APPROACHING RELIEF: COMPENSATORY IDEALS RELIEVE THREAT-INDUCED ANXIETY BY PROMOTING APPROACH-MOTIVATED STATES

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We propose that in anxious circumstances people are drawn toward ideal-istic meanings and purposes because ideals efficiently and reliably engage approach motivated states. We present evidence that approach motivation and anxiety are inversely related; that approach motivation and anxiety are positively and negatively associated with meaning in life, respectively; and that ideals are more reliable vehicles than concrete goals for sustaining meaning, approach motivation, and relief from anxiety. We suggest that various threats arouse anxiety because they generate goal conflict, review evidence for a reactive approach-motivation (RAM) interpretation of ide-alistic and worldview defense (Nash, McGregor, & Prentice, 2011), and integrate consistency, terror management, self-affirmation, and attachment-related theories of threat and compensatory defense from a RAM theory perspective. We conclude with a RAM account for why compensatory de-fenses tend to be idealistically conservative, group-based, and religious, and how they can be either antisocial or prosocial.

Most contemporary theories of psychological threat and defense still, like Freud 100 years ago, posit a fundamental psychological commodity that is hydraulically undermined by threats and restored by compensatory defenses. Freud (1905/1962)

maintained that sexual gratification was the fundamental commodity. Its frustration caused anxiety and a diverse range of sometimes obvious (fetishes) and sometimes oblique (super-ego-related) defense mechanisms. Theories of threat and compensatory defense seem most reasonable when the defense obviously addresses the threat, for example, sexual conflicts causing perversions, death anxiety boosting belief in an afterlife, or failure boosting claims to be a good person in some other way (Freud, 1905/1962; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Steele, 1988). In our view, however, theories of threat and compensation tend to become less parsimonious when extended to idealistic and meaningful kinds of defenses. For example, in his theorizing about the Oedipus complex Freud maintained that people react to ambivalence about their sexuality by identifying with the father's moral worldview in order to win the mother's affection, or by giving back to society in a generative way that symbolically sublimates sexual needs. Terror Management Theory posits that people overcome death anxiety by adhering to their self and worldview ideals to regain a sense of symbolic immortality. Self-affirmation theory posits that people exaggerate their self and value ideals because doing so restores the commodity of self-integrity, a global sense of moral and adaptive adequacy.

As fruitful as these and other fundamental commodity perspectives continue to be, we propose that it may be time for an integration of compensation theories and a loosening of the fundamental commodity assumption. We agree that people will often find an alternative way to restore a psychological commodity that has been threatened. When the commodity cannot be readily restored, however, we propose that people turn to worldviews for mere anxiety relief rather than for restoration of any particular commodity. Threats cause anxiety, and if the threat cannot be directly resolved, people will mount idealistic and worldview defense reactions because doing so effectively relieves anxiety. As will be discussed in detail below, ideals powerfully activate approach motivation processes, and approach motivation automatically quells anxiety.

We propose that people are drawn toward approaching meaningful ideals and worldviews because doing so reliably activates approach motivation without risk of becoming mired in the conflicts and complication that can impede the approach of concrete incentives. Meaningful ideals and worldviews also provide efficient relief because they can be instantaneously promoted in private imagination, without expenditure of physical resources.

In the following sections we review some ideas on the psychology of idealistic meaning, in contrast to happiness, in order to set the stage for our reactive approach-motivation (RAM) interpretation of threat and idealistically meaningful compensatory defenses. We propose that the anxiety-induced quest for idealistic meaning, and the special capacity of idealistic meanings to relieve anxiety, is one of the oldest themes in the humanities. It is also a core premise of both Eastern and Western philosophy, and of most major religious traditions. After highlighting the psychological distinction between relatively concrete happiness and idealistic meaning, we review some of our recent evidence that idealistic meaning in life is positively and negatively associated with approach motivation and anxiety, respectively, and that approach motivation and anxiety are negatively correlated. We then review evidence that ideals are particularly effective vehicles for sustaining meaning, approach motivation, and relief from anxiety. We interpret compensatory defenses from a goal-regulation perspective on anxiety and RAM. We con-

clude with a discussion of why compensatory defenses tend to be idealistically conservative, group-based, and religious, and how they can be either antisocial or prosocial.

APPROACHING IDEALISTIC MEANINGS: BEYOND TRANSIENT HAPPINESS

Most people would consider caring for a sick child as meaningful but less pleasant and consuming chocolate as pleasant but less meaningful. Lives exclusively characterized by indulgence in pleasures such as eating, drinking, casual sex, shopping, and entertainment can seem vacuous (King & Napa, 1998). Preoccupation with personal success can also feel hollow (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Imagine a young woman's life characterized exclusively by immersion in hedonistic and ambitious pursuits. For a while she might feel invigorated by her high life in the fast lane. Over time however, she might come to feel as if something were missing and gravitate toward a different way of life. She might look for meaningful work, deeper relationships, or cultivate a personal spirituality, which could all help her wake up in the morning with a more idealistically inspiring sense of purpose than amusement or winning the rat race. Why might the pursuit of pleasure and success leave people longing for more idealistic meanings? We think it is because ideals are particularly effective at sustaining approach motivated states that can keep people feeling buoyant and vital even in anxious circumstances.

The quest for meaning is featured in the 3700-year-old Sumerian story of the heroic Gilgamesh and his despair upon realizing that even with his considerable accomplishments he will die and "become like mud" (Guirand, 1977). The same theme is featured in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes with the wealthy King Solomon's jaded lament that "all is vanity and striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:14, *The King James Bible*). Longing for meaning is also the topic of the best-selling nonfiction hard-cover book of all time, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Warren, 2002; this book sold over 50 million copies in 10 years). Despite the prevalence of meaninglessness and the quest for meaning as a perennial human preoccupation, the psychological processes behind it and the maintenance of meaning have been elusive. So much so that an exhaustive review of philosophical and clinical work related to meaning in life concluded with the observation that with regards to the question of meaning the best one can do is ignore the question altogether and "embrace the solution of engagement rather than plunge in and through the problem of meaninglessness . . . the question of meaning in life is as the Buddha taught, not edifying. One must immerse oneself in the river of life and let the question drift away" (Yalom, 1980, p. 483).

