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TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY AND LEGISLATION: AN ANALYSIS OF
HOW PATTERNS EVOLVE AND CHANGE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

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ABSTRACT

Recent legislation passed in states including Georgia, Florida, and Kentucky have included clauses that govern “divisive” material and the manner in which this material is discussed, particularly in schools. The term “divisive” is never truly defined beyond content that is “patently offensive to prevailing standards.” The emphasis has been placed on the fact that students should not be biased by the information that they are taught or allowed to access, but definitions are lax as to what constitutes inappropriate information. The loose criteria as to what counts as “unsuitable” opens up divisive material to easy censorship based on partisan and political issues, which has occurred in the Tennessee, Florida, and Kentucky bills. These bills rely on language such as “adverse treatment” and “psychological distress” to designate which material may or may not be appropriate for schools. This language is extremely subjective and specifically open to interpretation so as to be skewed towards the cultural or moral majority. This thesis hypothesizes that this language is targeted in order to protect the self-esteem and cultural worldview of the majority in power and can be evaluated according to the proposals of Terror Management Theory (TMT). TMT relies on the idea that individuals will utilize defense mechanisms in order to manage concepts that conflict with their beliefs. These belief systems are necessary for the maintenance of their self-esteem and feeling of success in society. In order to assess the degree to which recent legislation is simply a defense mechanism, TMT should be considered as an evaluation tool.

To create an accurate evaluation tool and determine the significance of TMT within legislation, I have identified the key assessment criteria within TMT, as well as

specifically isolated key legislation that uses morally limiting and self-esteem-boosting language. These materials will allow me to determine the potential influence of TMT within legislation, and the very serious implications that it has when a piece of legislation meant for everyone and meant to determine a standard is instead based on the defense mechanisms, biased schemas, and prejudices of those in power.

I dedicate this thesis to my friends and family, who have heard me talk about this project for over two years at length, and who have expressed every confidence in me on the way.

I also dedicate this thesis to every single person who has ever felt a stinging sense of injustice during banned book week.

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INTRODUCTION

History and recent legislation have set a dangerous precedent of letting reactive language cloud supposedly unbiased judgment. This supposedly unbiased judgment is in control of our education, the dissemination of knowledge, and public opinion. From 2007 to 2011 there were over 250 attempts by school districts to ban books in 31 states (Brenyo 2). These attempts manifest in targeting specific material commonly seen in books that encourage consideration of multiple viewpoints outside of the mainstream. Banned material includes content that is sexually explicit, violent, depicting LGBTQ+ individuals, portraying various religions, profane, including depictions of race, racist, etc. (ALA). Targeted material also includes certain subjects that are seen as “inappropriate” or “lewd,” all of which the school district would like to limit children from considering, or that parents consider being too far outside of their comfort zone to allow their children to see. These distinctions (“inappropriate” and “lewd”) are the only ones allowed by the Supreme Court in 1982, which specified that material could not be removed on a partisan or political basis (e.g., Democrats removing Republican books) but could be removed based on being “pervasively vulgar or educationally unsuitable,” although they did not define these terms (Brenyo 4). Not defining these terms did a great deal in opening the limitation of books to thinly veiled partisan and political issues. Instead of removing books based on a political stance, districts, parents, and politicians instead make claims that certain books which discuss viewpoints outside of the norm are too lewd or inappropriate and ban them on those grounds instead of the grounds that the Supreme Court have ruled are invalid. Allowing moral arguments to bias and limit the information

in schools and distributed in the public sphere is dangerous and too subjective to be reliable.

There has been a steady movement, mostly perpetrated by administration and parents, to severely limit the material discussed and taught in schools. For example, since 2004, the American Library Association has tracked and published records of the most-banned books, and the reasons for which these books were banned. In 2015 alone, nine out of the ten most frequently challenged books contained diverse content (ALA). Diverse content is content that contains depictions by or of people of color, LGBTQ+ content, or content of people with disabilities (ALA). Some examples of these books include *The Color Purple*, by Toni Morrison; *The Diary of a Girl* by Anne Frank; and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (ALA). In the past ten years, three top reasons for books being banned in public libraries and schools has been material that has “sexually explicit,” “offensive,” and “religious viewpoints,” (ALA). A partisan Republican bill, HB0580, from Tennessee, passed in 2021, follows this worrying trend. Within this bill, these Tennessee lawmakers propose that schools cannot discuss material that implies an individual consciously or subconsciously could be privileged, racist, sexist, or offensive:

“No student enrolled at a public postsecondary education institution shall be subjected to any classroom instruction or discussion, formal or informal, or printed or digital material, including but not limited to textbooks and instructional materials, that promotes any of the following concepts: ...An individual, by virtue of his or her race, sex, or religion, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously,” (HB0580).

This language is extremely vague and can be openly interpreted in ways that solely benefit the majority. Additionally, this legislation is only one of many, and only one that applies to postsecondary education. However, multiple states are including this language in bills that apply to all levels of education, or, in Florida's case, education and the workplace. Schools, under this legislation, cannot discuss the nature of power relationships and struggles as perpetrated by history, in addition to material that would call into question an individual's moral character, or cause discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological stress. Similar Florida, Georgia, and Kentucky House bills have been passed or remain under consideration. The Florida bill, HB7, has been passed in 2022. This bill was co-introduced by 19 Republican representatives and uses much of the same language as the Tennessee bill, with the important distinction that this bill covers employment as well as education. Additionally, the lawmakers in Florida specify that "adverse treatment" based on past actions of one's race, sex, color, or national origin is an unlawful employment practice, which is also further specified to include that an individual should not experience "psychological distress" due to any of these concepts (*HB7*). The exception for both bills is that these topics are discussed in an "objective manner without endorsement of the concepts," (*HB0580; HB7*). Objectivity, of course, is determined in the same subjective way that this bill was written, by whichever majority is in office. This is the same objectivity that can be summarized as educators and lawmakers limiting material taught and discussed based on whether they experience a sense of shame or disgust, which is very obviously not objective at all. This material is therefore limited based on extremely subjective means, which can easily

become partisan depending on the political majority in the school district or among parents.

Removing the possibility of discussing divisive content, or even content that directly holds one group accountable for the actions of history, as discussed in Tennessee and Florida's bills, follows a trend of banning and burning books that stretches back centuries and only continues as restrictions get more specific and targeted according to the political and religious majority. The same topics and choices have been targeted since the Supreme Court was involved in 1982, which suggests that the targeted removal and censorship of diverse content is a pervasive issue that will likely never stop. This legislation sets dangerous limits and puts some groups' voices above others as those in charge will be able to define these terms and limits how they see fit. The legislation that these states are attempting to pass is being pushed by small groups that wish to determine acceptable topics to teach and discuss in public spaces. This "suitable" information is heavily biased based on the social norms that this small group has determined are best for others. According to a poll from Fox News, 77% of parents were concerned about the banning of books in schools by local school boards recently (Balara). A poll from CBS News found similar results, with eight in ten people holding the belief that materials should not be banned in schools for discussing race or criticizing actions from the U.S. in the past (Backus and Salvanto). These limitations that the legislation proposes restrict discussion and learning based on prejudices and opinions that others do not share. This legislation being passed and considered assumes that one group has the ideal and solely permissible school of thought, and it sets the precedent that there is only one "right" school of thought.

