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Defensive zeal: Compensatory conviction about attitudes, values, goals, groups, and self-definitions in the face of...

Defensive Zeal: Compensatory Conviction About Attitudes, Values, Goals, Groups, and Self-Definitions in the Face of Personal Uncertainty

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“Man, lacking instinctive determination and having a brain that permits him to think of many directions in which he could go, needs an object of total devotion . . . to be the focal point of all his strivings . . . The need for devotion itself is a primary existential need.”

—Fromm, 1973, pp. 260-261

There are many reasons why one might have conviction about something. For example, Grace’s strong opinion about capital punishment might arise from her feelings of compassion and horror at the idea of ending someone’s life, and also from her beliefs about the meager deterrent value of capital punishment. It might also be consistent with her left-wing value system, which might in turn be well supported by her personal feelings, beliefs, and sense of being a forgiving and moderate person. As such, Grace’s conviction would be well embedded in, and supported by, her idiosyncratic feelings, beliefs, and sense of self.

This chapter is not about such Grace-ful and relatively integrated, bottom-up conviction. It is about a seemingly more defensive, hot-headed kind. One of the remarkable things about conviction is that it can seem so unreasonable. Many of the issues that people have conviction about seem, to the non-zealot, to be gray and ambiguous at the core. Most religious groups have fundamentalist sects convinced that only their worldviews are valid, even with full awareness that other sects’ fundamentalists feel exactly the same way. Similarly, most contentious social issues and intergroup conflicts have zealots at either extreme who seem blind to each others’ perspectives and who seem intent on annihilating or at least hating and derogating one another. This chapter

investigates the hypothesis that one cause of rigid and closed-minded conviction may be that it can serve as an effective defense against personal uncertainty. Being a zealot or jingoist in one domain may alleviate discomfort associated with uncertainty in other domains.

PERSONAL UNCERTAINTY

Personal uncertainty is akin to Festinger's (1957) dissonance construct, but more explicitly pertains to important and self-relevant cognitions. The term, personal uncertainty, is used in this chapter to refer to an acute kind of identity crisis that can arise from awareness of having inconsistent or unclear self-relevant cognitions. Inconsistency (contradictory thoughts) and lack of clarity (not knowing what to think) both imply uncertainty (cf. Baumeister's 1985 distinction between the two kinds of identity crisis: conflict and deficit). Anyone who has grappled with a difficult personal dilemma, perhaps about a romantic commitment or vocational choice, knows how unbearable prolonged personal uncertainty can be. Hundreds of cognitive dissonance experiments over the past half-century have indirectly demonstrated that most people do not like to hold cognitions that contradict one another. Recently, cognitive dissonance and ambivalence researchers have more directly supported the core premise of dissonance theory, that awareness of one's "non-fitting cognitions" is experienced as aversive (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Harmon-Jones, Brehm, Greenberg, Simon, & Nelson, 1996; Harmon-Jones, 2000; McGregor, Newby-Clark, & Zanna, 1999; Newby-Clark, McGregor, & Zanna, 2002).

Aronson's (1968; and also Lewin's, 1935, p. 62) claim that self-relevant cognitive conflict and inconsistency should be particularly aversive is supported by evidence indicating that personal uncertainty is associated with psychological ill-being. A review of the literature (Baumeister, 1985) found that identity-related uncertainty or conflict has been linked with feelings of confusion, bewilderment, preoccupation, anxiety, discouragement, vagueness, emptiness, self-consciousness, rumination, tension, generalized malaise, self-doubt, disturbed thinking, impulsiveness, conflict with parents and other authority figures, reduced ego strength, and increased physical symptoms. Recent findings from diverse research paradigms concur. Intrapersonal conflict is related to the perception that life lacks meaning (McGregor & Little, 1998); deliberating about uncertain personal dilemmas causes depressed mood and lowered self-esteem (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995); low self-concept clarity scores (implicit and scale-based) are associated with low self-esteem and neuroticism (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996); contradictory self-guides are associated with confusion-related states, such as feeling muddled, indecisive, and distractible (VanHook & Higgins, 1988); and acting a different personality in different roles (self-concept differentiation) is associated with depression, neuroticism, and lower self-esteem (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993).