For someone in the grips of meaninglessness, however, this advice might seem glib. Extremes of meaninglessness are agonizing and not easy to ignore, and the problem is precisely that nothing seems worthy of immersion. Indeed, meaninglessness is highly correlated with feelings of anxiety and depression, and its empirical distinction is based on a perceived lack of purpose (McGregor & Little, 1998). Accordingly, desperate efforts at concrete engagement as a meaning-maintenance solution can tend to be compulsive, extreme, rigid, and hostile, and come at a cost to self and others (Baumeister, 1991; Fromm, 1941, 1973; see also Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). Clearer understanding of the basic motivational dynamics of idealis-

tic meaning could therefore have important personal and social implications. We submit that understanding these dynamics also illuminates the basic motivation for idealistic compensatory defenses that people mount in anxious circumstances.

We propose an approach-motivation account of idealistic meaning and world-view defense based on two premises: (a) ideals efficiently and reliably maintain approach motivation, and (b) approach motivated states automatically constrain motivational focus and relieve anxiety. With regard to the first premise, ideals are powerful levers for approach motivation (Amodio, Shah, Sigelman, Brazy, & Harmon-Jones, 2004; Higgins, 1997), and should therefore be expected to induce the sharpened sense of clarity and coherence that approach motivation confers. Focusing on abstract ideals that transcend the relative chaos of daily existence should also directly highlight a subset of familiar and expected associations afforded by the clear idealistic focus. This clarity of focus could immediately support a sense of coherence and connection associated with meaning (Heine et al., 2006; cf. Landau et al., 2004; Vess, Routledge, Landau, & Arndt, 2009).

With regard to the second premise, approach motivated states powerfully change affect and cognition. They directly downregulate anxiety and thereby release feelings of potency and vigor (Corr, 2008; Drake & Myers, 2006; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Nash, Inzlicht, & McGregor, 2012). They also constrict the scope of awareness to an internally consistent subset of goal-relevant perceptions (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Gable, 2009; Harmon-Jones, Schmeichel, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012). The resulting coherence in the subset of incentive-relevant perceptions, shielded from motivationally extraneous distractions (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002), confers a sense of clarity, connection, wholeness, and harmony. Together, the affective and cognitive changes liberate the experience of vitality, unity, conviction, and confident purpose that people recognize as meaning.

These links between ideals, approach motivation, and anxiety relief may help explain not only idealistic and approach-motivated reactions to various anxious uncertainty threats (McGregor, Gailliot, Vasquez, & Nash, 2007; McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010; McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010), but also why philosophical and religious views on meaning perennially focus on ideals. Hindu enlightenment, liberation, and sustainable well-being, for example, are attained by renouncing attachments to temporal goals for pleasure and success and yoking oneself to idealistic goals, such as selflessness (Karma yoga), love (Bhakti yoga), truth (Jnana yoga), or self-control (Raja yoga), that transcend the nagging wants of the temporal world (Smith, 1986).

EUDAIMONIA IS BETTER THAN HEDONIA

Plato, and to some extent Aristotle, similarly proposed that lives feel most vital when oriented toward universal abstractions beyond temporal reality. Plato's allegory of the cave portrayed the state of shackled devotion to shadowy phenomenal pleasures as drudgery in contrast to the more meaningful bliss derived from intentional devotion to apprehending transcendent ideals. Aristotle also distinguished a more trivial kind of happiness (hedonia) from a more sublime kind of flourishing (eudaimonia) that arises from the rational activity of humans' essential, divine intellect (nous) in recognizing the abstract universals that observable particulars represent. The Greek recognition of the motivational premium provided by idealistic

and essentialistic engagement has been referred to as "the passion of the Western mind" that has so powerfully animated subsequent Western cultures and religions with meaning and motivational sway (Tarnas, 1992). Christianity and Islam support meaning for more than half of the people in the world, and both float on the idealistic and essentialistic premises that they absorbed from Greek philosophy (Armstrong, 1993; Durant, 1939; Tarnas, 1992). Aristotle's views of eudaimonia reflected this emphasis on effective action. Eudaimonia is not only supported by contemplation of rational, universal truths, but also by application of the rational capacity for living and doing well through excellence and balance in action. As people actualize their essential capacities for rational thought and action they experience eudaimonic self-actualization (Tarnas, 1992). Consider the example of someone deciding whether or not to indulge in some transient pleasure that is inconsistent with his or her ideals, such as binging on chocolate or having an illicit fling. Doing so would enhance approach motivation up until consummation, but the hedonia would be fleeting and the residual conflict with personal ideals would undermine eudaimonia. In contrast, abstaining from the transient pleasure might momentarily restrain approach motivation for the duration of the temptation. But after the restraint, reflection on how the momentary restraint was consistent with personal ideals could reactivate a more sustained approach motivation.

This basic idea of meaningful flourishing arising from linkage between goals and a personal essence or ideal remained when the psychology of meaning became popular in the 1960s under the banners of existential and humanistic psychology. People were thought to experience meaningful well-being to the extent that they were able to self-actualize toward an identity-ideal. An important change in the Greek to the humanistic transition, however, was that existentialism and modernity rendered the identity-ideal a moving target. Rather than striving to realize a normative ideal or rational essence, humans became free to create a personalized identity-ideal to guide their subsequent behavior (cf. Baumeister, 1986; Gergen, 1991). The existential revolution turned on the notion that existence precedes essence. People first find themselves existing and they then struggle to construct an idiosyncratic personal essence or identity that is no longer divinely or traditionally predetermined (e.g., Heidegger, 1962/1927; May, 1961). With this transition the focus shifted from an action-based emphasis on virtue as arising from normatively rational action, to a more introspective emphasis on virtue as finding oneself, deciding how to be, think, and act, and having the courage to face the related uncertainties and crises (Baumeister, 1986; Erickson, 1968; Fromm, 1941; Tillich, 1954).

After a period of theoretical fascination with the vicissitudes of self-actualization, as represented in psychodynamically influenced clinical-existential theories (reviewed in Yalom, 1980), academic scholarship on personal integrity and meaning in life waned. Hard-nosed psychologists were turned off by the "carnival atmosphere" of the meaning-seeking movement in the 1960s (Yalom, 1980, p. 19). The emphasis on introspection, drug use, and spirituality had made meaning seem more like a magical mystery tour than a basic experience of living and thriving in the real world, much less something that could be precisely measured with objective scientific tools. At the same time an exhaustive review of the existential philosophy and clinical psychology literatures concluded that meaning does not arise from introspective speculation. Instead, it is a function of the capacity for sustained engagement in the everyday activities of life. In his exhaustive review Yalom (1980, p. 482) concludes that "engagement is the therapeutic answer to mean-

inglessness regardless of the latter's source . . . wholehearted engagement in any of the infinite array of life's activities." Academic psychologists interested in well-being accordingly began to move away from the seemingly vague and sometimes even flakey notions of meaning-seeking that had become associated with finding oneself, getting real, doing one's own thing, following one's bliss, tuning in, etc., and stuck with a clearer definition of well-being defined by low negative affect, high positive affect, and life-satisfaction (Diener, 1994; McGregor & Little, 1998).