This type of legislation limits the expression of those who do not share those beliefs. The majority (those who are not discriminated against based on race, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) limit the minority as a result of being fearful of becoming the victim of discrimination or isolation themselves. As a benefit of being in the majority, they have had the luxury of creating a system which validates their belief systems and excludes those viewpoints that conflict with them. They use language such as “reasonable” to ensure those viewing the legislation are manipulated into believing that if they do not follow this legislation, they are somehow “unreasonable” or “unfit” for social acceptance. In broader terms, this kind of legislation can lead to discrimination and a decline in meaningful education. They disseminate/prevent the dissemination of information based on subjective terms instead of focusing on the actual content and quality of the education.

If diverse or divisive information is prohibited on the basis that it is immoral or inappropriate, we are encouraging the discrimination of those that possess any of the qualities that are deemed “immoral” and “inappropriate” by those few people who are making these decisions. If we decide society’s laws and educational priorities based on what a “reasonable” person would do, we are giving control of the definition of “reason” over to one group who will impose their biases and definitions on those laws and the educational system.

This thesis uses Terror Management Theory, the work of psychologists Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenburg, as a lens through which to analyze and explain the recent and continuous trend of legislation that attempts to limit school curricula and materials. Terror Management Theory (TMT) proposes that the consciousness that humans

have of our mortality makes us uniquely predisposed to adopt management systems (belief, moral systems, community) to combat this knowledge. TMT describes a process of rationalization that serves to distance individuals from thoughts or ideas that may threaten their worldview. TMT is one potential theoretical framework that could help explain bias in a piece of legislation that leads to restrictive actions. Thus, the purpose of this project is to develop a systematic method for analyzing legislation using the TMT framework. Determining the amount of TMT present in a bill could offer insight into the discourse of lawmakers, provide discussion of the course of potential future action to prevent biased legislation, and combat the direct consequences of the current defense-laden legislation. These consequences include the previously discussed limitations on education, and the marginalization and discrimination that it perpetuates. This analysis will also discuss the consequences should the trend of defensive legislation continue, or should similar legislation be passed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Main Concepts

Terror management theory (TMT) offers a larger framework for analyzing social phenomena and their cultural contexts. The benefit of such a broad theory is that it can be applied across a wide range of contexts and accounts for diverse fields. Solomon, Greenburg, and Pyszczynski, the psychologists who developed TMT, note two basic tendencies that pervade human behavior and underlie a great deal of what is “noble and contemptible” about humanity: the desire of humans to maintain a favorable self-image (self-esteem); and a desire to promote the beliefs and values of an individual’s culture (Greenburg et. al 61). Often, this desire for self-esteem and the simultaneous desire for the maintenance of culture manifests in ethnocentrism and prejudice. Regardless of whether ethnocentrism and prejudice manifest as a consequence of protecting one’s self-esteem, the consequences of TMT are still observable. Solomon et. al. observed that despite the widely applicable nature of TMT to multiple fields, empirically oriented social scientists had not adequately examined why the basic motivations for self-esteem and faith in one’s conception of reality existed (Greenburg et. al 62). In rectifying this gap in research, Solomon et. al. have provided these multiple relevant applications and have broken down the maintenance and formation of terror-management responses into several relevant parts. The ability to conceptualize reality in terms of causality, the ability to conceive of future events, and the ability to reflect on ourselves are the cognitive

abilities that provide us with flexibility and adaptability, and cause us to recognize problems concerning aspects of existence that we cannot control (Solomon et. al 95). Imagining possible futures where painful, tragic, or uncertain events occur is a source of perpetual anxiety, and management systems like faith are assurance that we can be spared such outcomes (Solomon et. al 96). Becker, a theorist who helped to originate this concept, hypothesized that humans confront the physical problem of death (meant here as more of an absolute annihilation) symbolically with social structures and shared conceptions (Solomon et. al 96). Culture is a symbolic social construction that provides meaningful context where this constant anxiety is lessened because we are acting in a shared social space (Solomon et. al 96). Culture provides standards by which an individual's value can be judged, and it provides a place where symbolic immortality can be achieved as the culture lives on (Solomon et. al 97). Participation in culture is a form of perceptible living, which continues even after an individual passes because as the culture continues, so do their conceptual lives. Because culture is the way that an individual forms and maintains self-esteem, and self-esteem requires faith in an internalized worldview and satisfaction of cultural standards, an individual can avoid terror by meeting those cultural standards and maintain a sense of their immortality (Solomon et. al 97).

Solomon et. al propose that security is sought through the development of both active control of one's environment and cognitive control of one's conscious awareness and understanding of reality (Solomon et. al 98). Participation and preoccupation with cultural drama are what make it possible to keep our fears of symbolic death out of our subconscious, and Solomon et. al. suggest that this motive is often outside of our

conscious awareness (Solomon et. al 103). By conceptualizing self-esteem as the individual's perception of the extent to which they are meeting cultural standards of value, TMT implies that the effect that a given behavior will have on an individual's self-esteem is largely dependent on how that behavior is viewed within a particular cultural context (Solomon et. al 104). Threats to self-esteem provoke defense reactions to defuse or restore self-worth (Solomon et. al 108). These defense reactions can be entirely psychological, a kind of anxiety-buffer, or they can be more based in reality. For example, children may provide a sense of permanent value and immortality to the extent that they are viewed as physical and symbolic extensions of the parents (Solomon et. al 120). Additionally, fulfilling valued roles, eliciting the approval of others, becoming desired by others, accumulating material possessions, and identifying with real and mythical cultural norms may help individuals to establish a sense of worth (Solomon et. al 121).

TMT suggests that there are two conditions where self-esteem can be threatened and anxiety-buffers are needed: when an individual becomes aware that some aspect of themselves may undermine their efforts to fulfill a valued cultural role, or when individuals become aware that their value as perceived by others within the culture falls short of their own aspirations (Solomon et. al 122). TMT posits that we must have absolute faith in the validity of our worldview. The mere existence of others who do not share our central attitudes, beliefs, and values is threatening because if others do not agree with us and base their self-esteem on the same systems, it implies that we might be wrong. Consequently, those who are different motivate action from us to eliminate the threat, buffer the death-related anxiety, and therefore defend the validity of the worldview

(Solomon et. al 125). The more central the value that is being violated, the more severe the management response is. For most people, the belief that one is ethical is an important determinant of self-esteem, and moral principles are more often than not part of a system of religious beliefs and values that explicitly provide hope of transcending death and insignificance (Solomon et. al 125). Solomon et. al propose with TMT that any information that implies that the prevailing cultural worldview is wrong or equally valid as other contradicting world views should garner an anxiety response as self-esteem is threatened and would encourage efforts to bolster faith in the prevailing worldview and push out the challenging belief (Solomon et. al 128).