Furthermore, although weaker, the link between self-inconsistency and lower

well-being is significant for Asians as well as North Americans (Heine & Lehman, 1999; Suh, 1999). This finding is consistent with the guiding assumption in this chapter, that the need for self-consistency may not be wholly attributable to Western cultural prescriptions to know and be true to oneself. I propose that self-consistency (at least among the subset of self-relevant cognitions that are accessible at any one time) is a fundamental human need because it is required for effective action. This functional perspective on self-consistency is supported by the recent finding that there was most defensive attitude change in a dissonance experiment (and thus, presumably most dissonance discomfort) when participants were in a goal-oriented "implemental mindset" (Harmon-Jones, 2001).

Indeed, identity-related uncertainty or inconsistency has been linked with being "paralyzed by an inner turmoil of indecisiveness" (Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1973, p. 211). Laboratory support for this hypothesis comes from Sears and Hovland (1941), who found that failure to respond in the face of conflict ("blockage") is a function of the extent to which the conflicting response options are strong and equally strong. Similarly, among a group of highly anxious participants, Kamono (1963) found that those with high scores on an ego-disjunction measure (i.e., those whose motives were contradictory) took longer to resolve approach-approach conflicts than did those with low scores on the ego disjunction measure.

According to Baumeister (1985), negative feelings arising from the absence of clear identity commitments derive from conflict between wanting to commit to one desirable course of action but not being prepared to give up others. Going in one direction means having to forego other directions. Such a predicament essentially presents the kind of multiple approach-avoidance conflict that Lewin (1935, pp. 123) discussed as resulting in a restless state of *psychical tension*. Such conative conflicts may be aversive because they signal the imminence of self-regulatory impairment. If "thinking is for doing" (Fiske, 1992), then uncertain thinking would imply uncertainty about action. One could not function effectively if thrown into paralyzing indecision at every juncture. Thus, an adaptive function of the discomfort arising from self-relevant inconsistency may be that it helps to discourage debilitating ambivalence and prompts unconflicted and decisive action (Beckmann & Irlé, 1984; Brehm & Cohen, 1962; Harmon-Jones, 1999, in press; McGregor, 1998).

From a feedback control perspective (Powers, 1973; Scheier & Carver, 1988), self-regulation would break down if cognitions about the self were uncertain because they would not provide clear direction for subordinate goals and behaviors in the behavioral feedback control cycle. This may be why (evolutionarily speaking) uncertainty feels unpleasant. The functionalist perspective on why personal uncertainty is aversive is the corollary of Fromm's (1947, p. 48) explanation for why people become idealistic and fanatical about their "frames of orientation and devotion." Zeal may be a surrogate for lost instinct. Zeal makes it clear what one should do, eliminates uncertainty, and thus facilitates decisive, sustained action.

COMPENSATORY CONVICTION

Like Fromm, Lewin (1933, 1935) proposed that simultaneous awareness of multiple action alternatives can be overwhelmingly aversive and that single-mindedness can be adaptive. Without the capacity to become single-minded, one could suffer a fate similar to the mythic donkey mentioned by Lewin (1935, p. 123) that, paralyzed by indecision, starved between two equally attractive bails of hay. Lewin (1933, p. 609) noticed that the children he was observing became uncomfortable and tense when they were in situations in which multiple goals (what he called *fields of force*) were present. They tried to escape from the tension by blocking awareness of the conflicting goals in various ways. Some ways of escaping from such tense situations were primitive and mechanical, such as running away from the “field,” or crumpling into a ball and covering their eyes with their arms. Lewin also proposed defenses that involved psychological hiding. He referred to “encysting of the self” and the tendency to become obdurate. Lewin (1935) proposed that such innate psychological defense mechanisms help people cope with the predicament of psychical tension as follows:

[E]ach dynamic psychical system does not have clear communication with every other . . . communication in many cases is extremely weak, indeed practically nonexistent. If there were not this sometimes astoundingly complete segregation of different psychical systems from each other . . . no ordered action would be possible. Only the really extreme exclusion of the majority of all the simultaneously present psychical tensions . . . and the practically exclusive connection of the motor sphere with one special region of inner tensions make an ordered action possible.

Thus, according to Lewin (1935), one way to achieve single-mindedness and facilitate effective action is to focus exclusively on one particular set of goal-relevant cognitions at a time, to the exclusion of others. Along these lines, the main hypothesis guiding the research in this chapter is that people are drawn to conviction because conviction helps relieve the discomfort associated with personal uncertainty. One reason that people go to extremes and want to stand for something is because immersing oneself in a domain of conviction and consistency provides a reprieve from the uncertainty inherent in (at least the perceived) human experience of free will (Fromm, 1941, 1947).

