Defensive Pride and Consensus: Strength in Imaginary Numbers

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Failure (Study 1) and attachment separation thoughts (Study 2) caused exaggerated consensus estimates for personal beliefs about unrelated social issues. This compensatory consensus effect was most pronounced among defensively proud individuals, that is, among those with the combination of high explicit and low implicit self-esteem (Study 1) and the combination of high attachment avoidance and low attachment anxiety (Study 2). In Study 3, another form of defensive pride, narcissism, was associated with exaggerated consensual worldview defense after a system-injustice threat. In Study 4, imagined consensus reduced subjective salience of proud individuals' troubling thoughts. Compensatory consensus is seen as a kind of defensive self-affirmation that defensively proud people turn to for insulation from distressing thoughts.

Keywords: threat, implicit self-esteem, attachment style, narcissism, defensive consensus

> My logic prevails because it is the only logic . . . if others do not consent, they are idiots. ("neurotic pride" statement from one of Karen Horney's clients; Horney, 1950, p. 184)

After the shocking events of September 11, 2001, American patriotism surged, flags flew everywhere, and presidential approval ratings skyrocketed. Reflecting the fervor for consensus, a major TV network fired a popular talk show host for making unpatriotic comments. More important, politicians and citizens rallied behind an invasion to depose Iraq's anti-American leader, despite international disapproval and dubious evidence linking Iraq to the September 11th events.

Amid the flurry of flag-waving and bombing, some commentators expressed dismay at what they saw as an irrational upsurge in jingoism. They interpreted the zealous consensus as a psychological defense for soothing distress and were outraged and embarrassed by the malignant revenge it appeared to be feeding. Others chided the "psychological defensiveness" position as naive and argued that the surge in patriotism was a pragmatic response to a very real threat. Consensus was not irrational or psychologically defensive, they argued. It was clear-headed and practical under the banner of "united we stand, divided we fall." When under attack, sensible people should band together for security just like other animals do.

The present research investigates the plausibility of the idea that people exaggerate consensus for psychologically defensive purposes. It does this by assessing whether poignant threats can cause exaggerated social consensus for cherished beliefs about issues that are far removed from the topics of the threats. It also investigates whether such compensatory consensus reactions might be most evident among defensively proud individuals known to be particularly inclined toward self-serving reactions to psychological threats. Finally, we also investigate the idea that exaggerated consensus is appealing because it masks troubling thoughts. In Studies 1–3 we expected defensive consensus to be most pronounced among individuals with personality profiles related to repression. In Study 4 we directly assessed whether consensus would insulate proud people from concern about troubling thoughts. If defensively proud individuals with a penchant for repression prove particularly likely to react to threats with compensatory consensus about issues not related to the eliciting threats, and if compensatory consensus can be shown to effectively mask unrelated threatening thoughts, then the plausibility of the consensus-as-psychological-defense position would be supported. If exaggerated consensus after threat were strictly a clear-headed and pragmatic response, then it would not be most pronounced among psychologically defensive individuals with a tendency toward biased thinking, nor would it mask awareness of the eliciting threat. Clear-headed, pragmatic responding would presumably benefit from ready access to accurate facts.

Exaggerated Consensus

There are three main reasons suggested by social psychological literature for why exaggerated consensus for personal beliefs might be a rewarding reaction to self-threats. First, exaggerating similarity to others might foster social support. Threatened people tend to turn to others for security, safety, validation, information, and support (Morris et al., 1976; Schachter, 1959; Swann & Predmore, 1985; Wisman & Koole, 2003), and interpersonally anxious people and those with low self-esteem are particularly likely to exaggerate similarities and interdependencies with close others when upset, presumably to nurture a sense of safety (Mikulincer, Orbach, & Iavnieli, 1998; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). This kind of meek consensus clinging is limited to consensus with close others. Mikulincer et al. (1998, Studies 4, 5, and 6) found that when interpersonally anxious participants, who think relatively poorly of themselves, were threatened or distressed, they exaggerated their similarities with close others but not with people in general. In contrast, people with more avoidant attachment styles, who tend to have more positive self-views, played down their similarity and consensus with close others when distressed. To ensure that we were not studying the social-support kind of defensive consensus, Studies 1 and 2 in the present research assessed imagined consensus with generalized, hypothetical others, and all four studies focused on reactions of participants with highly positive self-views.

A second reason for exaggerated consensus after threat is that consensus might appeal to a momentary need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) in response to the preoccupation and impairment of cognitive resources that threats may cause (cf. Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002). Imagining that everyone has the same opinion may be relieving when one does not have cognitive resources available to cope with complexity and to consider multiple perspectives. Indeed, high dispositional need for cognitive closure and temporary restriction of cognitive resources have been associated with intergroup bias, with tendencies to form and use consensual stereotypes, and with tendencies to like homogeneous and self-resembling groups (Kruglanski, Shah, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2002; Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998). It is important to note here that need for closure and other forms of conservative thinking have, if anything, a slightly negative, not positive, relation to self-esteem (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Shah et al., 1998). Thus, if defensive consensus proves highest among the proudest of participants, as we predict, this would argue against the operation of need for closure mechanisms.

A third reason for exaggerated consensus after threat is that feeling like one's ideas and values are widely endorsed could affirm a more general image of oneself as correct and "adaptively and morally adequate" (Steele, 1988, p. 262) when self-threats undermine confidence (cf. A. J. Smith, 1960). Several lines of research support the plausibility of this third view and Allport's (1943, p. 466) assertion that various ego defenses are capable of operating according to a kind of "fluid compensation" (Steele, 1988; Tesser, Crepaz, Collins, Cornell, & Beach, 2000). According to this view a psychological defense does not need to address a specific threat to effectively relieve distress. It is enough if a defense affirms any adaptive aspect of the threatened individual. Some suggestive evidence for a self-affirming, fluid-compensation function of consensus shows that exaggerated consensus is highest after failure, in reference to attractive others, on value-laden as opposed to factual issues and for issues with high self-relevance (reviewed in Marks & Miller, 1987).

The present research attempts to extend the evidence for this third, self-affirming function of exaggerated consensus after self-threats. We investigate whether exaggerated consensus after threats is most pronounced among defensively proud individuals who are particularly inclined toward other kinds of self-aggrandizing defensive reactions. Following Horney (1950, p. 184), we investigate whether defensively proud people respond to threats with "arrogant righteousness." If compensatory consensus reactions prove strongest among defensively proud people, then this would argue against operation of the other two functions of consensus in the present research. As reviewed above, exaggerating consensus to secure nurturance is most pronounced among anxious individuals with humble self-views, not arrogant ones with proud self-views, and if anything, there is a slightly negative, not a positive, relation between need for cognitive closure and self-esteem. It should also be noted that although securely attached individuals also tend to have relatively proud self-views and react to threats by bringing thoughts about close relationships to mind (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000), they do not distort social perceptions after threats to make themselves feel better (Mikulincer et al., 1998). Their pride appears to be nondefensive.

Forms of Defensive Pride

Pride is a broad, general term that subsumes various kinds of explicit positive self-evaluation, dubious or justified. We use the term *defensive pride* more specifically. Consistent with seminal ideas by Adler on the "superiority complex" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, pp. 259–261) and by Horney (1950) on "neurotic pride" (pp. 86–109), there is growing evidence that some subsets of proud people are particularly defensive and that pride is sometimes a manifestation of defensiveness. In the present research, we operationalize subsets of defensive pride in three ways: as defensive high self-esteem (HSE; i.e., high explicit self-esteem belied by low implicit self-esteem), dismissive–avoidant attachment style, and narcissism. The three forms are theoretically and empirically related and have all been associated with repressive defensiveness in past theorizing and research (as reviewed below). The common theme is that they all involve an explicit focus on an ostensible self-strength, which appears to mask vulnerability. Thus, we see the three forms as manifestations of a latent defensive pride construct and, in the present research, expect them to be related to arrogant self-righteousness in the face of threats.

Defensive HSE

When confronted with self-threats, at least some people with HSE react in a variety of seemingly defensive ways that protect their rosy self-images (for partial reviews see Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Blaine & Crocker, 1993). For example, when confronted with thoughts about weakness, failure, death, and disaster, individuals with HSE fill their minds with mood-incongruent strengths and happy thoughts, which appear to keep the troubling thoughts out of awareness (Dodgson & Wood, 1998; S. M. Smith & Petty, 1995). After threats, they tend to distort

impressions of others and outgroups to make themselves look good by contrast (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Dunning, 2003), and when social groups they belong to appear in a negative light, they quickly disidentify with them (Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). They also tend to obnoxiously boast and self-promote after threats (Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). In contrast, people with low self-esteem, who seem reluctant to engage in such arrogant defenses, are more likely to stew in misery after a threat (Dutton & Brown, 1997; Heimpel, Wood, Marshall, & Brown, 2002; McGregor & Marigold, 2003). A recent review of these and other findings concluded that although self-esteem does make individuals feel good, it appears to be associated with defensiveness and to have net social costs (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; see also Paulhus, 1998; Robins & Beer, 2001).

Not all people with HSE are defensive, however. Whereas HSEs with low implicit self-esteem are particularly self-serving and defensive on various outcomes, such as dissonance reduction, unrealistic optimism, and intergroup bias, HSEs with high implicit self-esteem are usually not defensive at all (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). In the only published study we are aware of that has examined all eight cells of a Threat × Implicit Self-Esteem × Explicit Self-Esteem design, only the threatened participants with low implicit and high explicit self-esteem were defensive (McGregor & Marigold, 2003). Collapsing across implicit self-esteem in that study, however, there was a significant two-way interaction consistent with the research reviewed in the previous paragraph, such that threatened participants with high explicit self-esteem were most defensive. This is an important finding because it suggests that the unintuitive link between high self-esteem and defensiveness that has now been found in dozens of threat experiments may be driven by a defensively proud subset. In the present research, we focus on the defensively proud subset of HSE that is belied by low implicit self-esteem in an attempt to provide the first conceptual replication of the McGregor and Marigold Threat × Implicit Self-Esteem × Explicit Self-Esteem finding. Doing so would provide confidence that this operationalization of defensive self-esteem is a marker of general defensiveness in the face of threat.

Dismissive–Avoidant Attachment

We also investigate the defensive tendencies of individuals with a dismissive–avoidant attachment style. The dismissive–avoidant attachment style has been linked with nondifferentiated defensiveness, suppression and repression of distressing thoughts (Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Mikulincer, Dolev, & Shaver, 2004; Mikulincer & Florian, 2000, p. 268; Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995, p. 923), and inflation of already idealized self-views after threat (Bartholomew, 1990; Mikulincer, 1998).