Following this definitional reorientation well-being research sharpened the focus on hedonia. Rather than focusing on personal growth toward more idealistic "why" aspects of virtuous goal pursuit, the focus shifted to the immediately pleasant and instrumental "how" aspects of goal pursuit. Goals predicted hedonic well-being to the extent that they were enjoyable, likely to succeed, and free from conflict (reviewed in McGregor & Little, 1998). The transition was an important step away from introspective views of meaning and back to a view linking well-being with action (Little, 1993). It also helped bring an empirical focus to the study of human well-being. As a result of this shift, however, focus on the more meaningful and idealistic aspects of well-being fell out of favor.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

But interest in meaningful well-being did not completely fade away. Intrinsic motivation theory and research persisted with constructs related to eudaimonic flourishing (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sheldon, 2004). From this view when people pursue goals that lead to the satisfaction of normative human psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, people feel optimally engaged and vital (e.g., Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). The intrinsic motivation view maintains that optimal well-being arises from acting to realize some essential human nature (albeit a more grounded essence than Aristotle's divinely rational one). However, in intrinsic motivation research there is often little empirical distinction between hedonia and eudaimonia. Goals that support the basic human needs tend to be associated with feelings related to eudaimonia such as vitality, purpose, meaning, and personal growth, but also feelings related to hedonia, such as enjoyment and happiness (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Sheldon, 2004).

Other research, however, suggests that concrete and instrumental aspects of engagement may be less effective than symbolic and idealistic aspects at promoting eudaimonic well-being (Omodei & Wearing, 1990; Ryff, 1989; Waterman, 1993). In studies on the instrumental efficacy versus the idealistic integrity of personal goals in undergraduates' everyday lives, there was a double dissociation between the kinds of goal characteristics that predicted orthogonal hedonic (happiness, low stress, low depression, life-satisfaction) and eudaimonic (Purpose, Meaning, Growth) well-being factors. Doing well in personal goals predicted hedonic but not eudaimonic well-being and idealistic pursuit predicted eudaimonic but not hedonic well-being (McGregor & Little, 1998). In that research, however, orthogonality of the happiness and meaning principal components was statistically ensured. Without such artificial statistical constraints happiness and meaning are positively correlated (King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; see also Figure 1 plot of the factor loadings from McGregor & Little, 1998). Optimal well-being (i.e., that incorporates both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects) would therefore seem to
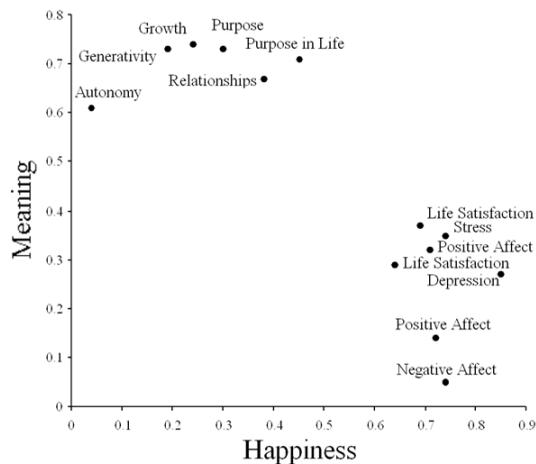
FIGURE 1. Loadings of eudaimonic and hedonic well-being scales onto orthogonal meaning and happiness principal components (data from McGregor & Little, 1998).

Note. Negative affect, stress, and depression are reverse-coded, and there were two different positive affect scales

arise from happy progress in basic personal goals, especially if they are guided by meaningful values and ideals (Brunstein, Schultheiss, & Grassmann, 1998; Lydon & Zanna, 1990; Sheldon, 2002).

IDEALISTIC GOALS: BEYOND FRUSTRATION AND CONSUMMATION

If approach motivation facilitates the experience of meaning, then why should ideals be so necessary for maintenance of meaningful well-being? We think the answer lies in the fact that ideals are essentially abstract goals that people use to guide more concrete goals (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1996; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). Indeed, thinking about ideals activates the same approach-motivated patterns of brain activity as sensory incentives (Amodio et al., 2004; Fox & Davidson, 1986) and both happiness and meaning are approach-motivated states (Urry et al., 2004). But there are wide variations in the extent to which people's social ecologies afford opportunities for pleasure, success, competence, autonomy, and relatedness in self-directed goal pursuit. If engagement in goals that satisfied these basic needs was the only basis for meaningful existence, then the only reliable way to maintain meaning would be to have enough opportunity to satisfy these basic needs, but not so much as to saturate and therefore habituate to them. In contrast, the promotion of ideals is resistant to frustration and habituation because it does not require physical resources and cannot be consummated. Ideals are easily promoted and elaborated in private imaginations, relatively free from censure, conflict, or attainment. The reliable access and ultimate unattainability of abstract ideals may be what makes them such powerful levers for approach motivation and meaning. Abstract idealistic goals may therefore have an advantage for reliably sustaining approach-motivated meaning.

A precursor to this idea was proposed by Klinger (1977) in *Meaning and Void: Inner Experience and the Incentives in People's Lives*. Like Yalom (1980), Klinger (1977, 1989) held that life is most meaningful when people are engaged in the pursuit of desired incentives. He proposed that engagement is undermined not only by frustration, but also by consummation, which can lead to habituation and disillusionment. Some kinds of incentives are relatively immune to habituation and disillusionment, however, such as "innate satisfiers" like smiles and baby's faces that seem compatible with a basic need for relatedness. Klinger went beyond incentives linked to basic needs, however, in proposing a category of incentives that confers an advantage for reliable engagement. Even smiles and babies can lose some of their power through habituation. In contrast, abstract incentives are yet more resistant to habituation and disillusionment. Their capacity for perpetual, asymptotic approach makes ideals a reliable vehicle for a "happiness of pursuit" (Little, 2011, p. 233). They may be pure abstractions or ideals anchored in the nostalgic past or hoped for future (e.g., McGregor, 2007; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). Klinger's emphasis on abstract incentives beyond attainment and habituation provided a preliminary bridge back to Plato's emphasis on transcendent ideals as the most sublime source of eudaimonia. Shimmering idealistic convictions on the perpetual horizon provide an oasis beyond the conflict-laden terrain of temporal incentives.