Conviction refers to the absence of ambivalence or ambiguity characterized by commitment to, emphasis on, or heightened importance of a particular self-element. The term *self-element* is used in this chapter to refer to any knowledge structure (e.g., an attitude, value, personal goal, trait definition, or identification) that is relevant to the “who am I and what do I value?” question. *Compensatory conviction* refers to heightening salience of and conviction about one self-element to relieve the psychological distress arising from other problematic self-elements.

Ideas related to the hypothesis that people respond to personal uncertainty

with compensatory conviction about other self-elements have a long history. Fromm (1941), Rogers (1951), and Kelly (1955) all proposed that states related to personal uncertainty can induce *systemic* compensatory rigidity (not only adjustment of a particular problematic attitude or belief as seen in dissonance research). According to Fromm, for individuals without authentic personal identifications, choices are difficult because they do not have a reliable intrinsic guide for action. Thus, to compensate, they cling to rigid, conforming patterns of thinking and acting. Adherence to the dictates of an authority or to the majority serves as a substitute for clarity about one's personal values and priorities. Rogers (1951, p. 515) proposed that "an experience which is inconsistent with the organization or structure of the self may be perceived as a threat and the more of these there are the more rigidly the self-structure is organized to maintain itself." Kelly (1955) similarly proposed that individuals respond to threats to the organization of the self (i.e., their personal constructs) with the tendency to "harden their categories"—that is, when a personal construct is invalidated, one adheres more insistently to the rest. The ideas of Fromm, Rogers, and Kelly are consistent with Lewin's speculation that regions of psychical tension can be "discharged" in unrelated, compensatory areas (1935, p. 61). Conviction in one domain can relieve the free-floating tension aroused by personal uncertainty or conflict in other domains.

Theorists rooted in the authoritarianism tradition have also proposed that, in general, threat can cause defensive cognitive rigidity. For example, according to Rokeach (1960, pp. 69-70), "individuals may become disposed to accept or form closed systems of thinking and believing in proportion to the degree to which they are made to feel alone, isolated and helpless in the world" and that "the closed system is ... the total network of psychoanalytic defense mechanisms organized together to form a cognitive system and designed to shield a vulnerable mind." Personality scales based on the assumption that cognitive rigidity is a kind of tough outer shell that is used to cover up inner weakness, fear, or insecurity began to proliferate after the ideologically driven horrors of World War II (e.g., [Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950](#)).

Despite longstanding theoretical support for the notion of compensatory conviction, there is only scattered, and mostly correlational, empirical evidence (but see [Sales & Friend, 1973](#)), supporting the hypothesis that threat can cause cognitive rigidity ([McCann, 1997, 1999](#); [Sales, 1972, 1973](#); [Porter & Suedfeld, 1981](#); [Suedfeld & Pietrohedra, 1984](#)). There is even less extant empirical support for the notion that personal uncertainty, in particular, can cause compensatory conviction (for related work, see [Hogg & Mullen, 1999](#); [van den Bos & Lind, in press](#)). For the most part, research on psychological compensation has tended to focus on compensatory self-enhancement after failure, that is, on how individuals cope with threats to self-worth by highlighting or enhancing unrelated, positive self-aspects (e.g., [Baumeister, 1978](#); [Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985](#); [Dodgson & Wood, 1996](#); [Steele, 1988](#)) or by derogating others to highlight self-enhancing downward comparisons ([Wills, 1981](#)). In this

chapter, I present five experiments that investigate the phenomenon of compensatory conviction in the face of personal uncertainty. Personal uncertainty is manipulated in three different ways, and subsequent conviction about personal attitudes, values, goals, group-identifications, and self-definitions are assessed.

STUDY 1: COMPENSATORY CONVICTION ABOUT ATTITUDES

One way that people might shore up a sense of self-stability in the face of uncertainty is by heightening conviction about their attitudes, perhaps toward social issues. Expressing strong, rigid views may help people feel like they know who they are and what they stand for. In a study designed to test this hypothesis (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 1), undergraduate participants in four uncertainty conditions wrote about a personal dilemma and the uncertainties and inconsistencies associated with it. Participants in a fifth, baseline condition wrote instead about a friend's dilemma. Next, in two of the four uncertainty conditions (labeled uncertainty/certainty conditions in Fig. 4.1), participants had a chance to repair a sense of self-certainty. They wrote a paragraph about a personally important value and described how their past actions and future plans were consistent with it. In the other two uncertainty conditions (labeled uncertainty/control conditions in Fig. 4.1) and in the baseline condition participants instead completed a neutral exercise that asked them to describe how their least important value could be important to someone else.