Attachment style refers to patterns of relating with and experiencing close others. Whereas securely attached individuals have a secure base of belief that significant others are available to provide support when needed, insecurely attached individuals do not and thus experience relationships as potentially threatening (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). As a result, dismissive–avoidant attachment insecurity involves the tendency to arrogantly avoid and dismiss rela-

tionships as unnecessary and to see oneself as exceptionally self-sufficient and competent (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan & Morris, 1997; Collins & Read, 1990).

When faced with attachment threats, the defensive maneuvers of dismissive-avoidant adults appear remarkably similar to displacement behaviors that avoidant children use to distract themselves from their frustrated attachment needs, such as intently focusing on autonomous thoughts and activities. The exaggerated self-competence of the dismissive-avoidant adult appears to serve a similar displacement function, providing a cognitive refuge by supplanting attachment insecurities and self threats (Bartholomew, 1990). Indeed, Mikulincer (1998) has proposed that avoidant individuals' "idealization of the self . . . might reflect the action of repression, by which information that is not accepted as part of the self is dissociated from other, positive self-aspects" (p. 432).

We wondered whether one aspect of the exaggerated competence of dismissive-avoidant individuals may be a presumptuous tendency to see idiosyncratic personal opinions as supported by social consensus. Feeling certain that everyone agrees with one's personal beliefs may affirm a correct and competent self-image. According to Horney (1950, pp. 86, 184) the "neurotic pride" that conceals attachment wounds involves a generalized "arrogant righteousness." Accordingly, past research indicates that avoidant individuals have an affinity for authoritarian consensual beliefs. They are more likely than securely attached individuals to base social evaluations on consensual ethnic stereotypes (Mikulincer, 1997, Study 5), to react to threat with hostility against individuals who violate consensual norms (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000, Study 1), and to react to mortality salience with a consensual worldview defense that serves the purpose of keeping threatening thoughts about death out of awareness (Greenberg, Arndt, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2001; Mikulincer & Florian, 2000, Study 3).[1]

Narcissism

Narcissistic individuals are defined by their willingness to endorse statements such as, "I am more capable than other people," "I am an extraordinary person," and "if I ruled the world it would be a much better place." They defend this arrogance by derogating and lashing out against their rivals when criticized or outperformed (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia, & Webster, 2002; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). Horney (1950, pp. 86–109,187–213) claimed that narcissistic, "neurotic pride" (in contrast to "healthy pride") relies on inflated self-evaluations to cover up insecurities about the self and attachment. Kernberg (1975) proposed that "grandiosity . . . and feelings of inferiority

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[1] Exaggerated consensus may be appealing for anxiously insecure individuals as well. Like dismissive–avoidant individuals, anxiously attached individuals are more inclined than secure individuals toward consensual world view defense (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). There is reason to believe, however, that they may be drawn to consensus for affiliative rather than self-affirmation purposes (cf. Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). Moreover, anxious individuals tend to ruminate about distressing thoughts (Mikulincer & Orbach, 1995). It is unlikely, therefore, that they would use consensus as a self-affirmation to take their minds off of threats. Indeed, Mikulincer and Florian (2000, Study 3) found that exaggerated world view defense after threat decreased threat accessibility for avoidant but not anxious participants.

may coexist in narcissistic personalities without affecting each other" (p. 331) and that compartmentalization may be accomplished by a kind of splitting off of negative self-views. Like Horney, Kernberg as well as Kohut (1971) blamed narcissism on early attachment experiences and theorized that parental abandonment, rejection, and indifference gives rise to excessive libidinal investment in the self. Accordingly, prevailing clinical definitions state that narcissists are egocentric, self-aggrandizing, boastful, and overly reactive to perceived threats (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and that their defensive high self-regard protects them from unpleasant realities and feelings of inferiority and shame (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Pulver, 1970).

Empirical research has found that narcissism is associated with positive illusions about the self (John & Robins, 1994) and with self-deceptive enhancement, arrogance, and hostility, particularly after failure (Johnson, Vincent, & Ross, 1997; Paulhus, 1998; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). Narcissism is also significantly associated with the defensive combination of high explicit self-esteem, low implicit self-esteem (Jordan et al., 2003), and dismissive–avoidant attachment style (Gjerde, Onishi, & Carlson, 2004; Neumann & Bierhoff, 2004; cf. Mikulincer, 1995).

Overview

Two common themes are apparent across the three manifestations of defensive pride. First, people with defensive self-esteem, dismissive–avoidant attachment style, and narcissistic tendencies are high on themselves. They see themselves as better than others, especially when they are under threat. The form of their grandiosity investigated in the present research is self-righteously exaggerated consensus for personal beliefs, that is, "I'm sure everyone agrees with me" (Studies 1 and 2), "and if they don't they must be stupid" (Study 3). The present research seeks to demonstrate for the first time, with convergent evidence across three different operationalizations of self-threat, that defensively proud people react to threats with exaggerated social consensus estimates. Second, as reviewed in the previous section, there is theoretical and empirical suggestion that all three forms of defensive pride are related to defensive thought control (suppression and repression). The second novel hypothesis we investigate is whether focusing on self-righteous consensus estimates might be one of the strategies that proud individuals use to insulate themselves from troubling thoughts (Study 4).

In Study 1 we investigate whether individuals with HSE belied by low implicit self-esteem will be most likely to react to a failure threat with exaggerated consensus. In Study 2 we investigate whether individuals with the dismissive–avoidant attachment style will react to an attachment separation threat with exaggerated consensus. In Study 3 we focus on whether individuals with high scores on a narcissism scale will react to a system-injustice threat with consensual worldview defense. Finally, Study 4 investigates whether imagined consensus can reduce subjective salience of proud individuals' troubling thoughts.

Study 1

Study 1 investigates whether explicitly proud individuals with low implicit self-esteem are particularly inclined toward exaggerated consensus claims after a self-threat (failure). Past research has found this kind of pride to be particularly narcissistic, self-serving, and defensive (Bosson et al., 2003; Jordan et al., 2003; McGregor & Marigold, 2003).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Thirty-eight introductory psychology students (12 men, 26 women; median age = 19 years) participated in exchange for partial course credit. The experiment was advertised as investigating "self, categorization, and attitudes." A male researcher ran up to 3 participants through the experiment at a time, in separate cubicles. For the "self" portion of the study, participants responded to paper-and-pencil demographic questions, a self-esteem scale, and other self-related questionnaire items that bolstered the cover story and provided some distance between the self-esteem assessment and the threat. They then proceeded to the computerized categorization component of the study, which included the assessment of implicit self-esteem, the threat manipulation, and then a reassessment of implicit self-esteem. The reassessment of implicit self-esteem functioned both as a manipulation check of whether the failure threat would affect implicit self-esteem and as a delay/distraction between the threat and the dependent measure. We incorporated a postthreat delay/distraction in all of the studies in the present research, mindful of the possibility that compensatory defenses might emerge only after a proximal period of threat suppression. Terror management researchers have found that compensatory distal defenses against death thoughts (e.g., worldview defenses) emerge only after an initial period of proximal death-thought suppression (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Given our past findings that various self-threats can cause compensatory reactions that resemble the distal defenses against death thoughts (McGregor & Marigold, 2003; McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001), it seemed likely to us that various threats might also cause proximal threat suppression as well.

For the main dependent variable, paper-and-pencil materials assessed participants' consensus about capital punishment and abortion opinions.

Materials

Explicit self-esteem (ESE) and implicit self-esteem (ISE). ESE was assessed with the M. Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale. Participants indicated their agreement with the 10 items from M. Rosenberg's self-esteem questionnaire using a scale anchored by 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*). Several personality measures followed the ESE assessment to bolster the cover story and separate the ESE scale from the threat manipulation. Such separation is advisable because reminding participants about their high ESE immediately prior to administration of a threat can diffuse threat and defensiveness (Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993, Study 2). ISE was assessed with an adapted version of the Implicit Associations Test (IAT; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), because the IAT is the most reliable of the ISE measurement techniques that are currently available (Cronbach's α = .88 according to Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000).

ISE is defined as an automatic and nonconscious evaluation of the self that is not introspectively identifiable (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). The IAT measures participants' automatic associations of self-related versus non-self-related words with pleasant versus unpleasant words. Participants with high ISE have particularly strong (i.e., fast) associations between self-related and positive words. We employed the adapted version of the IAT used by Jordan et al. (2003). Following Greenwald and Farnham's (2000) recommendations, latencies greater than 3,000 ms were presumed to represent distractions and were recoded as 3,000 ms (4.34% of participants responses were recoded in this way).

Failure threat manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. Those in the failure condition (*n* = 18) were

required to summarize an extremely difficult, one-page statistics passage on structural equation modeling. They first read that it was a popular tool for analyzing data in the field of psychology and that we were interested in assessing how well they could understand and summarize it in 7 min. (We thought pointing out that it was a common tool of the psychology trade would make the failure to understand it particularly poignant for the psychology student participants.) The passage was taken out of context and included complicated formulae, statistical terms, and mathematical symbols (from Pedhazur, 1982, pp. 639–640).

Participants in the success condition ($n = 20$) followed the same procedure but instead summarized a simple, one-page passage about the usefulness of statistics (from K. M. Rosenberg, 1990, pp. 3). After summarizing the passage, participants in both conditions used a 10-point scale to rate the extent to which they found it confusing, difficult to understand, or clear. These three ratings were averaged (with clarity reverse-scored) to yield an index of task difficulty, which we used as a proxy for a measure of failure. Finally, the difference between participants' ISE scores before and after the manipulation provided a check to determine whether the failure threat affected self-worth.[2]

Consensus. The main dependent variable was participants' perceived social consensus for their personal beliefs about value-laden social issues (from McGregor et al., 2001). They indicated their personal opinions about capital punishment and then abortion by examining a list of 14 diverse opinion statements for each issue and then selecting the one statement that most closely reflected their own opinion. Then, for each issue, participants estimated the percentage of people in general who would (a) "agree" and (b) "agree most" with their selected opinion. For each issue, the two consensus questions were embedded among 10 questions about personal conviction (from McGregor & Marigold, 2003). It is important to note that the list of 14 common opinions for each issue ranged across the political spectrum from far left, for example, "the benefits of abortion should be publicized by the government" and "capital punishment is absolutely never justified," to far right, for example, "to protect the rights of the unborn baby, legal abortion should never be available," and "a murderer deserves to die." The salience of such diverse opinions rules out the possibility that an exaggerated consensus effect could reflect a lack of awareness of divergent opinions.