Self-esteem

The maintenance of cultural worldviews and self-esteem, as previously discussed, are the most basic proponents of TMT. Self-esteem, the general sense that one is heroic within their cultural context, is acquired by living up to specific standards as prescribed by culture (Routledge and Vess 2). Living up to these cultural standards provides an individual with the symbolic ideal of death-transcendence. Bowlby's work on how attachment bonds are formed provides a basis on which to observe the formation of self-esteem (Routledge and Vess 3). Bowlby observed that the conception of self-esteem begins in childhood with the formation of the bond between a child and parent (Routledge and Vess 3). This is where a child first forms ideas of what is right and wrong according to parental approval and discipline, and this attachment is the precursor to the development of self-esteem, which serves to manage a child's fears and anxieties (Routledge and Vess 3). As ideas of cultural responsibilities and ideals expand beyond mere parental approval, self-esteem becomes a much more important factor to consider in

a social and cultural context (Routledge and Vess 3). Most responses that we have to our environments are in an effort to maintain or increase our self-esteem, or at least the stability of our self-esteem and cultural worldview. Functionally, within TMT, self-esteem serves as an anxiety-buffer. This buffer protects us from anxieties about thoughts and concerns about death.

Mortality Salience

Mortality salience is the idea that when confronted with death (symbolic or literal) which threatens one's self-esteem and cultural worldview, one's response when reminded of this death will be to increase their worldview defense mechanisms and engage in behavior that may raise their self-esteem (Routledge and Vess 4). Routledge and Vess have found that mortality salience can be evaluated in several ways: supporter vs. opposer determinant, similar vs. different determinant, and supporter vs. detractor determinant (4). This evaluation that necessitates worldview defense is not limited to active action by someone that opposes a cultural worldview and can apply to representations of a cultural symbol needing protection as well. For example, Greenburg et. al gave participants in a study several culturally valued objects (American flag and crucifix) that they would have to use to solve a puzzle (Routledge and Vess 5). Participants were unable to destroy these culturally valued objects in order to complete the puzzles, confirming the bias that damage to even representations of moral ideals is significant (Routledge and Vess 5). Because worldviews are inherently subjective, they require continual social validation to seem true, and also prompt an extreme response when threatened (Routledge and Vess 6). To protect these worldviews, according to the mortality salience hypothesis, individuals can react with prejudice or hostility in order to

protect themselves. Group loyalty and the pursuit for self-esteem as discussed by mortality salience do not have to be inherently negative, but fear responses offer so little in the way of leeway or reason when based on something so conceptual and subjective.

Death-thought Accessibility

The death-thought accessibility hypothesis reads as follows: if cultural worldviews and self-esteem serve to buffer individuals from thoughts and concerns about death, then threatening or weakening these structures should increase the availability of death-thoughts (Routledge and Vess 10). These death-thoughts have been found to increase due to threats to cultural worldviews, basis for self-esteem, significant relationships, the human-animal boundary, and structured meaning (Routledge and Vess 11). Significant threats to worldview increase death-thoughts, and because the worldview serves to buffer from these thoughts, increasing the defense of these worldviews is the inevitable action that results as the threat occurs. For example, Hayes et. al presented both atheists and Christians with ideas that contradicted their worldviews, and both groups had increased death-thoughts (measured through word-fragment completion tests) after the exercises (Routledge and Vess 12). The two primary defenses to death-thoughts are derogation, or the disparaging of a conflicting view as irrelevant or false, or accommodation, the willing manipulation of lesser peripheral facets of the worldview to accommodate the conflicting view (Routledge and Vess 12). The higher the self-esteem of the individual and the bigger the threat to the cultural worldview, the more likely the response to death-thoughts will be derogation (Routledge and Vess 12).

Dual-process Model of Terror Management

The dual-process model is a two-pronged subconscious approach that we take to death (Routledge and Vess 33). First, some feature of the environment elicits existential concerns about death (Routledge and Vess 33). When an individual is explicitly thinking of their demise, they exhibit proximal defenses: effortful, unconscious suppression of death-related thoughts, coupled with conscious seemingly rational efforts to deny vulnerability to death or distract attention from the death-thoughts (Routledge and Vess 33). Proximal defenses serve as direct and literal counters to the idea of death. As death-thoughts fade from direct consciousness, people exhibit distal defenses: the initially suppressed thoughts surface in the unconscious mind and provoke concerns about procuring self-esteem and maintaining a cultural worldview (Routledge and Vess 33). Distal defenses are a symbolic approach to address symbolic concerns. This process builds on the concepts of the death-thought accessibility process as well as the mortality-salience hypothesis. These defenses are a manifestation of the ideas that Solomon et al. propose as being the basis for protecting self-esteem and cultural worldview.

Historical Precedent

The reality of the current political landscape is a constantly shifting one, one that has many tendencies to follow the wants and needs of the majority, and this has not been a new trend. In February of 2022, the U.S. Senate met to discuss book banning and the nature of book banning. It was stated that recent efforts have been framed as attempts to regulate “obscene or inappropriate content, but if you take a passing glance at the books under scrutiny, it is clear the goal here is to censor and suppress materials that deal with matters of race, sexual and gender orientation, and, more broadly speaking, social injustice,” (*Congressional Record Vol. 168, No. 21*). They go on to discuss legislation in

Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee that pull titles from shelves and require schools send book lists to state legislators for scrutiny for worthiness to be made available to schools (*Congressional Record Vol. 168, No. 21*). The concerns expressed in the Senate join other concerns of a similar nature that those in power may seek to limit marginalized voices from representation. Utah and Virginia both similarly have received backlash for their state legislators banning *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, and *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman due to concerns of “appropriateness,” (Raymond). The Senate concluded their statement on banning books and the recent resurgence of censorship of sensitive topics with this: “We don’t need to look that far into history to see what happens when we go down the dangerous road of censorship and suppression. When free expression is weakened, the mob is empowered. The groundwork is laid for further discrimination, intimidation, and, God forbid, increased violence,” (*Congressional Record Vol. 168, No. 21*).

TMT is very clear that sometimes in an effort to employ management systems to defend against concerns about symbolic death, prejudice can be the default and that reaction and defense is very clear in these recent moves to ban material in schools. To evaluate what kind of presence and defense response one can expect when reviewing this legislation that makes these sweeping bans possible, this project seeks to determine the amount of terror management present in each bill and what themes with TMT are most salient.

