their own reactions more thoughtfully; for example, preventing students from dwelling on xenophobic reactions to refugees—instead of thrusting their shadows onto refugees, the students were able to dwell in the (irrevocably) uncomfortable cognitive space relating to the emergence of un/conscious fears (i.e., existential threat). Educators can mitigate defensive reactions to alternative worldviews and perspectives, and instead create real dialogue across difference in our classrooms. Information alone is not nearly enough to change human opinion or behaviour (Crocco et al., 2017), and so merely thinking with Becker/Jung is insufficient, although their ideas serve as starting points for the focus on unpleasant feelings beyond the rational intellect. As humans, we are unlikely to resolve or overcome our existential anxiety and many of our associated behaviors, but the hope is that acknowledging the context of some defensive behavior might lead to a sort of

reflexivity that mitigates the worst of such consequences. Much like the old adage, the first step is in admission, and there is something to be said for sitting in the tension of recognizing that we, as humans (and us, as authors), have existential entanglements that affect how we feel and behave, and that contextualizing those entanglements can help us in our relations with each other and ourselves. Avoiding conflict is not helpful, nor does it “erase the existence of that conflict” (Garrett & Alvey, 2020, p. 21), and so perhaps thinking with Becker and Jung provides a possible opening for the sort of radical contextualization of the emotional terrain that reverberates in relation to rigid thinking. Just as this work grapples with existential and psychic considerations through a lens of Becker and Jung, as researchers we endeavour to align ourselves in a position to acknowledge the ways in which these psychic forces disrupt our own conscious comforts offered through our defences against our mortality. Simultaneously, we recognize that such discomforts appear to serve as an entry point into broader considerations of becoming, both in and outside the classroom.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Indian Residential Schools operated in Canada from the 1880s, with the last school closing in 1996. Canadian government officials removed Indigenous children from their homes and families to sever connections to their culture and assimilate them into white settler cultural norms. The curriculum varied, but generally included basic academic skills, industrial training, and Christian doctrine. Some of the individuals operating and teaching at the schools emotionally, physically, and sexually abused the students, in addition to the harm caused by separating families. In Canada, compulsory attendance ended in 1948. Intergenerational trauma from residential schools undermines the mental and physical health at the individual level as well as for families and communities through the cumulative effects of numerous and sustained act of emotional, physical, and social violence.

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