BEHAVIORAL INHIBITION SYSTEM, ANXIETY, AND MEANINGLESSNESS

Temporal goals are regularly impeded by the conflicts, frustrations, and uncertainties of everyday social situations and environments. Conflicts can be of the approach-avoidance variety, as in simultaneously wanting to approach an incentive and avoid an aversive possibility (including frustration or failure). They can also be of the approach-approach variety, as in a dilemma between mutually exclusive incentives. Such a predicament ultimately becomes a double approach-avoidance conflict as approaching one incentive requires loss of the other. They can also arise from perceptual conflicts or uncertainties that introduce the generic approach-opportunity avoid-danger conflict associated with novelty (Gray & McNaughton, 2000; Peterson, 1999). Even more generally, all motivational uncertainties are essentially conflicts insofar as a decision to enact any behavior can conflict with an array of other potential opportunities and dangers. Indeed, a wide range of motivational and perceptual uncertainties arouse electrical activity (event-related negativity) localized to the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012), a brain area closely linked to the conflict detection and anxious arousal of the Behavioral Inhibition System (Boksem, Tops, Kostermans, & De Cremer, 2008; Hajcak, McDonald, & Simons, 2003).

The BIS is a vertebrate goal regulation system that responds to goal conflicts (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). The direct goal inhibition and anxious vigilance of BIS activation facilitates a dilatory awareness conducive to noticing cues for flight should flight become necessary. It is also conducive to direct resolution of conflicts by finding alternative means or goals (or ideals) that might be more viably pursued. As such, BIS activation is generally adaptive because it prevents perseverance on unviable goals. Along with the anxious vigilance, part of the way the BIS

TABLE 1. Correlations Between Anxiety-Related and Approach-Motivation-Related Scales and Hope and Meaning Scales

	Meaning-Related Variables		
	Hope (Study 1)	Meaning Presence (Study 2, Study 3)	Meaning Seeking (Study 2, Study 3)
Anxiety-Related Traits			
Stress	-.48		
Attachment Anxiety	-.38		
Neuroticism	-.40		
BIS	-.33	-.18, -.04	.20, .26
Uncertainty Aversion	-.44	-.26, -.13	.26, .26
Rumination	-.27	-.23, -.17	.26, .24
Avoidance Motivation	-.37	-.35, -.16	.26, .36
Approach-Motivated Traits			
Approach Motivation	.53	.32, .25	.17, .24
BAS Reward	.29	.23, .16	.22, .26
BAS Drive	.51	.21, .16	.18, .15
BAS Fun	.25	.00, -.08	.30, .13
Action Orientation	.44		
Power	.43		

Note. Study 1, $n = 248$, Study 2, $n = 241$, Study 3, $n = 312$. Meaning subscales from Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006); State Hope Scale from Snyder et al. (1996).

facilitates disengagement from conflicted goals is through direct inhibition of all ambient goals (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). Together the anxious vigilance and inhibition leave people feeling empty and restless, and like their ongoing goals are dull and uninteresting.

Brain activity associated with BIS activation is also negatively correlated with brain activity related to approach motivation (Boureau & Dayan, 2011; Nash et al., 2012). BIS activation thus replaces the perceptual clarity afforded by approach motivation and with hypervigilance for anomalies and conflicts. The amotivated angst thus feels all the more desperate with increased salience of incoherent perceptions. All possible actions seem wearisome and all horizons clouded. We propose that this state of BIS activation is experienced as meaninglessness.

As shown in Table 1, evidence for the link between the BIS and meaninglessness comes from a study in which the seven dispositional variables related to the BIS (Stress, Attachment Anxiety, Neuroticism, Avoidance Motivation, BIS, Rumination, Uncertainty Aversion) all significantly predicted Hope with an average $r = -.38$ (McGregor, 2012, Study 1). In two subsequent studies, four BIS-related variables (Avoidance Motivation, BIS, Rumination, Uncertainty Aversion) negatively correlated with the Presence of Meaning on average at $r = -.19$ and positively correlated with the Search for Meaning on average at $r = .26$. These relations illustrate the dynamics outlined above: BIS activation blunts meaning and makes one vigilant to find it.

We suggest that the various threats in the threat and defense literature cause their effects because they are essentially goal conflicts that activate the BIS. People seek to downregulate the BIS by engaging ideals and meanings that restore clear approach motivation. We have generated goal conflicts experimentally by first priming people to pursue a goal (see Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001) and then administering goal-threats in the same (or different) goal domain as the goal prime (e.g., relationship threat after relationship goal prime). Participants react with exaggerated approach motivation for their idealistic convictions only when threat manipulations match a previously primed goal (McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, in press, Study 1; Nash et al., 2011, Study 2). We extended our goal conflict interpretation to consider mortality salience, reasoning, like Ecclesiastes, that mortality salience would make *all* goals untenable, and found that people primed with a goal before mortality salience were more idealistically approach motivated for personal projects than participants who did not receive a goal prime (McGregor et al., in press, Study 3).

There is also evidence that anxiety mediates goal conflict and these defensive responses. Using the same prime/threat experimental paradigm, we found that goal-conflicted participants reported that the threat manipulation made them feel more *anxious, uncertain,* and *frustrated* (Nash et al., 2011, Study 1) than participants who did not receive a threat in the same domain as a goal prime. Allowing participants to misattribute their anxiety to a source other than the threat prevented compensatory conviction responses (Nash et al., 2011, Study 4), further underlining anxiety's generative role in defensive responding to goal conflict. In another study, participants who reported experiencing more BIS-related emotions during a strike that shut down their university engaged in more risky behaviors (e.g., smoking, illicit drug use) throughout the period when they were unable to attend school (McGregor et al., in press, Study 5). Together these studies suggest that (a) what is threatening about threat manipulations is their capacity to generate goal conflict, and (b) that this goal conflict arouses anxious uncertainty that drives approach-motivated defensive responses.

MEANINGFUL IDEALS PROMOTE APPROACH MOTIVATION AND THEREBY RELIEVE ANXIETY

As previously described, BIS-induced inhibition of active goals is adaptive because, in combination with the vigilant arousal of BIS activation, it is conducive to noticing novel opportunities, disengaging from a compromised goal, and switching to a new goal that can be engaged with wholehearted approach motivation. The organism can then remain vigorously engaged in pursuit of the new goal until it is consummated or some frustration, conflict, or uncertainty derails it by reactivating BIS processes.