Results and Discussion

The Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of ESE and the four-item (two from each issue) consensus scale were .84 and .77. Cronbach's alpha reliability for ISE was .79 on the first administration and .67 on the second administration (as computed by Bosson et al., 2000). As reported in previous research (e.g., Greenwald & Farnham, 2000), the correlation between ESE and ISE was nonsignificant, $r(38) = .05$, *ns*. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the three-item manipulation check of difficulty summarizing the statistics passage was .88. Participants in the failure condition rated the statistics passage as significantly more difficult ($M = 7.76$) than did participants in the success condition ($M = 4.12$), $t(36) = 5.12$, $p < .001$. In addition, there was a marginally more significant drop in ISE for participants in the failure condition ($M = 262$ ms) compared with participants in the success condition ($M = 86$ ms), $t(36) = 1.72$, $p = .09$. This finding provides some evidence that the difficult statistics exercise was experienced as a self-threat, presumably because participants perceived themselves as failing at it.

For the main analysis, threat was effect coded and continuous ISE and ESE were centered. The first-order predictors, the three second-order interaction terms, and the third-order interaction term

(Threat $\times$ ISE $\times$ ESE) were entered and interpreted simultaneously (Aiken & West, 1996) in a regression analysis with consensus as the dependent variable. Consistent with past research showing that people with high explicit self-esteem are most defensive after threats, there was a significant Threat $\times$ ESE interaction, $\beta = 0.39$, $t(30) = 2.25$, $p < .05$, such that highest defensiveness was at high ESE in the threat condition. There was also a significant Threat $\times$ ISE interaction, $\beta = 0.32$, $t(30) = 2.05$, $p < .05$, revealing highest defensiveness at low ISE in the threat condition. Most important, however, these two-way interactions were qualified by the predicted Threat $\times$ ESE $\times$ ISE interaction effect, $\beta = 0.35$, $t(30) = 2.03$, $p = .05$.[3] As shown in Figure 1, the predicted value (*PV*) of perceived consensus was greatest at high ESE and low ISE in the failure condition. Simple effect and slope analyses showed that at high ESE and low ISE, there was significantly higher perceived consensus in the failure condition (*PV* = 76%) than in the success condition (*PV* = 43%), $\beta = 1.16$, $t(30) = 2.98$, $p < .01$. The simple effect of threat did not approach significance at any of the other possible combinations of ESE and ISE (*p*s > .20). The only significant simple slope to emerge was for ESE at low ISE in the failure condition, $\beta = 1.14$, $t(30) = 2.25$, $p < .05$.[4]

The results of Study 1 support the hypothesis that defensively proud individuals react to self-threat with compensatory consensus about unrelated issues. When not under threat, the defensively proud individuals estimated that 43% of people in general would agree with their opinions about social issues. When under threat, however, their estimate jumped to 76%. This is a remarkably bold claim, considering that they had just viewed a list of 14 diverse opinions for each issue.

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[2] The reassessment of ISE involved critical-trial blocks only (i.e., no practice-trial blocks).

[3] Concern that a spurious result could possibly arise from this relatively small sample size can be eased by the fact that in the present study, explicit self-esteem, implicit self-esteem, and threat were orthogonal, ensuring representation in all cells of the design. Also, we predicted the three-way interaction a priori on the basis of previous findings in which the three-way interaction between implicit self-esteem, explicit self-esteem, and self-threat powerfully predicted opinion conviction in the direction expected in the present study (McGregor & Marigold, 2003). Moreover, when we reanalyze the data from that study using only the first 38 participants, the three-way interaction effect remains statistically significant. This indicates that the interaction effect of implicit self-esteem, explicit self-esteem, and threat is a powerful one, capable of significantly affecting opinions even in experiments with relatively small sample sizes.

[4] There was a trend toward a significant simple slope for ISE at HSE in the failure condition, $\beta = -0.68$, $t(30) = 1.64$, $p = .11$. All simple effect and slope analyses were conducted according to the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1996). For example, to find the simple slope of ISE at HSE in the failure condition, the regression with the three first-order, three second-order, and one third-order terms simultaneously entered was reconducted with ESE recentered at -1 *SD*, with failure coded as 0 and success coded as 1, and the higher order product terms recomputed from these recoded variables. The significance of the *t* for the beta of the first-order effect of ISE in this regression represents the significance of the simple slope of ISE at HSE in the failure condition.
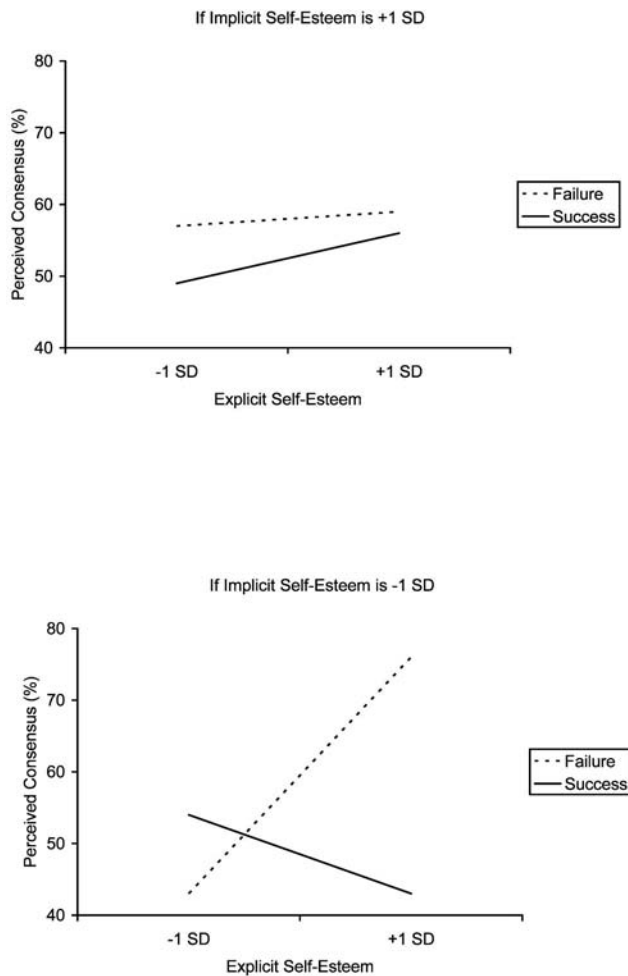
If Implicit Self-Esteem is +1 SD

If Implicit Self-Esteem is -1 SD

Figure 1. Perceived consensus about social issues as a function of implicit self-esteem, explicit self-esteem, and failure (vs. success).

Study 2

In Study 2 we extend our investigation by shifting to a dismissive–avoidant attachment-style framing of defensive pride. As was the case for HSEs with low implicit self-esteem in Study 1, we expected that avoidant individuals would react to a self-threat with arrogantly inflated assessments of social consensus for their opinions.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Fifty-four undergraduates (15 men, 39 women; median age = 19 years) participated in exchange for partial course credit or a $10 cash payment. The hypothetical separation threat in our manipulation involved imagining a move to a foreign country. Data for 2 female participants who had moved to Canada within the last year were excluded from the analyses because of the possibility that thoughts related to their actual life circumstances would bias or otherwise interfere with their participation. Data from 1 other participant was excluded because it was compromised by a computing error. A female researcher conducted the experiment with up to 3 partic-

ipants at a time in separate cubicles. Computers administered all materials and collected all data. After providing demographic information, participants completed several personality measures that bolstered the cover story. The personality questionnaire of primary interest, because of its relation to the dismissive–avoidant form of defensive pride, assessed the anxiety and avoidance dimensions of adult attachment style. After finishing the personality questionnaires, participants completed the experimental manipulation (separation threat vs. security control), followed by measures of mood and the assessment of perceived consensus for attitudes about capital punishment and abortion.

Materials

Adult attachment style. The Experience in Close Relationships (ECR) scale contains two 18-item attachment subscales: Anxiety and Avoidance (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Participants responded to each item using a scale ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Items on the Anxiety subscale refer to relationship proximity seeking fear of abandonment. Items on the Avoidance subscale refer to self-reliance and discomfort with relationship closeness. Following Brennan et al. (1998), participants who scored low on Anxiety and high on Avoidance were considered to have a dismissive–avoidant form of insecure attachment. Those who scored high on Anxiety and low on Avoidance were considered to have a preoccupied–anxious form of insecure attachment. Dismissive and preoccupied categorizations based on dimensional ECR Avoidance and Anxiety scores correspond to, but have better predictive validity than, the original corresponding categorical measures of avoidant and anxious–ambivalent attachment (Brennan et al., 1998).

The main hypothesis in the present study was that the three-way interaction between the two ECR subscales and threat would predict consensus estimates. Specifically, at high ECR Avoidance and low ECR Anxiety (operationalizing dismissive–avoidant attachment), consensus was expected to be higher in the separation threat than in the security control condition.

Separation threat manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to attachment separation or security conditions. Participants in the separation threat condition (*n* = 26) completed a "Prospective Imagery Assessment" in which they were asked to imagine the following situation: "You have just arrived in a big industrial city in a foreign country to start a new job. You don't know anyone and are separated from all your loved ones. You feel isolated and alone." Participants were then given 2 min to respond to each of the following open-ended probes: (a) "Describe any details that come to mind as you imagine this scenario, and the thoughts and emotions that it evokes," and (b) "Describe, as specifically as possible, how your days and nights might be different without your loved ones around." These materials were adapted from Mikulincer, Florian, Birnbaum, and Malishkevich's (2002) separation reminder manipulation.

Security condition participants (*n* = 26) were asked to imagine the following secure attachment situation: "Imagine being with the person (family member, friend, or significant other) with whom you feel most comfortable and secure. You know that this person loves you no matter what." They were then given 2 min to respond to each of the following probes: (a) "Describe any details that come to mind as you imagine spending time with this person, and the thoughts and emotions that it evokes," and (b) "Describe specific activities that you enjoy together."

Three questions followed the attachment separation and security materials: "How easy was it for you to imagine this scenario?", "How clearly were you able to imagine this scenario?", and "How vivid was the image of this scenario in your mind?" Participants responded to each question on a 5-point scale, with higher ratings corresponding to greater ease, clarity, and vividness. The average rating across the three questions served as a check that participants were equally able to imagine the two scenarios.