METHODS

Approach

Three bills were selected for review to determine the amount of TMT present: Georgia Senate Bill 226 (SB 226), Kentucky House Bill 18 (HB 18), and Florida House Bill 7 (HB 7). SB 226 was passed in April of 2022, HB 18 was introduced in January of 2022 with no further action taken to either pass or strike it, and HB 7 was passed in April of 2022. HB 18 was selected due to its regional relevancy, as this project is being created and defended in Kentucky. HB 7 was selected due to its cultural relevancy. Florida has been the subject of recent media coverage for bills of this nature and seems to be one of the most extreme examples of this type of legislation, and as such primed for evaluation using TMT. SB 226 was selected because it concerned the same subject matter, but Georgia is a less defined state as far as its political bias. For this reason, it serves to determine if a smaller fraction of political bias is present compared to the location of the two other bills.

Measures

In creating an instrument to evaluate the concentration of TMT presence within three different bills, a coding scheme was developed. The development of these codes was based on inductive reasoning, using the existing theoretical framework in TMT to isolate the key principles most useful for analyzing these bills (Miles and Huberman 36). First, the key tenets from TMT were reviewed and evaluated – dual-process model, mortality salience hypothesis, anxiety-buffer, and the death-thought accessibility

hypothesis. Breaking down the theory into its key tenants as proximal defenses, I was able to develop codes based on the factors that inspire a defense response: cultural hero (CH), when the bill mentions the expression of religious or political belief as something to be expected or encouraged in public school, in addition to any nonreligious or nonpolitical belief; culturally valued object (CO), when the bill mentions documents such as the Constitution or Bible as a material of value, or materials such as textbooks that parents or the school board have found as offensive or lewd; pride in cultural group (PC), seen in the bill when mentioning any superiority or lack thereof, an inherent nature of one group to exhibit certain characteristics, or when mentioning respect or moral character as being determined by membership to a certain group; anxiety (A), when the bill mentions that certain actions or attributions may cause psychological distress or discomfort; and thoughts and concerns about death (DC), when the bill rejects certain materials or discussions on the basis of being offensive or inappropriate, either on principle or to moral standards. These were the codes identified to align with the TMT principles of mortality salience and death-thought accessibility.

Cultural hero, culturally valued object, and pride in cultural group are all involved in the creation and maintenance of self-esteem. The presence of these codes indicates that TMT is being employed on the basest level. Anxiety and thoughts and concerns about death are both heavily involved in the anxiety-buffer, which is the defense triggered when self-esteem is threatened. Both self-esteem and the anxiety-buffer can be used to provide evidence for the mortality salience hypothesis and the death-thought-accessibility hypothesis which indicates the active presence of TMT within a bill.

Placing these codes into an instrument (Table 1) required that they be clearly defined as to reduce bias (or improve intended reliability of the instrument). Each code was assigned a color for later identification in the bill. Finally, examples of each code were obtained from HB 18 – the first bill to receive analysis. Language that particularly signified the presence of TMT within the example is bolded for clarity.

Code	Name	Description	Example
CH	Cultural hero	When the bill mentions the expression of religious or political belief as something to be expected or encouraged in public school, in addition to any nonreligious or nonpolitical belief.	<p>“...a student shall be permitted to voluntarily: ...(c) Express religious or political viewpoints in classroom, homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments free from discrimination or penalty based on the religious or political content of the submissions; (d) Speak to and attempt to discuss religious or political viewpoints with other students in a public school to the same extent and under the same circumstances as a student is permitted to speak to and attempt to share nonreligious or nonpolitical viewpoints with other students. However, any student may demand that this speech or these attempts to share religious or political viewpoints not be directed at him or her...”</p>
CO	Culturally valued object	When the bill mentions documents such as the Constitution or Bible as a material of value, or materials such as textbooks that parents or the school board have found as offensive or lewd.	Notwithstanding KRS 158.200 to 158.260 and 160.345, consistent with the Constitutions of the United States of America and the Commonwealth of Kentucky , a local board of education or board of a public charter school shall ensure that no public school or public charter school offers any classroom instruction or discussion, formal or informal, or distributes any printed or digital material, including but not limited to

			textbooks and instructional materials, that promotes any of the following concepts...
PC	Pride in cultural group	Maintenance of norms through social control—seen in the bill when mentioning any superiority or lack thereof, an inherent nature of one group to exhibit certain characteristics, or when mentioning respect or moral character as being determined by membership to a certain group.	1. One (1) race, sex, or religion is inherently superior to another race, sex, or religion; 2. An individual, by virtue of his or her race, sex, or religion, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously ; 3. An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race, sex, or religion ; 4. Members of one (1) race, sex, or religion cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race, sex, or religion; 5. An individual's moral character is determined by his or her race or sex ; 6. An individual, by virtue of his or her race, sex, or religion, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race, sex, or religion...
A	Anxiety	When the bill mentions that certain actions or attributions may cause psychological distress or discomfort.	Any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race, sex, or religion; or Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist, sexist, or oppressive, or were created by members of a particular race or religion to oppress members of another race or religion.
DC	Thoughts and concerns about death	When the bill rejects certain materials or discussions on the basis of being offensive or inappropriate, either on principle or to moral standards.	However, student speakers shall not engage in speech that is obscene, vulgar, offensively lewd, or indecent ; If the content of the student's speech is such that a reasonable observer may perceive affirmative institutional sponsorship or endorsement of the student speaker's religious or political viewpoint, the institution shall

			communicate, in writing, orally, or both, that the student's speech does not reflect the endorsement, sponsorship, position, or expression of the institution.
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(Table 1)