While engaged in whole-hearted approach motivation, attention is automatically constrained to incentive-relevant perceptions (Harmon-Jones & Gable, 2009; action-model) and anxiety is directly downregulated (Corr, 2008; Nash et al., 2012). Approach motivation is also associated with relative left-hemispheric and

dopaminergic activity characterized by feelings of vitality and confidence (Coan & Allen, 2004; Harmon-Jones & Allen, 1997; Pizzagalli, Sherwood, Henriques, & Davidson, 2005). Together, the motivational clarity and freedom from anxious uncertainty may support a resonant sense of vigor that, although arising from the same approach-motivated roots, can feel qualitatively more vivid than fleeting or superficial states of pleasure (cf. Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & King, 2009; Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008). People label this experience as meaningful and not just merely happy because, upon reflection, the smaller subset of goal-relevant perceptions is internally consistent and vigorous goal engagement feels supported by the (selective) subset of clear perceptions, purposes, and justifications.

The link between approach motivation and meaning is evident in the pattern of correlations shown in *Table 1* among approach motivation-related and meaning-related variables from the same three samples that revealed links between anxiety and meaninglessness. In Study 1 (McGregor, 2012) all six dispositional variables related to approach motivation (Approach Motivation, BAS Reward Sensitivity, BAS Drive, BAS Fun-Seeking, Power, and Action Control) significantly predicted Hope with an average r = .41. In the two other studies three of the four approach motivation-related variables (Approach Motivation, BAS Reward Sensitivity, and BAS Drive) significantly predicted Presence of Meaning in life with an average r = .22. The only approach-motivation scale included in those studies that did not predict Presence of Meaning was BAS Fun-Seeking. The difficulty of fun in sustaining meaning is consistent with the view of reliable incentives as being those which are less attainable and therefore less vulnerable to habituation. Fun and thrills are notorious for becoming boring after repeated experience makes people blasé. People still seem to gravitate toward them, however, perhaps due to difficulties in affective forecasting beyond the first blush of excitement (cf. Sheldon, Gunz, Nichols, & Ferguson, 2010). In any case, in both data sets, all four of the approach-related dispositions, including BAS Fun-Seeking significantly predicted Search for Meaning with an average r = .21. The consistent positive correlations of approach motivation with meaning seeking are consistent with our view that, while the aversive experience of BIS activation motivates the desire to find meaning, approach motivation mediates the experience of seeking and finding it (for experimental evidence of these dual roles of BIS and approach motivation, see McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010; McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010).

A popular scale for measuring dispositional approach motivation (and the one used in the Table 1 data) is the Promotion Focus scale (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002). Its items emphasize attentiveness to information related to moving toward personal ideals, such as, "I typically strive to accomplish my ideals." It has been theoretically and empirically linked to approach motivation (Higgins, 1997; Summerville & Roese, 2008) and has been linked to patterns of brain activity related to approach motivation (Amodio et al., 2004), and in our data it is significantly correlated with hope, presence of meaning, and search for meaning (see Table 1). In all three of the studies that generated the data in Table 1 this measure of approach motivation also significantly correlated with BAS Reward Sensitivity (rs = .48, .59, .52, ps < .001), BAS Drive (rs = .32, .30, .34, ps < .001), and to a lesser but still significant effect with BAS Fun-Seeking (rs = .17, .22, .14, ps < .05).

Why should a common measure of approach motivation focus on approach of ideals, rather than approach of more down to earth incentives like fun or chocolate? And why should approach motivation correlate least strongly with the ap-

proach of fun? Hedonic fun can be so easily frustrated or habituated to that it may be relatively unreliable as a way to sustain approach motivation. The kinds of incentives that best sustain approach motivation and meaning may therefore be the more idealistic kind. If so, the promotion of transcendent ideals may be particularly effective at relieving anxiety.

ARE IDEALS PARTICULARLY GOOD AT RELIEVING ANXIETY?

Are ideals more effective than temporal goals at relieving anxiety? Studies have demonstrated that idealistic convictions are associated with neural indices of reduced anxiety (i.e., amplitude of event-related negativity in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex; Inzlicht, McGregor, Hirsh, & Nash, 2009). Moreover, a recent study directly tested whether idealistic or concrete devotion would be more strongly associated with reduced anxiety, as indexed by muted activity in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex. Participants were preselected based on their equally high scores for professed love of God and of chocolate. They were then confronted with an anxiety induction, followed by a randomly assigned chance to express and elaborate on either their love of God, love of chocolate, or a mundane control-condition experience that was not related to God or chocolate. Results indicated that, compared to participants in the control condition, those in the chocolate condition had significant reductions on the neural measure of anxiety. Participants in the God condition, however, had significantly lower scores than participants in the chocolate condition (McGregor, Nash, Prentice, Hirsh, & Inzlicht, 2012). These results are consistent with the idea that although engagement with concrete incentives (like chocolate and instrumental success) can activate approach-motivated processes and relieve anxiety, engagement with idealistic incentives may do so more powerfully. Analysis of what participants wrote in their elaborations about their love of chocolate is also consistent with our analysis of why idealistic incentives may be more reliable than concrete ones. Participants were poetic about their love of chocolate, but they were also aware of associated conflicts related to cost, health, and appearance. In contrast, elaborations on love of God contained far fewer conflicts.

How is it that people can feel so free from conflict about their ideals, given that there are no clearly objective referents, and how chronically people disagree with partisan vehemence on idealistically charged matters? One might even expect ideals to be more fraught with conflict than temporal incentives due to their inherent ambiguity. The answer may lie partly in the introspective privacy of idealistic commitments. People can nurture preferred idiosyncratic ideals in the privacy of their own imaginations (a motivated reasoning process that might be spurred on by anxiety). Once engaged the ideals can activate approach-motivation processes that can make inconsistent ideals seem irrelevant. This may be why idealistic devotion can tend toward extremism and radical overestimation of social consensus: even after seeing a list of 10 diverse opinions for value-laden social issues like capital punishment and abortion, idealistically engaged people still tend to estimate approximately 80% social consensus for their own preferred opinion (McGregor & Jordan, 2007; McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang, 2005; McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001). Once cognitively sequestered into a partisan position, they can then preserve their idealistic devotion by selectively associating with others who

share their idealistic orientation (Festinger, 1954; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956; Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998).