As the main dependent measure, participants in the baseline condition, one of the uncertainty/certainty conditions, and one of the uncertainty/control conditions were then given the chance to express conviction about their attitudes toward capital punishment and abortion. Participants selected attitude positions that were closest to their own from a list and then rated their certainty, perceived consensus for, and ambivalence about their positions. Certainty, perceived consensus, and reverse-scored ambivalence were standardized and aggregated across issues into one conviction index.

Of participants in the three conditions that had an opportunity to express compensatory conviction (see Fig. 4.1), only those in the uncertainty/control/conviction-opportunity condition were expected to take the opportunity to express conviction, presumably to compensate for the dilemma-related uncertainty with which they had been confronted. As anticipated, results indicated that there was significantly more conviction in the uncertainty/control/conviction-opportunity condition than in either the uncertainty/certainty/conviction-opportunity condition or the baseline condition.

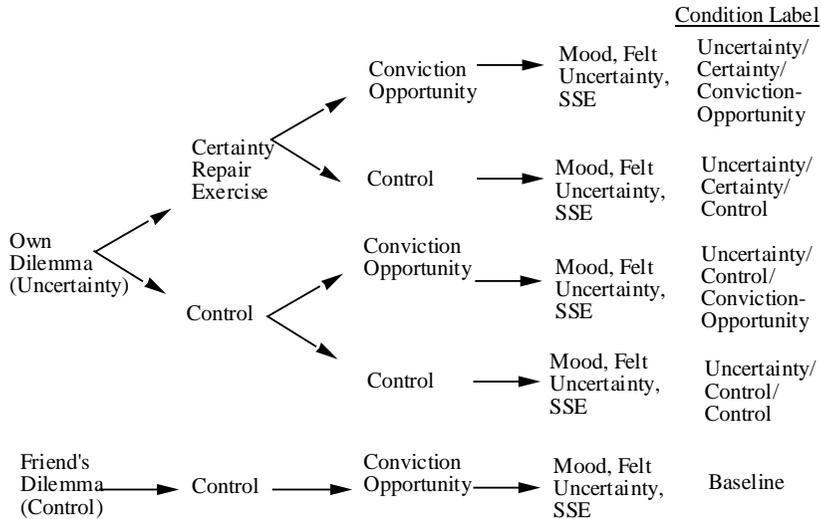


Fig. 4.1. Order of materials in conditions of Study 1.

Is the Conviction Really a Compensatory Defense Against Uncertainty?

If the conviction is compensatory, it should occur after participants are confronted with personal uncertainty but should not occur if participants are given a chance to restore a sense of self-clarity before conviction is assessed. Furthermore, if conviction is compensatory, it should work; that is, conviction should actually help to reduce uncertainty. An assessment of felt-uncertainty in all five conditions of Study 1 supports the contention that the heightened conviction in the uncertainty/control/conviction-opportunity condition is compensatory.

In the uncertainty/control/control and the uncertainty/certainty/control conditions, in which participants did not have a chance to express conviction about their attitudes, they instead completed control materials that asked parallel questions about politicians' attitudes. (We assumed most first-year undergraduates would not be able to muster much conviction about politicians' attitudes.) Then, participants in all five conditions completed a 19-item felt-uncertainty scale (e.g., "torn," "uneasy," "of two minds," "confused," "indecisive," "conflicted," and "unsure of self or goals"). Results indicate that felt-uncertainty was significantly higher in the uncertainty/control/control condition than in any of the other four conditions. Thus, the uncertainty manipulation made people feel uncertain, but conviction about attitudes reduced feelings of uncertainty to baseline levels. Moreover, the results suggest that the reason participants did not heighten their conviction in the uncertainty/certainty/conviction-opportunity condition is that the certainty-repair exercise effectively eliminated feelings of uncertainty. In the uncertainty/

certainty/control condition, felt-uncertainty was the same as in the baseline condition.

Internal analyses further support the compensatory conviction hypothesis. In the uncertainty/control/conviction-opportunity condition, the within-cell correlation between conviction about one's attitudes and subsequent uncertainty was significantly negative and differed significantly from the non-significant positive correlation in the baseline condition. Thus, it appears as though in the face of personal uncertainty, participants spontaneously heightened conviction about their attitudes toward social issues and in doing so alleviated felt-uncertainty.