Analysis

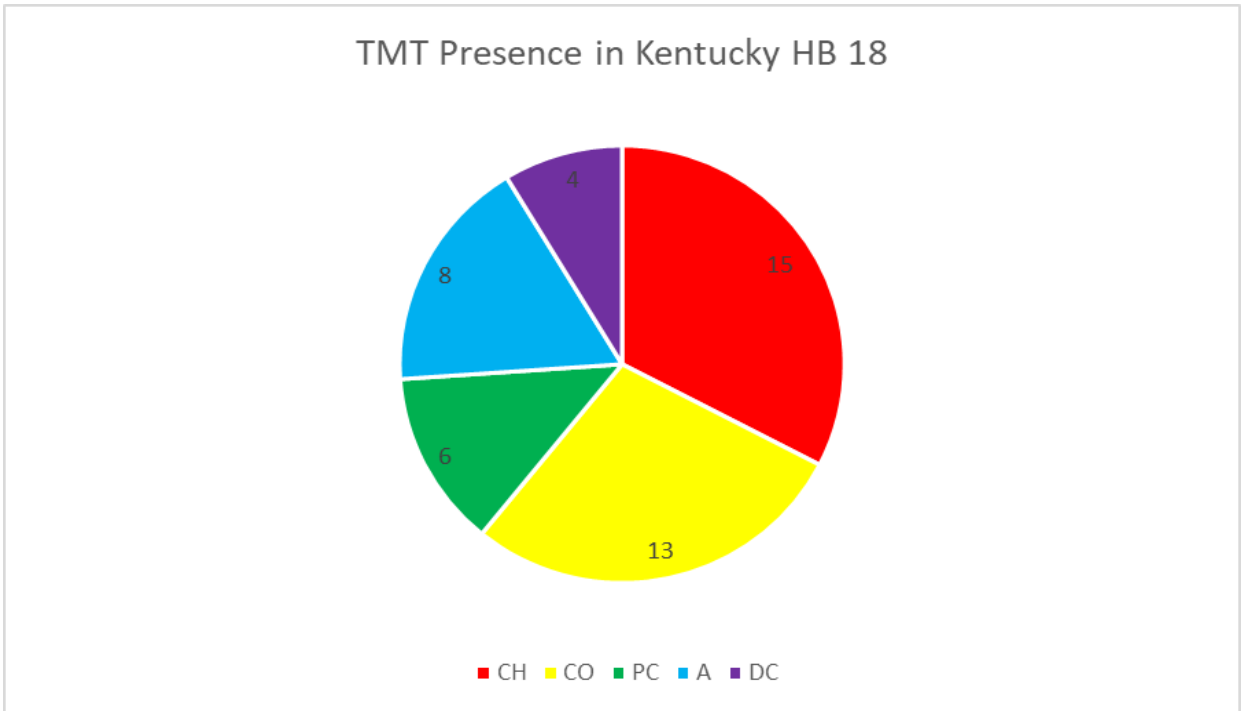
Each bill was analyzed in iterative waves first to determine ease of the instrument’s use, and then to detect the degree of code saturation present in the bills. Because legislation often contains similar language, pattern coding was used to identify sections that were particularly laden with TMT language. Within each bill, subsections were counted, then each bill was examined for instances of codes. “Instances” of codes could be one word, but they were most often phrases, contained in a sub-section of each bill delineated by the bill’s system of identification. Sections were designated by an (a), (b), (c), etc. Instances of each code were only counted once per section, and if multiple instances of a code happened in one sub-section, it would still count as a singular instance. This example, from HB 18, was a part of one subsection, so each word or phrase with bold, which indicates the presence of a defense response only counts as one instance of pride in cultural group in terms of the subsection count: “1. One (1) race, sex, or religion is **inherently superior** to another race, sex, or religion; 2. An individual, by virtue of his or her race, sex, or religion, is **inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously**; 3. An individual should be **discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race, sex, or religion...**” (HB 18). Codes were counted as they were identified and placed into tables for more accessible analysis (see Appendix A-C). Pattern coding is initially based

in plausibility and then verified, which is where the coding process begins (Miles and Huberman 217). Data in the form of frequencies per code and total proportion of TMT saturation in the bill will be presented.

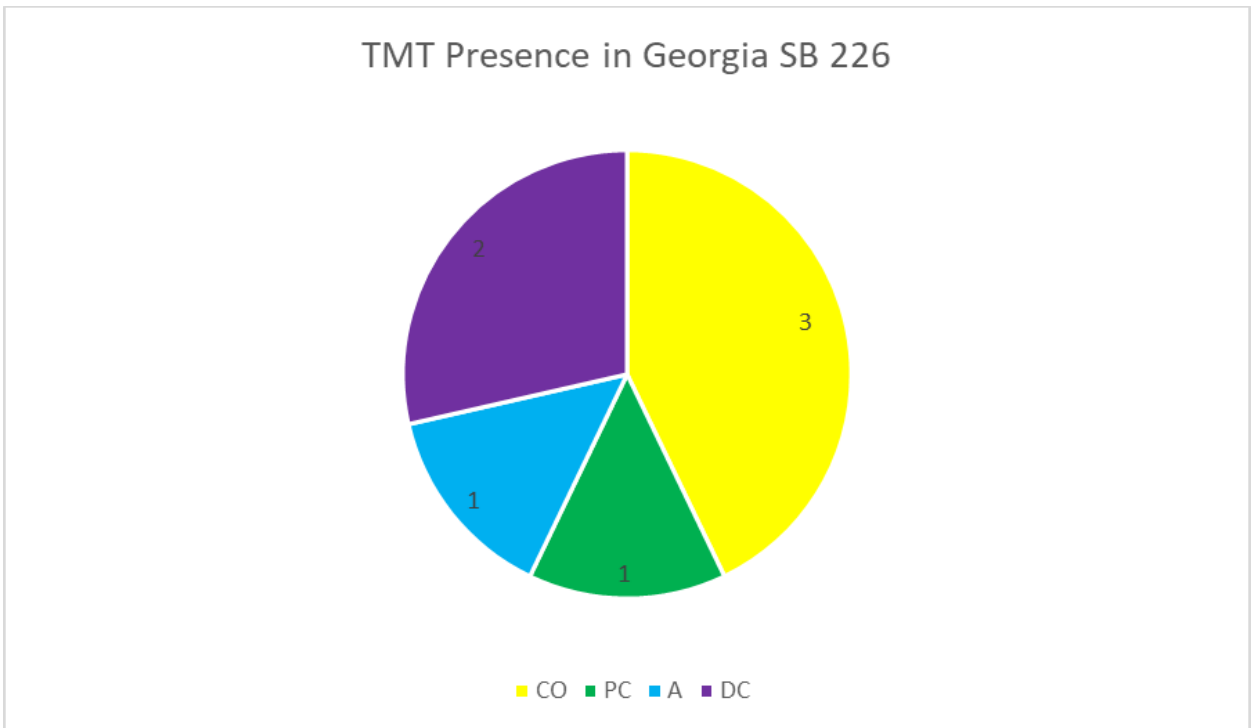
Each bill was analyzed in terms of two different aspects: the type and frequency of each code's appearance in each bill, and the total frequency of TMT code appearance in each bill. These codes are categories derived from the key concepts of TMT which aid later analysis (Miles and Huberman 56). Codes are descriptive, explanatory, and astringent; pulling a lot of material together and describing what is contained within a segment of words as well as the emergent pattern therein (Miles and Huberman 57). Examining these bills with the master codes of mortality salience, anxiety-buffer, and death-thought accessibility reduces bias which aids in the reliability of the instrument (Miles and Huberman 57). Because legislation often contains similar language, and similar language was found across all three bills, pattern coding was used to identify sections that were particularly laden with TMT language. The development of these codes was based on inductive reasoning, using the existing theoretical framework in TMT to isolate the key principles most useful for analyzing these bills.