APPROACHING IDEALISTIC MEANINGS IN PERSONAL GOALS

Personal goals appear to contribute to meaning in life to the extent that the goals have idealistic integrity, that is, are congruent with participants' life-guiding values and symbolic of an ideal personal identity (McGregor & Little, 1998; Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009). Evidence that the idealistic integrity that confers meaning to personal projects is approach motivated comes from other studies showing that participants' self-ratings of the extent to which personal projects have idealistic integrity are highly correlated with self-ratings of the extent to which they are approach motivated (McGregor et al., 2007, Study 3; McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010, Study 3; McGregor et al., in press, Study 2). In a recent study, for example (McGregor, 2012, Study 1) participants listed their four most prominent personal goals in life, and then rated each on eight dimensions, four related to Idealistic Integrity and four related to Approach Motivation. The Idealistic Integrity dimensions were related to value congruence, conviction, self-identity, and idealism, which were all intercorrelated at .5 or greater. The Approach Motivation dimensions related to approaching incentives, determination to overcome obstacles, confidence in success, and perceived competence, and were also all intercorrelated at .5 or greater. Idealistic Integrity (alpha = .87) and Approach (alpha = .86) composites comprised of the averages of the four relevant dimensions correlated at $r = .71$, and they cohered in a single factor accounting for 61% of the variance in a principal components analysis. These findings are consistent with our past research showing that idealistic integrity and approach motivation are intimately intertwined in goal regulation and the experience of meaning.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the view of meaning as arising from idealistically approach-motivated goals comes from research on compensatory conviction and reactive approach motivation (RAM). Experimentally manipulated anxious uncertainties cause surges in idealistic conviction that mediate the engagement of approach motivation (McGregor et al., 2007; McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010, Studies 3 & 4; Nash et al., 2011). These same and related anxious uncertainty manipulations also cause surges in self-reported meaning in personal goals and identities, and on a meaning-seeking scale (McGregor et al., 2001; McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2009; see also Landau, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Martens, 2006; Landau, Greenberg, & Sullivan, 2009; Landau, Greenberg, Sullivan, Routledge, & Arndt, 2009; Vess et al., 2009). Indeed, the tendency to spontaneously defend against anxious experiences with defensively idealistic and meaningful thoughts and actions has been woven in various ways into most of the prominent theories of threat and defense in social psychology.

From the RAM perspective, idealistic commitment is a lever for activating approach-motivated states that shield people from the anxiety of everyday life and existential reflection. The idealism, approach motivation, and absence of anxiety create a rewardingly meaningful cognitive and motivational state, and thereby become negatively reinforced and habitual in anxious circumstances. In sum, just as people escape from anxiety by engaging concrete and immediate incentives

and experiences (Baumeister, 1991), we propose that they can also use ideals for the same purposes of escape. In both cases, approach-motivation processes are engaged, attention becomes constrained to the domain of the incentive, and un-related anxieties recede. Paradoxically, then, idealism may be another mode of escaping from an anxious self.

ANXIETY AND REACTIVE APPROACH MOTIVATION (RAM): INTEGRATING THE THREAT AND COMPENSATORY DEFENSE LITERATURE

Over the past 30 years research has demonstrated that various psychological threats cause people to become more idealistic and meaning seeking. Theories vie to account for this intriguing tendency. Most of the theories are based on meta-phors of a fundamental commodity that is depleted by the threat and restored by the compensatory defense. Some of the findings in support of each theory are uncontroversial, because the studies focus on threats and defenses that are in the same domain. Same-domain compensation does not call out for penetrating motivational explanations. It seems as obvious as stating that when people lose some money, they exert effort get money back. The story becomes more compli-cated, however, when research demonstrates, as it has amply done, that various threats (e.g., to cognitive-consistency, relationships, worth, or immortality) can interchangeably cause extreme beliefs, relationship illusions, self-enhancements, intergroup biases, religious extremes, hostility, risk-taking, etc. (reviewed in Nash et al., 2011). Such radical fluid compensation findings stretch the credibility of each specific-commodity-restoration explanations. Prominent theories have explained such wide-ranging compensatory reactions to threats by proposing broad and vaguely defined commodities. As compensatory reactions appear more and more fluid, the theories then stretch the commodity metaphor around the contours of the phenomenon. For example:

   (a) Cognitive Dissonance and other balance, uncertainty, and meaning theorists contend that the critical commodity is cognitive consistency—having cognitions that "fit" with one another (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999; Hogg, 2007; Van den Bos, 2009), or, more specifically, having cognitive and perceptual associations that are expected (Heine et al., 2006; Proulx et al., 2012). Dissonant or conflicting per-ceptions, thoughts, or experiences are aversive because they violate and deplete this sense of meaningful cognitive consistency. To restore this resource, people rationalize, bolster, and selectively attend to subsets of their perceptions, beliefs, or experiences that fit together better. From this perspective threats that may not seem to be about consistency, like mortality salience, failure, and attachment sepa-ration, are aversive because they violate expected associations, and defenses re-lated to worldview defense, self-enhancement, and relationship bolstering serve to maintain meaning by restoring expected associations (e.g., Heine et al., 2006).

   (b) Terror Management theorists contend that the critical commodity is a sense of immortality (Greenberg et al., 1997). Reminders of death and other threats are aversive because they deplete this sense of immortality. To restore this people try to become "symbolically immortal" by cleaving to "worldview defensive" ideals

of worth and value that are prescribed by their relatively immortal cultures. From this perspective, if other threats like inconsistency, failure, and attachment separation cause the same defensive reactions as mortality salience it is because they undermine people's sense of symbolic immortality. The various defensive reactions that have been found in response to cognitive consistency, worldview defense, self-enhancement, and relationship bolstering serve to indirectly restore that sense of immortality (e.g., Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008).

(c) Self-Affirmation theorists contend that the critical commodity is a general sense of "moral and adaptive adequacy" (Steele, 1988), sometimes more simply referred to as self-worth, self-image, self-esteem, or self-evaluation (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Tesser, 1988, 2000). Failures, conflicts, uncertainties, and other threats are aversive because they deplete this sense of moral and adaptive adequacy. To restore it people exaggerate or focus on personal ideals of worth or value. From this perspective, threats such as inconsistency, mortality salience, and attachment separation are aversive because they violate "self-integrity" perceptions of adaptive adequacy, and defenses related to cognitive consistency, worldview defense, self-enhancement, and relationship bolstering serve to restore this global resource of self-integrity or adaptive adequacy (Sherman & Cohen, 2006).

(d) Attachment and belongingness theorists (e.g., Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) identify the critical commodity as belonging or relationship security. Rejections and separations are aversive because they deplete a vital sense of security. To restore this, people may idealize their partners and relationships, present themselves as more appealing, and engage in other relationship preserving reactions (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). Beyond such direct restoration efforts, however, some have proposed that other threats like mortality salience and failure are aversive because they violate perceptions of felt security, and defenses related to worldview defense and self-enhancement serve to restore felt security (Hart et al., 2005; Leary et al., 1995; Wiseman & Koole, 2003).