Mood. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) assessed 10 positive affect items (e.g., "excited," "proud," "attentive") and 10 negative affect items (e.g., "scared," "upset," "irritable"). Participants rated the extent to which they felt each of these items using a scale anchored by 1 (*slightly or not at all*) and 5 (*very much*). Past research has found that self-threats do not reliably influence mood when mood is assessed immediately after the threat (McGregor et al., 2001; Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Twenge, Baumeister, & Stucke, 2001), and if they do, mood does not mediate defensive responses to the threats (McGregor & Marigold, 2003). For exploratory reasons, and also to provide the desired delay/distraction between the threat and the dependent variable, we also included a 3–5 min measure of implicit affect (adapted from Hass, Katz, Rizzo, Bailey, & Moore, 1992). Implicit affect scores were not predicted by any variables or interaction terms of interest in the present study, however, and so are not discussed further.

Consensus. Participants completed a computerized version of the consensus materials from Study 1.

Results and Discussion

Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the ECR Avoidance and Anxiety scales, the PANAS positive and negative mood subscales, and the four-item consensus scale were .94, .91, .91, .91, and .83, respectively. As in past research (Brennan et al., 1998), the ECR subscales were not significantly correlated, $r(52) = .17$, *ns*. The manipulation check confirmed that participants were equally able to visualize the separation and security scenarios ($Ms = 3.72$ and 3.71, respectively, $t < 1$). The experimental manipulation did not affect positive or negative mood ($ts < 1$).

For the main analysis, attachment threat was effect coded, and the distributions of Anxiety and Avoidance were centered. As recommended by Aiken and West (1996), consensus was regressed simultaneously on the first-order predictors, the three second-order interaction terms (Threat × Anxiety, Threat × Avoidance, and Anxiety × Avoidance), and the third-order interaction term (Threat × Anxiety × Avoidance). There was a significant three-way interaction between threat, anxiety, and avoidance, $\beta = -0.41$, $t(43) = 2.70$, $p = .001$. Of primary interest to the main hypothesis, as illustrated in Figure 2, highest consensus ($PV = 59\%$) was in the separation threat condition among dismissive–avoidant individuals, that is, at high avoidance and low anxiety. Simple effect analyses indicated that consensus was significantly lower ($PV = 42\%$) among dismissive–avoidant individuals in the security control condition, $\beta = 0.85$, $t(43) = 2.11$, $p < .05$. No other simple effect reached significance.[5] This result (together with the results of Study 1) supports the hypothesis that defensively proud individuals react to self-threats with compensatory exaggeration of social consensus for personal beliefs. The three-way interaction did not significantly predict positive or negative affect ($ps < .26$), and so they are ruled out as possible mediators.

Study 3

Study 3 used a narcissism scale to operationalize defensive pride and shifted to a dependent variable that assesses consensual worldview defense, that is, exaggerated disdain for individuals who contradict a consensual worldview relative to evaluations of worldview supporters. It also further probes the question of whether defensive consensus serves as a kind of spontaneous self-affirmation by investigating whether another kind of self-affirmation can eliminate it.
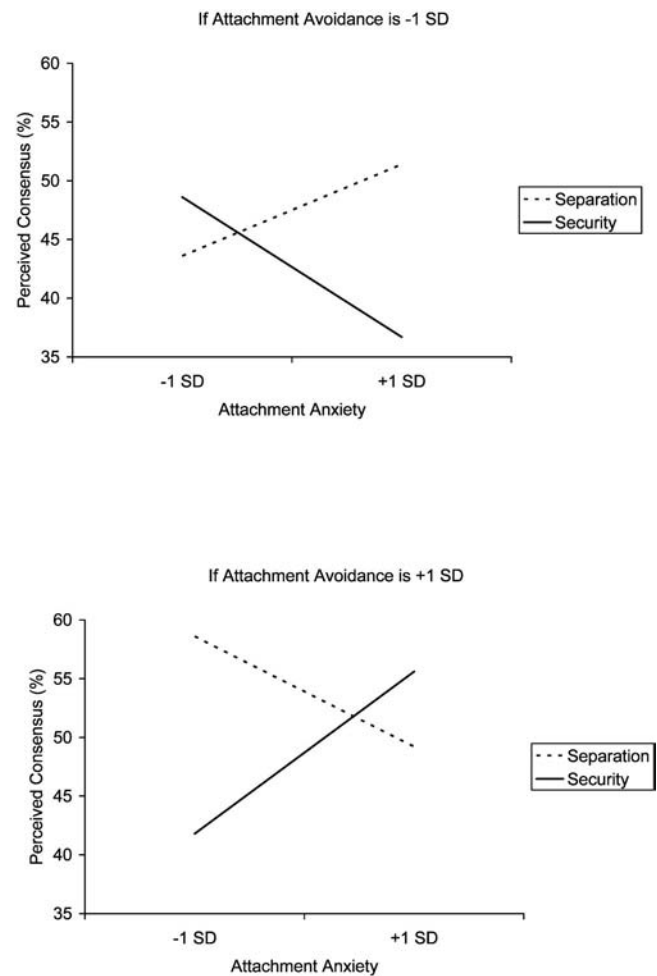

Figure 2. Perceived consensus about social issues as a function of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, and imagined separation (vs. security).

All participants were first exposed to a psychological threat. We then affirmed a random subsample of them by giving them bogus personality praise. On the basis of past fluid compensation findings indicating that self-affirmations can interchangeably quell threats (Steele, 1988; Tesser, 2000), we expected that the affirming praise would eliminate narcissists' need for subsequent defensiveness. In contrast, we expected that nonaffirmed narcissists would be most likely to defensively praise the consensual worldview supporter and derogate the critic. Doing so would be a way for them to affirm themselves in the face of the threat (cf. Fein & Spencer, 1997; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Sixty-one American undergraduates (28 men, 33 women; median age = 18 years) participated in exchange for course credit. At a mass-testing

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[5] There was a trend toward a simple effect of separation threat on consensus among preoccupied individuals, that is, at low avoidance and high anxiety, $\beta = 0.43$, $t(43) = 1.50$, $p < .14$.

session, participants completed a narcissism scale along with several other personality scales that were ostensibly being assessed as part of a personality study. Participants were told that they would receive "personality profile" feedback when they returned in several weeks to complete two more unrelated studies. Participants returned 4–12 weeks later, in groups of between 1 and 11 participants per session, and were told that two unrelated studies, about their reactions to a legal case and their reactions to essays written by foreign students, were being conducted in the same session to save time.

For the system-injustice threat, a male researcher read all participants a disturbing newspaper article about a shocking case of high-profile corporate fraud at Enron and the failure of the American justice system to bring the perpetrators to justice. We expected that the article would pose a system-injustice threat and undermine participants' sense of security. There is growing evidence that institutional injustice can pose a poignant psychological threat for individuals who participate in the institution (Jost et al., 2003; van den Bos & Miedema, 2000).

After being read the article, participants in the affirmation condition then received their affirming personality feedback. All participants were then given a copy of the newspaper article that they had just been read and were asked to indicate how severe the punishments should be for the executive portrayed in the article as possibly being involved in the corporate fraud. Finally, for the main dependent variable, all participants evaluated a consensual worldview-supporting individual (i.e., who praised American values) and a consensual world view-criticizing individual (i.e., who criticized American values). Our main hypothesis was that nonaffirmed narcissists would display the most exaggerated worldview defense. We expected that narcissists would turn to consensual worldview defense as a compensatory reaction to the injustice threat.

Materials

Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Hall, 1988). The NPI, as adapted by Jordan et al. (2003) contains 37 statements for which participants indicate their level of agreement on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Examples include "I really like to be the center of attention" and "I am more capable than other people."

System-injustice threat. A male researcher read all participants a fictitious, one-page summary of a legal case, allegedly from the *Houston Chronicle*, about a midlevel executive, Mr. Robert E. Jeffries, III, who had been involved in the collapse of Enron. Enron was a mammoth, high profile American company that had gone bankrupt amid glaring accounting fraud perpetrated by its senior executives shortly before the present study was conducted. During the period when the data were collected, the American news was filled with stories of trusting Enron employees and investors who had lost their life savings and of ruthless executives who were getting off with what seemed like light punishment for their white collar crimes. The stories in the news also revealed how the corrupt executives had made huge profits from their fraud and had lied under oath. The article read to participants stated that although it appeared that Mr. Jefferies likely had some role in the collapse, he would likely not be prosecuted.[6] Immediately after hearing the summary of the Enron/Jefferies case, participants responded to the following question: "Based on the above information, do you believe that Mr. Jefferies should be prosecuted for his role in the collapse of Enron?" (1 = *clearly no*, 11 = *clearly yes*).

Affirmation manipulation. Affirmation condition participants (*n* = 37) were randomly assigned to receive a sealed envelope containing bogus feedback ostensibly based on the personality scales they had completed at the first session several weeks earlier. The feedback included vaguely positive comments that lent "Barnum effect" believability (Snyder, 1974) and concluded by stating that participants had scored outstandingly on "two of the most functional and desirable personality traits, creativity and originality." Participants rated the accuracy of the feedback on a scale from 1 (*very inaccurate*) to 11 (*very accurate*). The no-affirmation condition

participants (*n* = 24) were randomly assigned to receive this feedback at the end of the study instead of at the beginning.

Consensual worldview defense. For the main dependent variable, we adapted the assessment of consensual worldview defense from materials that are frequently used in research on defensive reactions to threatening thoughts about personal mortality (Pyszczynski et al., 1999). Participants read and evaluated two one-page essays that were supposedly written by foreign students attending a local university. The essays concerned the students' experiences and reactions to living in America. One of the essays was positive in tone and affirmed the American worldview. It stated that the student loved America because of its many freedoms, democratic political system, and abundant opportunities. It concluded with the student effusing about the desirability of becoming a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. The other essay was negative in tone and was critical of the American worldview. It expressed problems adjusting to the American emphasis on status and materialism and dismay at the inequities between the rich and the poor. It concluded by expressing doubts about returning to America for school next year. The order of presentation of the pro-American and anti-American essays was counterbalanced.