RESULTS

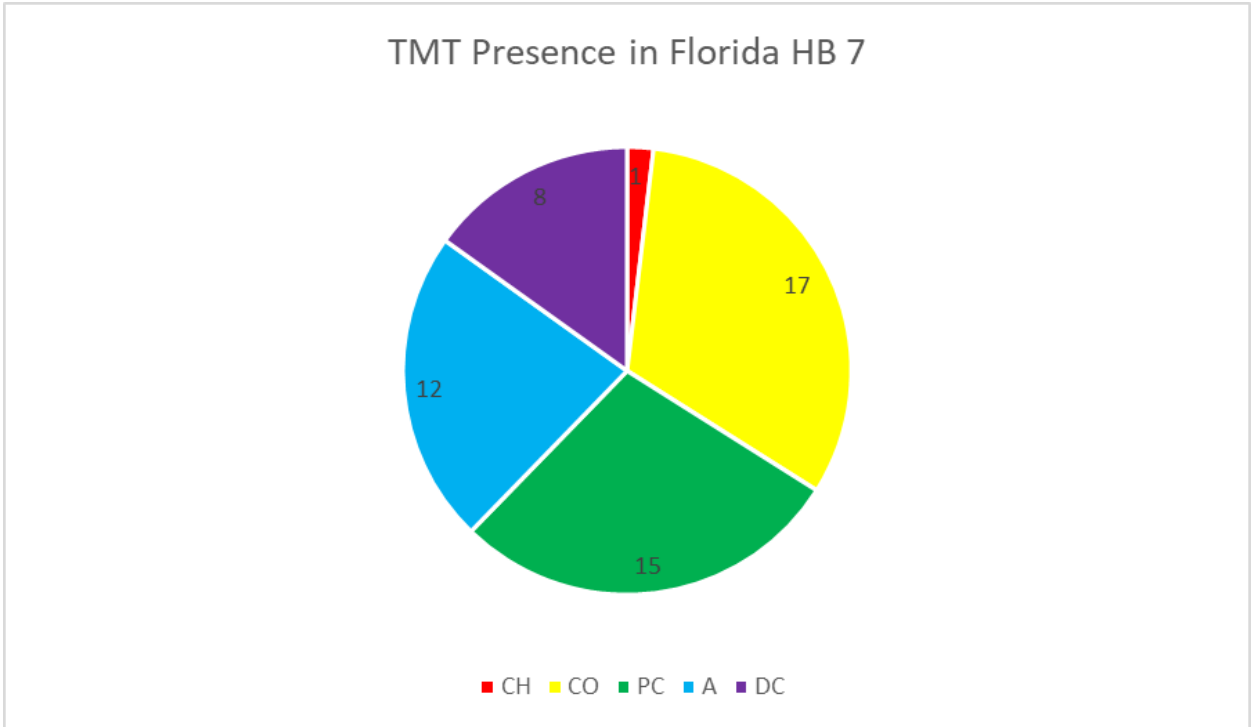
The presence of TMT was detected in each bill with variation in amount and distribution of codes. Figure 1 depicts the distribution of codes in HB 18, the Kentucky House bill, and Table 2 represents the number of TMT instances per bill, in addition to the concentration of TMT. Within HB 18, I have identified multiple instances of each code, with more frequent occurrences for cultural hero (CH) and culturally valued object (CO). Overall, the 26 coded sections of this bill account for 60.4% of the total bill. Within SB 226 depicted in figure 2, the Georgia House bill, I have identified instances of every code except for cultural hero, where cultural object (CO) and thoughts and concerns about death (DC) are the most frequently appearing. Overall, the 3 coded sections of this bill account for 60% of the total bill. Figure 3 presents the concentration of code within the Florida Senate bill, and the specific number of instances in each bill. Within HB 7, I have identified several instances of each code, with the primary codes featuring being cultural object (CO) and pride in cultural group (PC). Overall, the 28 coded sections of this bill account for 56.5% of the total bill. Cultural object is the most consistently represented code throughout all of the bills at 33 instances, and thoughts and concerns about death is the least represented code at 14.



(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)

Bill	# of Instances	# of Subsections	# of Coded Subsections	% of TMT
Kentucky (HB 18)	46	48	29	60.4%
Georgia (SB 226)	7	5	3	60%
Florida (HB 7)	53	46	28	56.5%

(Table 2)

Table 3 is a combination of the information represented in Figures 1-3 and Table 2. Overall, the bills had a greater concentration of culturally valued object than any other code. The least consistently represented code was cultural hero, with HB 18 contributing 99% of the instances. Death concerns was the least represented code, only accruing 14 total instances over all three bills. Cultural object, pride in cultural group, and anxiety

were all comparatively evenly represented in every bill. Each coded subsection had various instances where multiple codes were represented, and every bill had over half of its content coded for TMT responses.

Codes	Total #	Kentucky (HB 18)	Georgia (SB 226)	Florida (HB 7)
CH	16	15	0	1
CO	33	13	3	17
PC	22	6	1	15
A	21	8	1	12
DC	14	4	2	8

(Table 3)

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to determine the amount of terror management response present within three current pieces of legislation. Each bill had a marked presence of TMT, over half of each bill's total number of sections, which is not an insignificant amount. Because each code was represented, it indicates that each larger theoretical base of TMT is present. Beginning with cultural hero, culturally valued object, and pride in cultural group; if these codes are present in the bills, it implies that in terms of TMT the bill is attempting to regulate a threat to worldview and self-esteem through minimizing the threat to self-esteem and bolstering attitudes and ideals that are highly valued. In other words, if these three codes are present, the bill is attempting to engage in mortality-salience, making the threat to immortality lessened. As an example of culturally valued object, or where the bill engaged in attempting to pose limitations on materials based on a prevailing moral standard, SB 226 used the language: "Is patently offensive to **prevailing standards** in the adult community as a whole with respect to what is **suitable material** for minors..." In a different section, HB 18 used the language: "Distribute **religious or political literature** in a public school, subject to reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions to the same extent and under the same circumstances as a student is permitted to distribute **literature on nonreligious or nonpolitical topics or subjects** in the school." HB 7 used: "authorizing instructional personnel to **facilitate discussions and use curricula to address**, in an age-appropriate manner, specified topics; **prohibiting classroom instruction and curricula** from being used to indoctrinate or persuade students in a manner inconsistent with certain **principles or state academic**

standards...” These examples of culturally valued object coding were seen in every bill and indicate that there is a self-esteem managing defense process occurring. This section in HB 7 specifically serves as an amendment to existing legislation. Many of the newly written sections contain TMT codes because they are no longer relying on state standards or historical success, but they are relying on these defense responses instead. Culturally valued object occurs frequently in each of these bills due to the nature of the subject which the bill is discussing—new standards for curricula and materials to be discussed in schools more aligned with moral standards now as opposed to previously structured systems relying on educational standards or history. Mentions of literature, instruction, “class materials,” and the facilitation of instructions according to these new standards are all present within these bills, and all are observable traces of TMT.