All four theoretical orientations account for the same kinds of diverse compensatory reactions by positing superordinate commodity that subsumes the rest. As it stands, such competing (or sometimes mutually ignoring) critical commodity theories have accumulated impressive empirical support, but there is scant consensus on what the critical commodity really is. Critical tests go back and forth, with no clear resolution (cf. Greenwald, 2012). This may be because in some sense they are all correct, but in our opinion the accounts miss a more basic motivational process that underlies them all. The RAM perspective proposes a process rather than a commodity-based explanation for instances of radical compensation (i.e., in which the threat and defense are in ostensibly different domains altogether). RAM does not require one to posit an overarching critical psychological commodity at all. Anxious experiences cause RAM because approach motivation relieves anxiety and is therefore negatively reinforced in anxious circumstances. People are accordingly drawn to various idealistic defenses, including cognitive consistency convictions, worldview defenses, self-worth affirmations, and relationship security idealizations that activate or reflect approach motivation (McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010; Nash et al., 2011). We propose that appreciating these shared

motivational roots might help integrate the threat and defense literature in a parsimonious way.

All of the categories of threats listed above cause anxiety (Nash et al., 2011; Proulx et al., 2012). They also all cause implicit, neural, behavioral, and personal-project evidence of RAM (McGregor et al., 2007; McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010; McGregor et al., 2012; McGregor, Nash, & Inzlicht, 2009; Nash et al., 2011; Nash, McGregor, & Inzlicht, 2010). Moreover, there is evidence that the idealistic defenses interchangeably aroused by the threats are all associated with approach motivation (e.g., Amodio et al., 2004; Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009; Harmon-Jones et al., 2012; Impett, Gordon, Kogan, Oveis, Gable, & Keltner, 2010; Leonardelli, Lakin, & Arkin, 2007; McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010; Nash et al., 2011) and all relieve varieties of anxious uncertainty (Greenberg, Arndt, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2001; Hart et al., 2005; Koole, Smeets, Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999; McGregor, 2006; Proulx & Heine, 2008). The RAM account of idealistic defense and meaning-making therefore integrates the social psychological literature on threat and fluid compensation defenses in a way that moots arguments over a critical psychological commodity.

It is important to emphasize that this does not mean that there cannot be a tendency to respond to certain threats in a relevant way. Presumably it is advantageous to respond to threats with domain-relevant responses if possible. There is some evidence that different kinds of threats do tend to preferentially stimulate thematically related kinds of defenses (e.g., Sheldon & Gunz, 2009). These kinds of "matching" findings may reflect the fact that, as in real life, domain-specific primes are often built into the threats, and these primes constrain the domain of defense. Control threats, for example, tend to preferentially cause defenses that restore control, likely because cues inherent in the control threats prime control-related defenses (e.g., Shepherd, Kay, Landau, & Keefer, 2011). If people are not aware of the domain of the threat, however, or if there is no obvious way to directly address the threat, then people sometimes turn to merely palliative idealistic reactions.

GROUP IDEALS

The RAM account helps make sense of why people defend their group identifications so zealously, and why extremes of idealistic conviction and meaning so often occur in intergroup contexts (Hogg, 2007). Meaningful groups often extend into the past, where their essence can come to be seen as representing an idealized golden age of entitlements. Group norms and ideals with historical inertia can also become "injunctified" as confident, utopian ideologies (Kay et al., 2011). Ideological groups can then catalyze the radicalization process by helping to package, endorse, and justify self-serving ideological extremes. Personal responsibility for scrutiny of jingoistic ideals can be diffused to the group, and partisan identification with the worth and value of a communal group can disguise what might otherwise be more easily recognized as egocentricity. Idealistic meanings carried by groups also have more of an aura of inevitability, even transcendence, than idiosyncratic personal ideals, and so may feel safer from challenge, at least among the in-group. This convenient and efficient function of groups as bearers of self-worth and value ideals may partly explain why people so zealously defend their

groups and worldview after various threats (Greenberg et al., 1997; Hogg, 2007; Sherman & Kim, 2005).

CONSERVATIVE IDEALS

Conservative groups may be particularly valuable as levers for approach motivation and idealistic meaning because they are more pervasively idealistic than liberal groups. Whereas liberal morality turns primarily on ideals of harm-reduction and fairness, conservative morality revolves around ideals of loyalty, authority, and sanctity as well (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Conservative ideology also emphasizes familiar tradition and absence of change (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), both of which focus on expected associations and familiar narratives that would be less likely to activate anxious uncertainty (Proulx et al., 2012). The more idealistic and cognitively consistent aspects of conservative groups may thereby make them particularly useful for maintaining consensus, social norms, and cohesion (Graham & Haidt, 2010; cf. Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008). The use of force and punitive aggression promoted by conservative ideologies may also make them particularly appealing as levers for approach motivation and meaning (Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987). Anger and power are closely linked to approach motivation (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Keltner et al., 2003), and so ideologies that wield them should be more able to activate approach motivation. Indeed, moral outrage and worldview defensive reactions to threats are often mediated by anger (Lambert et al., 2010; Mullen & Skitka, 2006). In sum, although one can be reactively extreme for either liberal or conservative ideals, conservatism may be more appealing and conducive to sustaining approach motivation because it is more idealistic, consistent, and comfortable exercising power and aggression.

RELIGIOUS IDEALS

The reactive idealism and approach motivation account may also help explain the idealistic, group-focused, and often conservative leanings of religious devotion. Religions have historically served as cultural vehicles for ideals. Through myths, symbols, rituals, and injunctions, religions purvey consensual ideals of worth, value, and belongingness, that people use to guide their action (Smith, 1986). Converts relate shiny experiences of meaning characterized by a clear path to follow and a confident way of being, free from the anxiety that used to characterize their lives. They describe their experiences in hypomanic terms, relating a freedom from uncertainty and anxiety, boundless energy, soaring confidence, and metaphors of harmony, light, and clarity (James, 1902/1958). Such experiential descriptions are very similar to those associated with approach motivation (Drake & Myers, 2006), and indeed, reactive religious conviction does appear to be an approach-motivated phenomenon (McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010). Moreover, the maintenance of religious devotion is usually intertwined with a sense of community and, in anxious times it tends toward conservative emphases on purity, consistency, tradition, and power hierarchy (Armstrong, 2000). Despite the noble intentions of most religious ideals and the universal emphasis on love and compassion in the world's religious traditions (Armstrong, 2006), approach-motivated

processes aroused by ideals can obscure others' perspectives (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), which could lead to the paradoxical phenomena of ideological and religious bigotry and violence (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