Participants evaluated each essay and its author on 11 questions. Three of the questions assessed degree of agreement that the essay made valid points, was well written, and was free from bias, using a scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 11 (*strongly agree*). Two of the questions used the same scale to rate the degree to which the author was likable and whether participants might like to meet the author. Six of the questions then rated the degree to which the author was knowledgeable, reasonable, weak-minded, practical, ungrateful, and obnoxious, on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*extremely*). Ratings on the weak-minded, ungrateful, and obnoxious items were reverse-scored, so that higher numbers always indicated more favorable impressions of the essay and author. We operationalized consensual worldview defense as the difference between the means of the evaluations of the pro-American and anti-American essays and authors.

Results and Discussion

Participants eagerly believed the bogus affirmation feedback about their exceptional creativity and originality (accuracy *M* = 9.40 on the 11-point scale). Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the NPI and of the evaluations of the pro- and anti-American essays and authors were .86, .76, and .82, respectively.[7]

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[6] A random subsample of the participants was told that Mr. Jefferies would not likely be prosecuted because, although there was strong evidence that he lied under oath, he did not profit personally from the accounting fraud. The rest of the participants were told that he would likely not be prosecuted because of lack of evidence that he had lied to Justice Department officials. We collapsed across the two versions because results did not differ between them.

[7] Neither affirmation nor narcissism was significantly related to belief that Mr. Jefferies should be prosecuted (Fs < 1). The interaction was marginally significant, however, $\beta = 0.25$, $t(57) = 1.94$, $p = .06$, with highest belief that Jefferies should be prosecuted at high narcissism in the affirmation condition and a significant simple effect (the only one) of narcissism in the affirmation condition, $\beta = 0.34$, $t(57) = 2.12$, $p < .05$. This result is consistent with other research indicating that affirmation can fan the flames of arrogance and cause narcissists, attachment avoidants, and individuals with defensive HSE to become even less compassionate (Haji, Kocalar, & McGregor, 2003, 2005). These findings reveal the interpersonal volatility of individuals with defensive pride. Affirmations decrease their world view defense reactions to threat, as shown in the main analysis of Study 3, but may make them callous and less forgiving at the same time.

For the main analysis, we regressed worldview defense on continuous NPI scores (centered), effect-coded affirmation, and the product interaction term, all entered into the regression simultaneously (Aiken & West, 1996). The first-order effect of affirmation was not significant ($F < 1$), but there was a significant first-order effect of narcissism, $\beta = 0.32$, $t(57) = 2.55$, $p = .01$, that was qualified by a significant Narcissism × Affirmation interaction, $\beta = -0.31$, $t(57) = 2.44$, $p < .05$.[8] Specifically, highest worldview defense was at high narcissism in the no-affirmation condition (see Figure 3). Simple effect and slope analyses revealed that at high narcissism, the predicted value of worldview defense was significantly higher in the no-affirmation condition ($PV = 3.21$) than in the affirmation condition ($PV = 2.11$), $\beta = -0.37$, $t(57) = 2.04$, $p < .05$. At low narcissism, however, consensus did not differ between the no-affirmation and affirmation conditions, $\beta = 0.24$, $t(57) = 1.42$, ns ($PVs = 1.33$ and 2.07, respectively). Further, there was a significant simple slope of narcissism in the no-affirmation condition, $\beta = 0.63$, $t(57) = 3.17$, $p < .005$, but not in the affirmation condition ($t < 1$). These results clearly indicate that it was the relatively narcissistic individuals who reacted with exaggerated defense of their consensual worldview. Moreover, the finding that a personality affirmation eliminated the defensive consensus response suggests that the consensual worldview defense may have served a self-affirmation function—once affirmed with personality praise, participants no longer needed to affirm themselves with jingoistic judgments.

Together, these results indicate that after being exposed to unsettling news about corporate and legal injustice, defensively proud individuals exaggerated their criticism of a consensual worldview dissenter relative to a consensual worldview supporter. The finding that this reaction was ameliorated by affirming personality praise is consistent with the view of compensatory consensus as a self-affirming defense that can be deactivated by fluid compensation.

Supplementary Data and Analyses

To assess baseline levels of worldview defense among participants in a no-threat condition who had not been recently exposed to the Enron threat in the news or in the study materials, 1 year after the Enron scandal had faded from the news, we collected additional data from a control group of 33 undergraduates at the same university and from the same participant pool as the original sample. As in the main study, these participants completed a narcissism scale[9] and other personality questionnaires at the beginning of the term and then returned several weeks later to complete the rest of the materials. When they returned, instead of being read the threat condition article about the unpunished corruption of a Mr. Jefferies at Enron (as all participants had in the main study), the same male researcher read all participants a similar article about a Mr. Jefferies who had clearly embezzled money from IBM but was caught and brought to justice. The article made it very clear that this Mr. Jeffries was guilty and that justice would be served. As such, it did not pose a threat to participants' sense of system justice. As in the threat condition, after hearing the article, participants rated the extent to which they thought Mr. Jefferies deserved punishment and then proceeded to complete the worldview defense dependent variable. For the main analysis, we com-
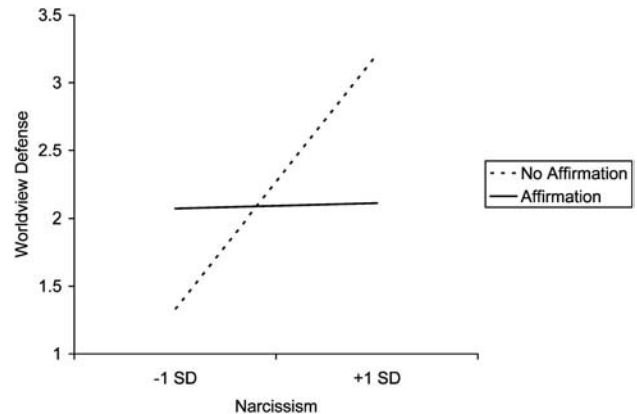

Figure 3. Consensual world view defense as a function of narcissism and personality affirmation.

pared worldview defense extremity among these nonthreatened/nonaffirmed participants to that of the 24 threatened/nonaffirmed participants from the main study.

In a preliminary analysis, we regressed the recommended punishment for Mr. Jefferies on effect-coded threat (threat, no threat), centered narcissism scores, and the Threat × Narcissism interaction. (Narcissism scores in the threat and no-threat conditions did not differ, $t = 1$.) The only significant effect was that the recommended punishment for Mr. Jefferies was significantly higher in the control condition ($M = 8.55$) than in the threat condition ($M = 6.75$), $t(55) = 2.86$, $p < .01$. This finding indicates that participants in the control condition were indeed more able to blame an individual perpetrator (as opposed to system injustice) for the crime.

The main results revealed a significant Threat × Narcissism interaction effect on worldview defense $\beta = 0.35$, $t(53) = 2.75$, $p < .01$. As predicted, highest worldview defense was in the threat condition at high narcissism. Simple effect and simple slope analyses revealed that at high narcissism, worldview defense was higher among threatened ($PV = 3.03$) than among nonthreatened ($PV = 1.09$) participants, $\beta = 0.62$, $t(53) = 3.28$, $p < .005$, and that in the threat condition, worldview defense was higher at high narcissism ($PV = 3.03$) than at low narcissism ($PV = 1.31$), $\beta = 0.55$, $t(53) = 2.82$, $p < .01$. Not surprisingly, worldview defense was also low among nonthreatened participants at low narcissism

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[8] The interaction remained similarly significant when blame was statistically controlled. Finer grained analyses of the Narcissism × Affirmation interaction effect on world view defense, that is, with evaluations of the pro-American and anti-American essays and authors analyzed as separate dependent variables, revealed that the only significant interaction effect was with derogation of the anti-American author as the dependent variable, $\beta = 0.30$, $t(57) = 2.52$, $p < .05$. Interaction effects on evaluations of the anti-American essay and the pro-American author, and the pro-American-essay alone were not significant ($ps > .18$).

[9] For this supplementary data and analysis, we used a shortened, 20-item version of the narcissism scale that had a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .87.

($PV = 1.57$).[10] The results of the supplementary analyses, together with the main results indicate that an injustice threat caused relatively narcissistic participants to affirm themselves by exaggerating their contempt for a critic of the American consensual worldview relative to a supporter.

Study 4

> Where he feels difficulty, fantasy helps to give him an illusory view of the enhancement of his self-esteem . . . fantasy, so to speak, is the compensation . . . Whenever the ambition of a person finds reality intolerable, he flees to the magic of fantasy. (Alfred Adler, quoted in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 218).

Studies 1–3 demonstrated that defensively proud people react to various self-threats with spontaneous exaggeration of perceptions of social consensus for their opinions about value-laden social issues (Studies 1–2) and with increased defense of consensual beliefs (Study 3). These results, together with the fluid-compensation results of Study 3, are consistent with the idea that imagined consensus is a spontaneous self-affirmation strategy in the face of self-threat. The central tenet of self-affirmation theory is that an experience that affirms the "integrity of the self" (i.e., moral or adaptive adequacy) can act as a "fluid compensation" to take the "sting to self" out of disparate threats and thus eliminate defensive responses to those threats (Steele, 1988). Study 4 investigates the social cognition of fluid compensation. How do diverse threats, defenses, and self-affirmations share a common intrapsychic currency? We propose that defensive and self-affirming thoughts ameliorate threats by reducing their subjective salience.

In several previous experiments, participants who affirmed their personal values, successes, convictions, or secure attachments after experiencing a self-threat reported lower subjective salience of the self-threats than did nonaffirmed participants (McGregor, 2004). Subjective salience refers to participants' reports of the extent to which threats feel urgent, important, and hard not to think about. These results suggest that self-affirmations may be interchangeable and may fluidly compensate for disparate threats for the simple reason that they effectively diminish rumination about threats (cf. Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999). We propose that threatened people may have turned to consensus in the present research for the same reason. Imagining widespread agreement with one's own convictions may be self-soothing because self-righteousness is an appealing fantasy that can capture attention, make threats seem more remote, and allow them to fade from salience.

This interpretation is consistent with theorizing about the developmental foundations of the forms of defensive pride investigated in Studies 1–3. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) and Horney (1950) explicitly claimed that proud and narcissistic self-images are used to mask self-doubts and insecurities (see also Baumeister & Vohs, 2001; Kernis, 2003; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Others have similarly proposed that the proud self-images of attachment-avoidant individuals serve to "minimize the subjective awareness of distress" (Bartholomew, 1990, p. 174) and that the "positive self-view might reflect the action of repression, by which information that is not accepted as part of the self is dissociated from other, positive self-aspects" (Mikulincer, 1998, p. 432).