The presence of anxiety in these bills indicates that each bill is attempting to buffer the threat to self-esteem and cultural worldview through employing these defenses against psychological distress. Sections which involved anxiety were very clear, and both Kentucky and Florida contained the exact same phrase to convey this sense: “A person, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, bears personal responsibility for and must feel **guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress** because of actions, in which the person played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, national origin, or sex,” (*HB7*). Georgia, instead, conveyed anxiety through this section: “**Is patently offensive to prevailing standards** in the adult community as a whole with respect to what is suitable material for minors...” (*SB226*). This mention of distress, and in Georgia’s case, patent offense to prevailing standards, is a manifestation of anxiety over material which the majority feels they are no longer in

control of, and so must manage. Georgia's language in that example also provides for a manifestation of thoughts and concerns about death. The presence of thoughts and concerns about death firstly implies that there are concerns of symbolic death that are being addressed with these bills. The presence of thoughts and concerns about death occurring less often than the other codes implies that the other codes, as strictly defense responses, are working to minimize the threat of death successfully. As these codes are present and are representing the active employment of defense responses as discussed in the mortality salience and death-thought accessibility hypothesis, it can be inferred that these bills are acting as a kind of proximal defense as seen in the dual-process model. Materials that cause psychological distress, are controversial, or are otherwise prevented to be distributed in schools according to these bills are the effortful suppressions of threats to cultural worldview and self-esteem as proximal defenses, the presence of which is confirmed through the codes.

After analyzing the coded sections in each bill, a few interesting points have arisen. Perhaps the most glaring is the overwhelming presence of cultural hero in HB 18 (KY) when compared to any other bill. Cultural hero is a main feature of self-esteem, and requires a humanely constructed, shared, symbolic conception of a social or moral ideal. HB 18 featured these concepts heavily whereas the other bills attempted to convey pride in cultural group or culturally valued object. Pride in cultural group and culturally valued object are both more objective and more socially acceptable than an obvious preference for a moral ideal, which makes the lessened presence of cultural hero understandable in HB 7 (FL) and SB 226 (GA). For example, pride in cultural group was present in these bills when language like: "Is, when taken as a whole, **lacking in serious** literary, artistic,

political, or scientific value for minors,” (*SB226*). Pride in cultural group was also seen in sections like: “An individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, is **inherently** racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously...” (*HB7*). These sections contain the maintenance of social norms by using language such as “lacking in serious... value,” and contain the maintenance of social hierarchy by using language such as “inherently” to state that one group may have control or superiority over another (*HB7*). It is easier to imply superiority or a moral standard rather than outright state that some standards are more welcome than others, as can be the case with cultural hero, thus pride in cultural group and culturally valued object are seen as frequent representations of the mortality salience hypothesis. That *HB 18* has the most represented presence of cultural hero and has still not been passed may be telling of the extent to which overt defense responses can be exhibited within a bill and be tolerated.

Another interesting point is the overall lessened presence of thoughts and concerns about death. Thoughts and concerns about death involve symbolic thoughts and concerns for a symbolic death of a social or moral ideal. This is a difficult concept to verbalize, and the fact it does not have a large presence in these bills when compared to the other codes means that the concept may be too theoretical to place legislation on. However, that it has a presence at all means that it is a relevant concern. (It appears in sections with language like: “However, student speakers shall not engage in speech that is **obscene, vulgar, offensively lewd, or indecent**,” (*HB18*)). This language is very bold and very clear with what it thinks of these materials that may fall under this provision in the legislation. Where other codes may rely on veneers of distance or historical lawmaking precedent (lacking in serious literary value, etc.), this language (obscene,

vulgar, offensively lewd, or indecent) relies on both the moralistic interpretation of “appropriateness” and the subjective interpretation of what may constitute this absolute response. Thoughts and concerns about death are a very strong response, directly attempting to end the threatening material. The minimized presence of thoughts and concerns about death could also imply that the bill itself, as a tool to respond to these cultural threats, is minimizing these concerns so occurrences of thoughts and concerns about death would be less frequent.

Anxiety, culturally valued object, and pride in cultural group are all present in each bill consistently. The frequent presence of culturally valued object, humanely constructed and shared physical representations of symbolic social or moral ideals, was unsurprising. It is much easier to impose meaning and limitation on a physical representation of an ideal (books, informational materials, religious texts, symbols) rather than place limitations on ideals, as seen in the lower number of coded instances of cultural hero. Pride in cultural group was similarly unsurprising. These bills are rules to govern specific aspects of society, and pride in cultural group is about prosocial tendencies for people to maintain a connection to those that share their conceptions of a social or moral ideal. This can bleed into cultural hero, however, in this instance cultural hero and pride in cultural group are separated by the distinction that cultural hero is about the actual expression of belief (“Express religious or political viewpoints in classroom, homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments free from discrimination or penalty based on the religious or political content of the submissions,” (HB 18)), and pride in cultural group is about the potential for “inherent” hierarchies (“An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of

his or her race, sex, or religion,” (HB 18)). Anxiety, insecurity in a social or moral ideal prompted by a threat to said ideal, was the most straightforward code to identify within each bill, as each bill included a phrase stating that certain materials be limited or reviewed due to any “psychological distress” they may cause. Anxiety is also the most straightforward code to apply to a theoretical structure within TMT, relating directly to the anxiety-buffer. Outside of the marked difference in the concentration of cultural hero between HB 18 and the other bills, there was little difference to be observed in the codes between the bills. The presence and concentration of each code was similar throughout each bill, though it is interesting that HB 7 and HB 18 were both lengthier than SB 226 by a fair margin. This could mean that SB 226 is a product of Georgia being less concerned with limiting content taught in schools, however, the similar concentration of TMT across each bill regardless of length implies that there is the same sense of concern and bias, regardless of political leaning or length of legislation.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS

Conclusions

Overall, this study has identified a potential method through which to identify the presence and amount of TMT in legislation, as well as the importance of creating such a tool. Each of the five codes represents a different defense response present in TMT, and from those defense responses, it can be traced back to the larger theoretical base of TMT. From the presence and concentration of specific codes, inferences can be made about the degree to which certain defenses have been employed according to TMT. In total, each bill had an observable presence of TMT defense responses throughout. With the exception of HB 18 and its abundance of cultural hero, all of the bills exhibited very similar concentrations of each code. Because that is the case, it implies that the TMT responses of mortality salience and death-thought accessibility were also fairly evenly represented. The limited presence of thoughts and concerns about death within the bills serves as evidence that some of the defense responses being exhibited throughout the bills are working. The sections that contained the highest concentration of defense response are those sections that specifically governed the material taught in classrooms, and the material that school boards have control of distributing to students, which calls to mind the studies that Bowlby did with children and the length to which parents would go to protect the worldviews they had instilled within them (Routledge and Vess 3). Through further study and validation of this tool, TMT could be used to evaluate legislation moving forward and eliminate some of the terror-motivated bias that may be present in legislation.

Implications

Ultimately TMT describes a process of rationalization that serves as a way to distance individuals from thoughts or ideas that may threaten their worldview. TMT helps to identify these rationalizations by providing a framework and explanation for the moralistic language that the legislation uses, and any contradictions that may result in projecting one's worldview and concept of self-esteem onto others.