ANTISOCIAL IDEALS

An approach-motivation understanding of ideals helps explain why ideological conflicts can be so intractable and hostile. People gravitate toward idealistic meanings for relief from anxiety because their worldly goals are not able to sustain sanguine approach-motivated states, either due to frustration, uncertainty, or habituation (McGregor, Nash, & Prentice, 2010, Study 3). By activating approach-motivated states, idealistic meanings provide powerful relief from anxiety (Inzlicht & Tullet, 2010; Nash et al., 2012). They replace the anxiety with a highly rewarding sense of invigoration and confidence brought about by activating similar dopaminergic circuits as those activated by cocaine (Berridge, 2007; Schultz, 2010). The approach-motivated states associated with idealistic meanings also tend to be biased toward personal perspectives. As described above, approach-motivated states sharpen and level social reality in a way that is biased toward internally consistent and personal-goal-supportive subsets of available information. Zealous and extreme ideological states can therefore make people relatively unable to see past the clear motivational structure of their own meanings to appreciate others' perspectives (McGregor & Jordan, 2007; McGregor et al., 2005).

Further, when one does become aware of other perspectives that contradict one's own cherished (and apparently objectively correct) ideals and meanings, hostility is intuitive because anger is an approach-motivated state (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). Moreover, approach-motivated states are conducive to risk-taking and impulsivity (Cavallo et al., 2009; Knoch et al., 2006; Knutson & Greer, 2008; Nash, 2012). From an approach motivation perspective, then, it can then be understood why the quest for meaning can sometimes become so callous and antisocial in the name of high ideals. Perpetrators' states of approach motivation may crowd victim's perspectives out of awareness while at the same time promoting extreme, risky, and aggressive behavior.

Such antisocial tendencies might be due to the motivational myopia that can accompany approach motivation (Harmon-Jones et al., 2012; Harmon-Jones & Gable, 2009), but it might also arise from direct suppression of vigilance for error, indexed by activity in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC; Nash et al., 2012). Meaningful and approach motivated states suppress ACC activity, which in turn reduces anxiety but may also make people less able to change course and regulate their behavior effectively (Bush, Luu, & Posner, 2000; Heatherton, 2011). Indeed, religious extremists, psychopaths, and delinquents tend to have lower chronic ACC activation (Birbaumer et al., 2005; Inzlicht et al., 2009; Kiehl et al., 2001). Anxious worldly concerns, even of life and death, may come to pale in contrast to the rewards offered by eager immersion in self-righteous and hostile ideologies. The meanings may become the psychological equivalents of narcissism and risky addictions. They feel good for the individual but can have self-defeating and antisocial consequences (cf. Baumeister & Vohs, 2001).

PROSOCIAL IDEALS

From our goal-regulation perspective the best way to mute anxiety is to have reliable ideals to engage for the activation of approach motivation processes (which powerfully and automatically inhibit anxiety). Frustrations, habituations, and the looming awareness of mortality can introduce anxiety and take the glow off of temporal goals, even those that serve basic needs. A tenet of most theories of meaning and most religious traditions, therefore, is that what people eventually require is a vista of transcendent ideals to identify with. Hinduism is very explicit in describing this process. People begin their lives on the path of desire for pleasure and success. After habituation, people then long to yoke themselves to transcendent ideals. When they idealistically renounce the path of desire, they achieve liberation from limitations (Smith, 1986). The world's religious traditions have a long history of attempting to provide technologies for orienting people toward meaningful and prosocial ideals and goals. Love and compassionate action, for example, are the central themes in all religious traditions (Armstrong, 2006), even if in practice they are sometimes ignored as anxious people pander after superstitious, political, nationalistic, and partisan accretions of their faiths (Armstrong, 2000).

Indeed, merely reminding people of their religious beliefs (by having them answer a single question at the beginning of the study about the religious belief system they most identify with) reverses the unprimed tendency toward reactive hostility and intergroup bias in anxious circumstances, and replaces it with reactive magnanimity. After having religious beliefs primed in this way, participants in five studies reacted to mortality and uncertainty threats by becoming significantly more benevolent in the experimentally manipulated anxiety conditions than the neutral control conditions (Schumann, McGregor, Nash, & Ross, 2012).

Philosophical and secular approaches to meaning also emphasize ideals of kindness and compassion. Buddhism, for example, began as a deliberate intention to strip away the supernatural accretions found in Hinduism and focus squarely on technologies for coping with anxiety. Some of the most basic spiritual exercises in Buddhist traditions are grounded in ideals of loving-kindness through identification with compassionate ideals, as exemplified by Bodhisattvas (enlightened ones). Confucianism, which forwarded the first version of the golden rule, is also anchored in the basic tenet of mindful focus on the perspective of others (Smith, 1986). Secular humanism is similarly grounded in benevolent ideals of care for others, social justice, and social progress. It should not matter whether the benevolent ideals are religious, philosophical, or secular. Anxious experiences incline people to act in accordance with whatever norms or ideals are salient (e.g., Gailliot, Stillman, Schmeichel, Maner, & Plant, 2008; Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992; Rothschild, Abdollahi, & Pyszczynski, 2009).

From our perspective anxious circumstances make people free-floating idealists, eager to adhere to whatever plausible ideals are salient. If hostile, egoistic, or jingoistic ideals are salient, then those will be adhered to. One of the functions of religion may have been to continually remind people of prosocial ideals in order to counter antisocial and aggressive reactions to anxiety (Armstrong, 2006). Daily prayers, chants, rituals, and observances may have served this function. If idealistic RAM is the essence of compensatory defense, then with or without religion,

finding ways to make benevolent ideals more chronically accessible could help ensure that meaningful relief from anxiety is attained in a more prosocial than antisocial way.

CONCLUSION

We have advanced a RAM theory of threat and defense that holds promise for a parsimonious explanation of meaningful and idealistic defensive reactions to threats. We suggest that threats exhibit their effects because they create motivational conflict, which leads to anxious uncertainty. RAM relieves this anxiety, and we can understand idealistic and ideological defenses as levers for RAM. Though both concrete and idealistic pursuits can provide avenues for approach motivation, we submit that idealistic ones are both more reliable and more potent. This is why people tend to become idealistically inclined when threatened, and why idealistic pursuits feel particularly meaningful.

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