In the present study, we investigate the effect of a consensus affirmation on subjective salience of proud individuals' troubling cognitive conflicts. We expected that conflicted HSEs would use the provided consensus affirmation to take their minds off of their conflicted thoughts and that this tendency would be pronounced under conditions of high motivation to escape conflict. We used explicit self-esteem to operationalize pride because, across Studies 1–3, positive self-evaluation is a common theme across the three measures of defensive pride. Not all participants with HSE are defensive, but all defensively proud individuals tend to claim high self-esteem.[11]

To manipulate motivation to escape from conflict, we had all participants write about a personal conflict, and then we randomly assigned half of them to a goal implementation condition in which they described a goal (unrelated to the conflict) that they were currently in the process of implementing. Such implemental mind-set manipulations have been found to increase defensive conflict-reduction efforts even when the focal goal is unrelated to the conflict. It does so presumably because implemental mindset is a general perceptual orientation that indiscriminately clears all conflicts to make way for decisive action (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002). Thus, in the present study we expected that implemental HSEs would be particularly likely to use consensus thoughts to decrease subjective salience of their troubling conflicts.

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[10] As in the main analysis, the world view defense interaction effect was driven by threatened narcissists' derogation of the author who criticized the American consensual world view. With evaluation of the anti-American author as the dependent variable, the Threat $\times$ Narcissism interaction effect was $\beta = -0.41$, $t(53) = -3.34$, $p < .005$. With evaluation of the anti-American essay, the pro-American author, or the anti-American essay as the dependent variable, there were no significant interaction effects ($ps > .12$).

It must be noted that it would have been ideally symmetrical for the supplementary analyses to include a no-threat/affirmation condition and to assess the three-way Threat $\times$ Narcissism $\times$ Affirmation interaction. Given that nonthreatened, defensively proud participants did not show any defensiveness in Studies 1 and 2, however, this did not seem vital. Thus, for economy, we included only the no-threat/no-affirmation control. We assumed that in the no-threat condition, there would have been no defensiveness for the affirmation to eliminate.

It is also important to note that there is more thematic similarity between the threat and the defense in Study 3 than there is in Studies 1 and 2. As will be seen in Study 4 and the General Discussion, however, there is no reason to expect that the proposed mechanism of defensive consensus should require complete incommensurability of threat and defense. Indeed, the finding that the self-affirmation eliminated the defensive response indicates that the threat-incommensurate affirmation and the less-threat-incommensurate defense were interchangeable.

[11] Accordingly, in the only two experiments that have examined manipulated Threat $\times$ ESE $\times$ ISE designs (Study 1; McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Study 3), there was also a significant two-way interaction between threat and ESE on defensiveness, with highest defensiveness at high ESE in the threat condition. Finer grained analyses of the eight PVs in each of those two studies showed that the Threat $\times$ ESE interaction was moderated by ISE, such that the only significantly elevated PV was in the threat condition at high ESE and low ISE. Nevertheless, in both studies, ESE alone interacted with threat to predict defensiveness. Thus, because we already had a four-factor design, we assessed only ESE for economy but were confident it would be adequate to detect the effect on its own.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We gave course credits to 109 undergraduates (30 men, 79 women; median age = 19 years) in exchange for their participation. Data from one participant were excluded because she neglected to fill out the self-esteem scale. A female researcher administered materials to participants in separate cubicles in groups of up to 3 at a time. After completing the self-esteem scale, all participants wrote about and rated the difficulty of a troubling cognitive conflict (personal dilemma) they were currently facing. Then, half were randomly assigned to a goal implementation condition and half were assigned to a goal deliberation condition. Next, all participants named a group they belonged to, and were randomly assigned to either a consensus or a no consensus condition, in which they wrote about either their agreements with or their disagreements with the group. Next, they were randomly assigned to a group positives or group negatives condition, in which they wrote about group strengths or weaknesses. We then assessed effects of the manipulations on perceived opinion similarity and liking of group members. Mood and state self-esteem were also assessed as possible mediators. The main dependent measure assessed subjective salience of the dilemma written about at the beginning of the session.

We expected that the consensus manipulation would reduce the subjective salience of dilemmas for HSE participants in the goal implementation condition. Such a finding would provide an explanation for why defensively proud individuals in Studies 1–3 reacted to threats with compensatory consensus. It would show that focusing on consensus can help individuals with HSE get their minds off of unwanted thoughts. We also included the group strengths and weaknesses manipulation to assess whether the appeal of group consensus comes from the "reflected glory" of a positive group (Cialdini et al., 1976) or simply from consensus per se, regardless of group valence. If reflected glory is the basis of the appeal of consensus, then the expected drop in subjective salience among implemental HSEs in the consensus condition should be more pronounced in the group-strength condition than in the group-weakness condition. If consensus per se is the appeal, then group valence should not affect subjective salience. We regressed dilemma subjective salience on self-esteem (continuous), implementation condition (implementation vs. deliberation), consensus condition (consensus vs. no consensus), and group valence (positive vs. negative), and all the higher order interactions, simultaneously (following Aiken & West, 1996).

Materials

Self-esteem. As in Study 1, the M. Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale was followed by several filler personality scales.

Personal dilemma nomination. All participants next completed a short cognitive conflict exercise that asked them to briefly describe the conflicting poles of a difficult, unresolved personal dilemma about which they felt torn between two competing action alternatives (adapted from Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995):

> Think of an unresolved personal decision that you are currently facing in your life. Do not select a problem that is easy to solve, or that you have already made your mind up about. Select a decision about which you feel very uncertain what you will eventually do. You feel torn between two possible courses of action because you can see advantages and disadvantages of each. The decision should be complex, and should take the form of, "Should I do A or should I do B?"

Examples provided were "Should I A) stay with my boyfriend or B) break up with him; Should I A) get my own apartment or B) continue to live with my parents; Should I A) stay in Science or B) switch to Arts; Should I A) get a part-time job or B) not get a part-time job." In past research, related manipulations have caused psychological discomfort and

defensiveness, especially among HSEs (McGregor & Marigold, 2003; McGregor et al., 2001). After writing a brief description of their dilemma, participants answered four dilemma difficulty questions about the extent to which they felt (a) uncertain, (b) confused, and (c) undecided about the dilemma, and (d) the extent to which it felt difficult on a scale anchored by 1 (*not at all*) and 5 (*extremely*).

Implementation/deliberation manipulation. Participants were then randomly assigned to either goal implementation or deliberation condition. In the implementation condition (n = 55), they described an ongoing goal that they were determined to achieve within the next 3 months and spent a few minutes outlining the details of the five most important steps they planned to take to accomplish the goal. In the deliberation condition (n = 53) participants instead answered a series of questions about the difficult dilemma they had just described. They outlined the possible difficulties, immediate consequences, and long-term consequences associated with the two competing poles of the dilemma. (Implementation and deliberation materials were adapted from Taylor & Gollwitzer's, 1995, implemental and deliberative mindset materials).

Consensus manipulation. Next, all participants named "a group you belong to, feel a part of, or identify with, at least to some extent." Examples of social, cultural, ethnic, national, religious, and demographic groups were provided. Participants randomly assigned to the consensus condition (n = 56) then described two important values or issues about which there was group consensus. In contrast, participants in the no-consensus condition (n = 52) described two important values or issues about which there was no group consensus.

Group valence manipulation. Finally, participants were randomly assigned to describe two positive (n = 49) or two negative (n = 59) qualities that characterized the group or typical group members.

Group identification. A 12-item manipulation check assessed the extent to which the group consensus and group valence manipulations affected participants' group liking, belongingness, and felt similarity. Items including "I like this group," "I fit in well with this group," and "I am similar to the group in terms of general attitudes and beliefs" were rated on a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) scale. Eight of the items were adapted from Hogg and Hains's (1996) group relations questionnaire.

Mood and state self-esteem. Next, all participants rated a variety of mood and state self-esteem items on the "extent to which you feel this way right now, that is, at the present moment." Items included 10 pleasant and 10 unpleasant mood words from the 20-item PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) and three face valid state self-esteem phrases: "dissatisfied with self," "inferior to others," and "good about self" (from Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Subjective salience of personal dilemmas. Finally, participants thought back to the troubling personal dilemmas they had all described at the very beginning in the session and rated how (a) pressing on their minds, (b) preoccupying, (c) much they were still thinking about it, (d) hard to ignore, (e) important, (f) urgent to resolve, (g) significant, and (h) big it felt to them "right now," using a 5-point scale anchored by 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) and 5 (*extremely*).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Analyses

The four-item dilemma difficulty scale had a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .78, and participants reported that their dilemmas were between "moderately" and "very" difficult (M = 3.52) after initially describing them. Self-esteem was significantly correlated with dilemma difficulty, $r(108) = -.24$, $p = .01$, and so we entered dilemma difficulty as a covariate in analyses involving self-esteem.

A principal components analysis of the 12 items from the group identification manipulation check revealed a two-factor solution.

The first factor accounted for 50% of the variance, and after varimax rotation, it was defined by primary loadings above .60 from eight items about the extent to which participants liked and belonged to their groups. The second factor accounted for 11% of the variance and was defined by primary loadings above .60 from three items about perceived consensus (i.e., shared attitudes and beliefs, guiding values, and priorities). We computed liking and consensus subscales by averaging the unit-weighted primary loadings of each factor. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the eight-item group liking and three-item group similarity subscales were .90 and .69, respectively.

We conducted two regression analyses to assess effects of the three manipulated variables on group liking and group consensus.[12] There were no significant effects of the implementation/deliberation manipulation ($ps > .19$). The consensus manipulation significantly increased perceptions of group consensus, $\beta = 0.25$, $t(102) = 2.68$, $p < .01$ ($M = 3.67$ in the consensus condition and $M = 3.29$ in the no-consensus condition), but did not affect group liking ($t < 1$). The positive group-valence manipulation showed a trend toward increasing group liking, $\beta = 0.16$, $t(102) = 1.60$, $p = .11$, and marginally increased perceptions of group consensus, $\beta = 0.18$, $t(102) = 1.92$, $p = .06$ (cf. Simon, Pantaleo, & Mummendey, 1995). In light of the main findings of this study that are discussed next, it is also important to note that the Consensus Manipulation × Self-Esteem interaction did not affect perceptions of group consensus ($t < 1$).

The eight-item subjective salience (of the dilemma) scale that was the main dependent variable was unifactorial, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .90. Not surprisingly, participants' initial ratings of dilemma difficulty were significantly correlated with reported subjective salience of the dilemma at the end of the experimental session, $r(108) = .38$, $p < .001$.