In terms of recent legislation, TMT can aid in identifying where the line is between unbiased lawmaking and a defense mechanism that results from threatened self-esteem and cultural worldview. Specifically, through identifying the engagement and presence of mortality salience, the death-thought accessibility hypothesis, and the dual-process model, TMT can identify which responses may be self-esteem-promoting and terror-management-based response. TMT helps to determine the degree to which there is a defense response ingrained in the legislation, and whether the degree of saturation of terror-management-based response indicates a specific manageable trend or not. TMT is one potential theoretical framework that could help explain bias in a piece of legislation that leads to restrictive actions. From there, the response can be analyzed in terms of the precedent that biased legislation sets, the course of potential future action to prevent biased legislation, and the direct consequences of the current defense-laden legislation. These consequences include the previously discussed limitations on education, and the marginalization and discrimination that it perpetuates.

Already the consequences of this legislation and similar bills can be observed. Organizations like the National Coalition Against Censorship, the American Library Association, and the American Civil Liberties Union have tracked the progression of bills

like these, and all are unanimously concerned for their implications. The concentration of moral language and standards will only increase as time goes on, a slow but steady progression. Unless the moralistic language is caught now, subjective and limiting interpretations of these bills will continue and increase. Any material which is diverse or portrays difficult content, or content that is “psychologically distressing” can already be limited or called into question based solely on the language of these bills. As this continues, and as TMT continues to make up more than half of these bills’ content, diverse content is placed into further danger of censorship. Diverse content does not deserve to be silenced, let alone solely by a defense response. Additionally, it is telling and concerning that despite the results found in the polls done by CBS and Fox News that the majority of Americans do not appreciate or feel the need for these bannings and limitations, the majority of politicians and legislators still believe that this effort is worthwhile enough to continue.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the best efforts of this project to thoroughly depict the nature and depth of this issue, it is so much more than can be covered with the time and space allotted. TMT and its applications are broad for a reason, in order to be applied to as many areas and issues as possible. Future research is well and truly limitless, only constrained by the bounds of human language.

The bills contained within this study are three of many throughout the country of a similar nature, which would all benefit from a similar analysis. These bills are also from more conservative-leaning areas, which affects the language and the bias that may be present in each bill. Although these bills are current at the time of writing this project,

they will not remain current for long, and as such, the analysis of them will not remain current for long either. The use of this instrument or similar instruments would require consistent updates and awareness of relevant materials.

Additionally, this instrument has not been verified or tested by multiple raters, so inter-rater reliability was unable to be calculated. As such, researcher bias is very possible within this instrument, and further testing and examination will be required for this tool to truly become usable.

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APPENDIX A: KENTUCKY HOUSE BILL 18

Bill: Kentucky

Date: 3/1/2023

CONSTRUCT (CODE)	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE (INSTANCES) <i>(Use Tally Marks Here.)</i>	DESCRIPTION
Cultural Hero (CH)		When the bill mentions the expression of religious or political belief as something to be expected or encouraged in public school, in addition to any nonreligious or nonpolitical belief
Culturally Valued Object (CO)		When the bill mentions documents such as the Constitution or Bible as a material of value, or materials such as textbooks that parents or the school board have found as offensive or lewd.
Pride in cultural group (PC)		Maintenance of norms through social control – seen in the bill when mentioning any superiority or lack thereof, an inherent nature of one group to exhibit certain characteristics, or when mentioning respect or moral character as being determined by membership to a certain group.
Anxiety (A)		When the bill mentions that certain actions or attributions may cause psychological distress or discomfort.
Thoughts and Concerns about Death (DC)		When the bill rejects certain materials or discussions on the basis of being offensive or inappropriate, either on principle or to moral standards.

NOTE 1: Subsections [e.g., (a), (b), (c)] could be coded with more than 1 instance (code).

NOTE 2: Frequency counts = # of instances (unique codes) per section (e.g., (a), (b), (c))

Totals: 15 CH + 13 CO + 6 PC+ 8 A + 4 DC = **46** # of instances

How much TMT is present in the bill? 29 # coded sub-sections/ 48 # total sub-sections = **60.4** % of TMT

APPENDIX B: GEORGIA SENATE BILL 226

Bill Georgia SB 226

Date: 3/26/23

CONSTRUCT (CODE)	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE (INSTANCES) <i>(Use Tally Marks Here.)</i>	DESCRIPTION
Cultural Hero (CH)		When the bill mentions the expression of religious or political belief as something to be expected or encouraged in public school, in addition to any nonreligious or nonpolitical belief
Culturally Valued Object (CO)		When the bill mentions documents such as the Constitution or Bible as a material of value, or materials such as textbooks that parents or the school board have found as offensive or lewd.
Pride in cultural group (PC)		Maintenance of norms through social control – seen in the bill when mentioning any superiority or lack thereof, an inherent nature of one group to exhibit certain characteristics, or when mentioning respect or moral character as being determined by membership to a certain group.
Anxiety (A)		When the bill mentions that certain actions or attributions may cause psychological distress or discomfort.
Thoughts and Concerns about Death (DC)		When the bill rejects certain materials or discussions on the basis of being offensive or inappropriate, either on principle or to moral standards.

NOTE 1: Subsections [e.g., (a), (b), (c)] could be coded with more than 1 instance (code).

NOTE 2: Frequency counts = # of instances (unique codes) per section (e.g., (a), (b), (c))

Totals: 0 CH + 3 CO + 1 PC + 1 A + 2 DC = 7 # of instances

How much TMT is present in the bill? 3 # coded sub-sections / 5 # total sub-sections = 60 % of TMT

APPENDIX C: FLORIDA HOUSE BILL 7

Bill Florida House Bill 07

Date: 3/13/23

CONSTRUCT (CODE)	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE (INSTANCES) <i>(Use Tally Marks Here.)</i>	DESCRIPTION
Cultural Hero (CH)		When the bill mentions the expression of religious or political belief as something to be expected or encouraged in public school, in addition to any nonreligious or nonpolitical belief
Culturally Valued Object (CO)		When the bill mentions documents such as the Constitution or Bible as a material of value, or materials such as textbooks that parents or the school board have found as offensive or lewd.
Pride in cultural group (PC)		Maintenance of norms through social control – seen in the bill when mentioning any superiority or lack thereof, an inherent nature of one group to exhibit certain characteristics, or when mentioning respect or moral character as being determined by membership to a certain group.
Anxiety (A)		When the bill mentions that certain actions or attributions may cause psychological distress or discomfort.
Thoughts and Concerns about Death (DC)		When the bill rejects certain materials or discussions on the basis of being offensive or inappropriate, either on principle or to moral standards.

NOTE 1: Subsections [e.g., (a), (b), (c)] could be coded with more than 1 instance (code).

NOTE 2: Frequency counts = # of instances (unique codes) per section (e.g., (a), (b), (c))

Totals: 1 CH + 17 CO + 15 PC + 12 A + 8 DC = 53 # of instances

How much TMT is present in the bill? 28 # coded sub-sections / 46 # total sub-sections = 56.5 % of TMT