STUDIES 2 AND 3: COMPENSATORY CONVICTION ABOUT PERSONAL VALUES AND GOALS

The results of Study 1 suggest that one way individuals cope with uncertainty is to become more rigid in their conviction about their attitudes. Studies 2 and 3 assessed whether uncertainty also would cause compensatory conviction about values and goals.

Study 2: Dilemma-Related Uncertainty

In a simple two-condition experiment (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 2), personal uncertainty was induced with the same dilemma exercise as in Study 1 to see whether participants would respond by heightening their conviction about their communal values and personal goals. After writing about either a personal dilemma (uncertainty condition) or a friend's dilemma (baseline condition), participants rated seven communal values (from Schwartz, 1992) such as "mature love," "true friendship," and "helpfulness" on "how important each is as a guiding priority in your life." For each participant, we averaged the seven ratings to form an index of value conviction. Each participant also wrote down ten of their current personal goals (e.g., "get an A in Statistics," "be nicer to my sister"). They then rated each goal on four dimensions representing the extent to which each goal was personally important, congruent with their core values, consistent with their self-identity, and personally meaningful (as in McGregor & Little, 1998). Instructions for elicitation and rating of goals were adapted from Personal Projects Analysis (Little, 1983). The 40 ratings per person (ten goals with four rating dimensions per goal) were then averaged to give one index of goal-conviction per person. Results indicated that conviction was significantly higher in the uncertainty than control condition for both communal values and for personal goals.

Study 3: Existential Uncertainty

Compensatory conviction about personal goals also emerged in a conceptual replication of Study 2 that used two manipulations of existential uncertainty (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 4). In one existential uncertainty condition, participants wrote a paragraph about what would happen to them after they died. (Pilot studies indicated that uncertainty was the most commonly mentioned feeling evoked by this exercise. (See also van den Bos & Miedema, 2000, and Leary, 2000, Study 2 for similar findings and conclusions about the psychological impact of mortality salience). The second, “faded memory” existential uncertainty manipulation was an attempt to highlight personal change over time and remind participants that they were not the same people they used to be. Participants wrote a description of the physical scene of an important, self-defining childhood memory and then described how that physical scene would likely have changed if they were to revisit it in 2035. It was expected that contemplating the corruption of the scene of a self-defining memory (e.g., “the park and baseball diamond where I used to play with all my chums would likely have been bulldozed and developed into a shopping mall or condo complex”) would destabilize participants’ sense of self-consistency. In the control condition, participants wrote a paragraph about what they thought happened to their bodies, physically, when they watched television (a control condition often used by mortality salience researchers; see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). The measure of goal conviction was the same as in the previous study (the average of the 40 importance, value congruence, self-identity, and meaning ratings across the ten personal goals). Results revealed that participants in the mortality salience and faded memory conditions reported significantly more goal conviction than did participants in the control condition.

STUDY 4: COMPENSATORY CONVICTION ABOUT GROUPS

Studies 1 through 3 demonstrate that induced uncertainty can cause compensatory conviction about personal attitudes, goals, and values. Study 4 assessed whether induced uncertainty would also cause compensatory conviction about self-elements with an explicit interpersonal component. There is good reason to believe that cognitions related to group membership should be particularly relevant to the amelioration of personal uncertainty. Early consistency theories recognized that the beliefs of others are relevant to one's own sense of certainty. [Lewin \(1935\)](#) proposed that social “fields of force” can be as compelling to an individual as one's own idiosyncratic goals as contributors to psychological tension. Heider's (1958) balance theory featured the equal contribution of one's own sentiments and those of others to the valuation of an attitude object. Festinger (1957, pp. 179-183) similarly recognized that dissonance will result if one's own cognitions are logically

incompatible with those of others, especially to the extent that the cognitions are about opinions not concerned with "testable physical reality." Festinger further proposed that rejecting or derogating dissenters (e.g., by casting them as stupid, ignorant, unfriendly, or bigoted) could effectively reduce dissonance by reducing the perceived importance of their dissenting opinions.

A companion to the derogate-dissenters strategy for reducing discomfort associated with uncertainty might be to increase liking, identification, and affiliation with those who share one's opinions and bolster one's sense of self. Indeed, one of the primary reasons for joining social groups may be the uncertainty-reducing value of groups (Hogg & Mullen, 1999). In the face of personal uncertainty about what to believe, value, strive for, and what kind of person to be, group membership and identification may be attractive because most groups promote, implicitly or explicitly, a relatively consensual core of internally consistent attitude, value, and world-view positions. Thus, group identification may highlight an internally consistent subset of self-elements.