Main Analyses

We regressed subjective salience of personal dilemmas on self-esteem, consensus condition (consensus vs. no-consensus), group valence (positive vs. negative), implementation condition (implementation vs. deliberation), and their two-, three-, and four-way interaction terms. Initial dilemma difficulty was also included as a covariate because of its significant correlation with subjective salience. We centered the continuous variables and effect coded the manipulated variables to permit simultaneous entry and interpretation of the first order and higher order effects (Aiken & West, 1996). Results revealed no significant effects for the first-order or interaction terms involving group valence ($ps > .19$; $F < 1$ for the four-way interaction), and so we dropped those terms and report results from the slimmer analysis.

Results revealed no first-order effects, other than that of the initial dilemma difficulty covariate, $\beta = 0.36$, $t(99) = 4.29$, $p < .001$. Significant two-way interactions of Consensus Condition × Self-Esteem, $\beta = 0.30$, $t(99) = 3.65$, $p < .005$, and Consensus Condition × Implementation Condition, $\beta = 0.24$, $t(99) = 2.88$, $p < .005$, were qualified by a significant three-way Self-Esteem × Implementation Condition × Consensus Condition interaction, $\beta = 0.22$, $t(99) = 2.72$, $p < .01$. As shown in Figure 4, at high self-esteem, participants in the implemental and consensus conditions had lower subjective salience ($PV = 2.07$) than those (a) at high self-esteem in the implemental and the no-consensus condi-
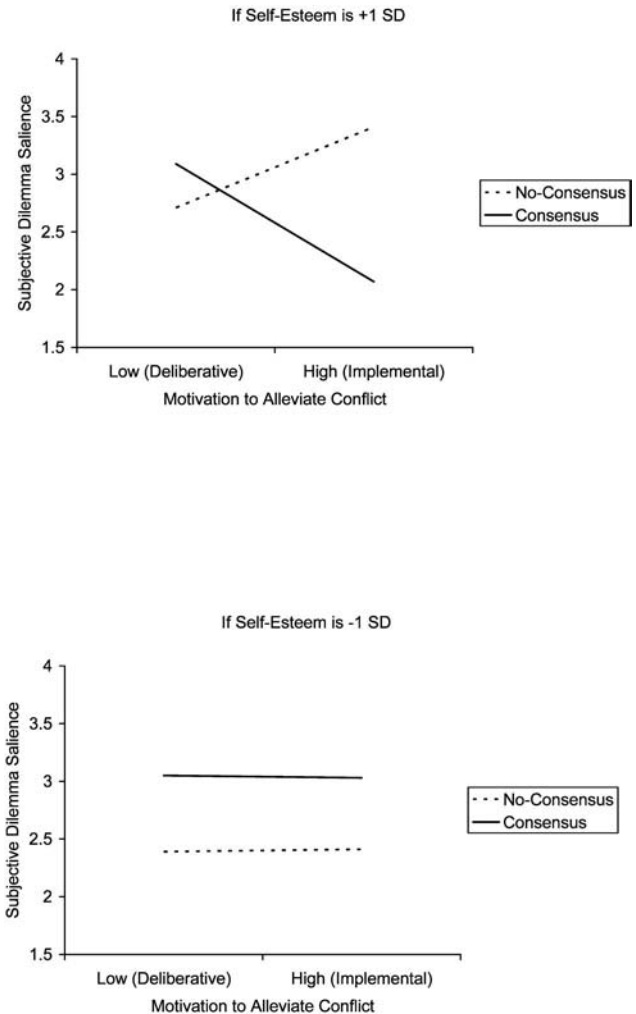

Figure 4. Subjective dilemma salience as a function of self-esteem, motivation to alleviate conflict, and consensus focus.

tions ($PV = 3.41$), simple effect $\beta = 0.72$, $t(99) = 4.36$, $p < .001$; (b) at high self-esteem in the deliberation and consensus conditions ($PV = 3.09$), simple effect $\beta = 0.54$, $t(99) = 3.25$, $p < .005$; and (c) at low self-esteem in the implemental and consensus conditions ($PV = 3.03$), simple slope $\beta = .51$, $t(99) = 3.55$, $p < .001$. These results indicate that motivated (i.e., implemental mindset), proud (HSE) individuals used consensus to insulate themselves from their troubling uncertainties.

Possible mediators. We used Baron and Kenny's (1986) logic of statistical mediation to determine whether the significant three-way interaction effect on subjective salience might be mediated by one of five possible factors: group liking, group similarity, positive affect, negative affect, or state self-esteem. Group similarity, group liking, and state self-esteem were all disqualified as possible mediators because they were not significantly correlated with subjective salience ($ps > .82$). Negative affect was disqualified as

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a possible mediator because it was not significantly predicted by the three-way interaction term ($p > .91$). Positive affect was disqualified as a possible mediator because although it was significantly predicted by the three-way interaction term, $\beta = 0.24$, $t(99) = 2.64$, $p < .01$, adding it as a term in the regression analysis did not even come close to significantly reducing the effect of the three-way interaction on subjective salience (the β dropped only slightly, from .22 from .20).

The lack of mediation by affect or state self-esteem is consistent with the results of Study 2, past research showing that other compensatory responses of proud people are not mediated by affect (McGregor & Marigold, 2003), and the theoretical perspective guiding the present work on compensatory consensus. Given the absence of mediation by affect or state self-esteem, we propose that compensatory consensus is an affirming response to self-threats simply because it reduces vigilant concern with them. Decreased subjective salience of threats may eventually translate into improved affect or state self-esteem, but the apparent precedence of subjective salience in the present study is consistent with past findings, that effects of threats and self-affirmations on defensiveness are not mediated by affect (e.g., McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Study 4; Pyszczynski et al., 1999, pp. 836–837; Twenge et al., 2001, Studies 3–5; Steele & Liu, 1983, pp. 15–16; Steele et al., 1993, Study 3; but see Tesser, 2000, for an alternative view).

General Discussion

The results of Studies 1–4 converge across three different operationalizations of defensive pride and threat to provide the first evidence that defensively proud individuals cleave to consensus as a way to affirm the self and mask threats. Defensively proud participants reacted to failure (Study 1) and attachment separation (Study 2)[13] with compensatory consensus estimates as high as 76% for their personal views on capital punishment and abortion. This is remarkable given that participants had just been exposed to a long list of diverse, commonly held opinions about each issue. Study 3 results are consistent with a self-affirmation interpretation of compensatory consensus. Defensively proud individuals reacted to a threat with exaggerated consensual worldview defense, but only if they had not had their personality affirmed. Affirmed participants showed no consensual worldview defense reaction. The apparent fluid-compensation interchangeability of praise and consensus suggests that they may serve a similar psychological function. Indeed, consistent with past research showing that affirmations of self-worth, values, convictions, or secure attachment can reduce the subjective salience of threatening thoughts for proud individuals (McGregor, 2004), Study 4 found that consensus also decreased subjective salience of troubling thoughts for proud individuals.

Together, these findings suggest that compensatory consensus may, like other self-affirmations, be a way to ameliorate threats by focusing on highly compelling thoughts. Deliberately highlighting personally compelling thoughts may be a relatively enlightened mental control strategy that bypasses the rebound hyperaccessibility associated with unfocused efforts to simply not think about an unwanted thought (Wegner, 1992; Wenzlaff & Bates, 2000). In the face of bewildering self-threats, imagined consensus about value-laden issues may be particularly compelling for defensively proud

individuals to think about because of the clarity, correctness, and validation that it implies. Moreover, value-laden social issues and worldviews may be chronically accessible topics for consensus because of the self-centrality and chronic accessibility of personal values (Rokeach, 1973; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977). Indeed, value clarity may itself serve as a compelling cognitive refuge in the face of threat. Past research has found that threats cause spontaneous exaggeration of personal value clarity and heightened conviction about value-laden issues (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992; McGregor et al., 2001; Tesser et al., 2000, Studies 1a & 1b) and that value-affirming thoughts effectively decrease rumination about threats (Greenberg et al., 2001; Koole et al., 1999; McGregor & Marigold, 2003).

Relevance to Other Theories of Self-Threat and Defensiveness

The finding that self-threats can cause exaggerated consensus (Studies 1–2), worldview defense (Study 3), and conviction (McGregor & Marigold, 2003) and that consensus (Study 4), worldview defense (Greenberg et al., 2001), and conviction (McGregor & Marigold, 2003) can take people's minds off their troubling thoughts suggests an integrative perspective on existing theories of self-defensiveness. Self-affirmation theory research (e.g., Steele, 1988; Steele et al., 1993), for instance, has shown that affirmations related to personal values and self-worth can decrease defensive reactions to topically unrelated self-threats. Self-evaluation maintenance model research (e.g., Tesser, 2000) has found similar fluid compensation effects. In one study, a self-evaluative threat caused heightened value clarity, and in another, a dissonance threat caused exaggerated self-evaluation. The present results, together with compensatory conviction research findings (McGregor, 2004; McGregor et al., 2001; McGregor & Marigold, 2003) suggest that fluid compensation may arise from the ability of various defenses and affirmations to reduce the subjective salience of self-threats.

It also suggests an integrative perspective on terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1997). Terror management theory research on reactions to personal mortality salience has shown that people respond to reminders of their own death with consensual worldview defense. They not only exaggerate consensus estimates (Pyszczynski et al., 1996), but they also become more likely to behave in accordance with their personal values and identities, become increasingly critical and hostile toward out-group members and moral transgressors, and become more protective of national and religious icons (see Greenberg et al., 1997, for a review). We see such reactions as spontaneous self-affirmations of consensus and conviction that serve to reduce subjective salience of troubling thoughts (Greenberg et al., 2001; McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Study 4; Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). Accordingly, uncertainty and self-worth threats have also caused Canadians to exaggerate their conviction and pride in Canada and their disdain for Islam (Haji & McGregor, 2002). These findings, together with

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[13] The possibility that the effects in Studies 1 and 2 are partially driven by the affirming control conditions cannot be ruled out and so should be interpreted as a relative threat versus affirmation effects. The supplementary analyses in Study 3, however, show a clear threat effect.

those in Study 3, extend the work of terror management researchers and indicate that a variety of poignant self-threats[14] can cause worldview defense reactions (see also van den Bos, Poortvliet, & Maas, in press).

We propose that all of these findings can be economically explained from a thought-control perspective. According to Wegner (1992), thought suppression begins with the search for distracting thoughts. The "distractor search brings a series of thoughts to mind until one is selected that absorbs attention," at which point "attention is drawn from the controlled distractor search to the absorbing distractor itself" (Wegner, 1992, p. 203). Given the centrality of self-affirmation concerns in North America (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), and the self-relevance of such concerns for individuals with HSE, it makes sense that affirming thoughts should be chronically accessible and effectively absorbing distractor thoughts for individuals with HSE. Indeed, thoughts "that are chronically or acutely accessible are more likely to be retrieved and enlisted as distractors" (Wegner, 1992, p. 203).

It is important to acknowledge that we have not provided conclusive evidence to rule out the "common currency" theories of defensive compensation. It may be that defenses and affirmations contribute to a common currency of implicit affect (Tesser, 2000), symbolic immortality (Greenberg et al., 2001), self-integrity (Steele, 1988), self-certainty (McGregor et al., 2001; van den Bos et al., in press), or self-esteem (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999) and that once the critical resource is restored, participants are able to let go of the need to continue ruminating about the threat. Although our subjective salience perspective is parsimonious and has explanatory power to integrate diverse theories of defensiveness, future research should investigate whether people will spontaneously react to self-threats with other kinds of absorbing ways of thinking that do not reflect positively on the self, such as immersion in angry or obsessive thoughts. If so, and if such poignant but unaffirming thoughts also reduce subjective salience of self-threats, the subjective salience view would be further supported as an alternative to the prevailing common currency interpretations of the mediating mechanism of self-affirmation, fluid compensation, and defensiveness findings. Encouraging initial support for this view comes from recent research in one of our labs indicating that defensive individuals react to self-threats by attempting to mask the threat by increasing their alcohol consumption (McGregor, 2005). These new results suggest the intriguing possibility that zeal and alcohol are alternative routes to myopic threat relief (cf. Steele & Josephs, 1990).

It should also be emphasized that our account need not be seen as incompatible with self-affirmation theory. Rather, it may shed light on the cognitive mechanism that allows the fluid compensation process to reaffirm self-integrity after threat. We propose that affirmations (and defenses, which we see as spontaneous self-affirmations) reaffirm the integrity of the working self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987). The affirming information supplants the threatening information from the active subset of self-relevant information. If this were not the case, then self-affirmations would presumably make people feel even worse, because the simultaneous accessibility of the threatening and affirming thoughts would lead to uncomfortable ambivalence and personal uncertainty (McGregor, Newby-Clark, & Zanna, 1999).

Future Directions: Mechanisms and Boundary Conditions

Our defensive pride and consensus results reported here converge with previous findings that have shown that defensive pride is related to compensatory conviction after threats, as well, and that conviction and other affirmations also reduce subjective salience of threats for individuals with high ESE (McGregor & Marigold, 2003; McGregor, 2004). The precise cognitive mechanism of how defensive conviction and consensus mask subjective salience of unwanted thoughts remains to be specified, however. Furthermore, precise relations among various kinds of defenses and affirmations remain to be determined. One promising new development with potential for informing these questions is the burgeoning research on how relative cerebral hemisphericity relates to threat, approach motivation, and defensiveness. Convergent evidence indicates that whereas emotionally involving threat experiences such as mortality salience (Martin & Shrira, 2005) are preferentially processed and vigilantly attended to in the right hemisphere (Friedman & Forster, 2005, Study 3; Heller, Nitschke, Etienne, & Miller, 1997; Kalin, Larson, Shelton, & Davidson, 1998; Lee et al., 2004; see also Martin, Shrira, & Startup, 2004), self-regulation-related processes in the left hemisphere tend to more narrowly focus attention on a constricted subset of information relevant to approaching incentives with persistence (Amodio, Shah, Sigelman, Brazy, & Harmon-Jones, 2004; Drake & Myers, in press; Harmon-Jones & Allen, 1997; Schiff, Guirguis, Kenwood, & Herman, 1998; Sutton & Davidson, 1997; see Martin & Shrira, 2005, for review).

These divergent specialties raise the possibility that aspects of processing in the right and left hemispheres might be opponent processes with reciprocal inhibition. Consistent with this idea, priming the left hemisphere not only facilitates approach behavior (finger flexion) but inhibits avoidance behavior (finger extension) as well (Schiff & Bassel, 1996), and left and right frontal cortical electroencephalogram activation inversely correlated (Amodio et al., 2004). Accordingly, Tomarken and Davidson (1994) found that chronic left-hemisphere activation was associated with higher scores on a defensive repression scale, and Tomarken and Keener (1998) proposed that approach motives are used by humans for emotional regulation.

If focus on approach motivations can help keep threats from looming large, then it might be expected that thinking about self-central incentives, like pride and consensus, would be particularly effective. Consistent with this idea, Urry et al. (2004) found that personal-goal-directed approach motives were indeed associated with greater happiness and meaning in life. Initial evidence indicates that affirmation of important self-defining values and priorities, successes, and consensual convictions does indeed accomplish a relative shift toward left-hemisphere dominance and decreased rumination about threats (Koole et al., 1999; Martin & Shrira, 2005, Study 3; Shrira & Martin, 2005). Of specific relevance to the present research on defensive consensus, other research in one of our labs has found that defensive consensus decreases the amount of time that proud participants spend rumi-

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[14] Future research needs to determine why some threats, like those in the present research, cause defensive reactions similar to those caused by mortality salience, whereas others, such as thoughts of pain, final exams, or difficulties after college, do not (Greenberg et al., 1997).

nating about threats when asked about them (McGregor & Crippen, 2005). Thus, there is provisional support for the neuropsychological basis of our theorizing about zealous conviction and consensus as self-relevant incentives that can provide hemispheric insulation against distressing self-threats. With repeated use and negative reinforcement, zealous thoughts could come to be automatically activated in the face of self-threats and serve as a basis for automatic threat management (in contrast to unfocused thought suppression efforts, which can backfire and cause hyper attentiveness to unwanted thoughts; Wegner, 1992).

If so, then this could explain why various affirmations and defenses are somewhat interchangeable after various threats. Any important, self-relevant affirmation, whether related to consensus, conviction, imagined superiority, attachment security, or focus on important values, could conceivably activate the approach system and accomplish hemispheric insulation in the face of any threat. Incidental factors would be left to determine which defense was chosen as a reaction to threat. For example, in past research when threats were reminders of ongoing intrapersonal difficulties, defenses were intrapersonally referenced (i.e., about idiosyncratic convictions; McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Studies 1–3). In contrast, in the present research, the manipulated threats were all novel and introduced by other people, and the defenses were interpersonally referenced (i.e., about consensus). Future research should manipulate threat source in one study and assess whether intrapersonal versus interpersonal sources of threat differentially cause conviction and consensus responses, respectively.

Another factor influencing the kind of defense chosen might be the extent to which the defense is closely related to the threat. Past research has shown that affirmations closely related in topic to a threat fail to quell the threat because they remind participants of the threat (Blanton, Cooper, Skurnik, & Aronson, 1997). Given our view that defenses are essentially spontaneous self-affirmations, we would expect participants to choose defenses somewhat removed from the exact topic of the threat.

Choice of defense is also most likely limited by available self-resources. For example, someone with high explicit self-esteem might be particularly inclined toward arrogant defenses (as in the present research and in McGregor & Marigold, 2003), someone with strong egalitarian value commitments might be more inclined toward defenses that focus on value conviction (Greenberg et al., 1992; Tesser et al., 2000, Studies 1a & 1b), and a heavy drinker might be inclined toward alcoholic defenses (McGregor, 2005). Finally, acceptable defenses may be culturally shaped, with exaggerated pride being prevalent in cultures that encourage proud individualism (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Heine et al., 1999) and exaggerated self-criticism being prevalent in cultures that encourage self-improvement (Kang, 2003).

Concluding Reflections on Defensive Pride

The vast majority of North Americans rate themselves as well above average in self-esteem (Heine et al., 1999). This self-serving skew, together with the fact that self-reported esteem is not correlated with objective measures of esteem-worthiness (Baumeister et al., 2003) suggests that for many, pride may be a defensive distortion. Indeed, there is growing evidence to suggest that a mechanism for maintenance of defensive pride may be the same as we are proposing for self-affirmation—focus on desirable thoughts as a way to mask threatening ones. When confronted with failures, for example, individuals with (presumably defensive) high self-esteem spontaneously fill their minds with their strengths, which appears to mask their weaknesses (as assessed by a me/not-me response latency task; Dodgson & Wood, 1998). They also react to thoughts of death and disaster by filling their minds with appealing thoughts (S. M. Smith & Petty, 1995). Attachment avoidance and narcissistic forms of defensive pride have similarly been linked with repressive coping, as discussed in the introduction.

It should come as no surprise, then, that defensively proud individuals use repressive means to fend off threats with compensatory consensus, conviction (McGregor & Marigold, 2003), and other defensive reactions, such as worldview defense, that are arguably composite self-affirmations. Indeed, this perspective may account for the cultural covariation of exaggerated self-esteem and defensiveness (Heine & Lehman, 1997a, 1997b; Heine et al., 1999; see also Heine, Harihara, & Niiya, 2002, in which the effect size of worldview defense after a mortality salience manipulation was a third as large in Japan as is typically found in North America). It may similarly account for the relative absence of zealous idealism in far Eastern cultures that emphasize self-improvement and self-criticism, as compared with the bloody history of idealistic warfare in Western cultures that emphasize independent self-enhancement (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Pride and exaggerated consensus may be manifestations of the same tendency to preserve the self by masking unwanted thoughts with self-affirming ones.

The present compensatory consensus findings, together with parallel compensatory conviction findings in past research (McGregor & Marigold, 2003) provide a window of insight into why people hold so tenaciously to consensual worldviews, especially in times of threat. Consensual worldviews may be ideal affirmations for drawing attention away from threats because they affirm the self in three different ways—with consensus, conviction, and self-worth, each of which can decrease subjective salience of threats (McGregor, 2004). The present research has shown that defensive people exaggerate consensus when threatened and that doing so serves to decrease the salience of threatening thoughts. An appreciation of the thought-control function of imagined consensus may help explain why intergroup relations are so often plagued by lack of perspective taking and self-righteous intransigence. When proud ideologies clash, opponents often react with explosive resolve to intimidate, demean, and invalidate one another. The present research on compensatory consensus, together with past research on compensatory conviction (McGregor & Marigold, 2003; McGregor et al., 2001) suggests that doing so may provide psychological relief but may inflame rather than smother zealous opposition.

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