Study 4 (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 3) investigated whether participants would respond to uncertainty with increased conviction about their identification with an ingroup and derogation of an outgroup. The mortality salience, faded memory, and control condition materials from Study 3 were used as the three conditions of the independent variable. For assessment of the dependent variable, all participants read the same two 200-word essays in counterbalanced order. One essay was written by an ingroup author who praised the participants' university and university students in general. The other essay was written by an outgroup author who was critical of the participants' university and university students in general. The two essays represented ingroup and outgroup positions. After reading each essay, participants answered questions that evaluated their favorability toward the authors and the opinions expressed. An overall measure of intergroup bias (that we used as a proxy for conviction about group identification) was assessed by taking the difference between participants' favorability toward the ingroup author and opinion and their favorability toward the outgroup author and opinion (materials adapted from [Greenberg et al., 1990](#)). As a manipulation check before the dependent measure, participants rated their feelings of uncertainty on a six-item uncertainty scale that contained the three items from Elliot and Devine's (1994) self-report dissonance scale (bothered, uneasy, uncomfortable), and three other items theoretically related to dissonance and uncertainty (aroused/active, excited, worried/anxious).

Results revealed that there was significantly more uncertainty in the mortality salience and faded memory conditions than in the baseline condition. There was also significantly more intergroup bias in the mortality salience and faded memory conditions than in the baseline condition. Thus, induced uncertainty appears to cause heightened conviction about both interpersonally and intrapersonally referenced self-elements.

Is Compensatory Conviction A "Self"-Defense?

Studies 1 through 4 are based on the assumption that personal uncertainty is a poignant threat to the self and that compensatory conviction is a self-defense. If compensatory conviction is indeed a self-defense, then there is good reason to expect that it should be most pronounced for high self-esteem (HSE) participants. HSE individuals are the most likely to engage in a variety self-defenses after threat (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). They are more likely than individuals with low self-esteem (LSE) to bring positive information about the self to mind when confronted with failure (Dodgson & Wood, 1998); to derogate and aggress against others who outperform them (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Baumeister & Bushman, 1998; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993); to distort impressions of others to make themselves look good (Dunning, Chapter 3, this volume); and to derogate outgroups (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987).

To assess this defensive-self-esteem hypothesis, the self-esteem by uncertainty interaction effect on conviction was computed in the previously-described studies in which self-esteem was assessed (Study 1 on conviction about attitudes and Study 4 on conviction about group identification). In Study

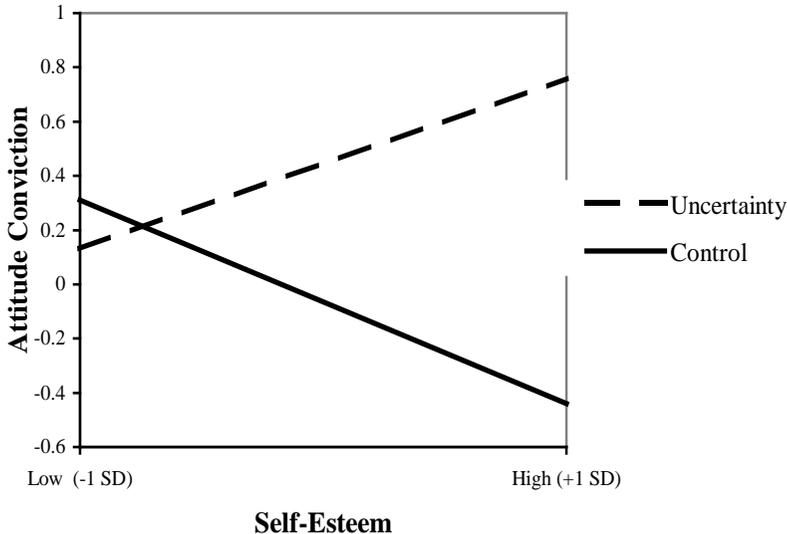


Fig. 4.2 Standardized conviction about social issues as a function of self-esteem and induced uncertainty.

1 there was a significant interaction between condition (uncertainty/control/conviction opportunity vs. baseline) and self-esteem on the dependent

variable—conviction about attitudes. As shown in Fig. 4.2, the highest conviction was for HSE participants who were facing uncertainty.

In Experiment 4, the interaction between uncertainty condition (combined existential uncertainty vs baseline) and self-esteem on conviction about group identification yielded similar, although only marginally significant results. The highest conviction was again registered by the HSE participants in the uncertainty condition.

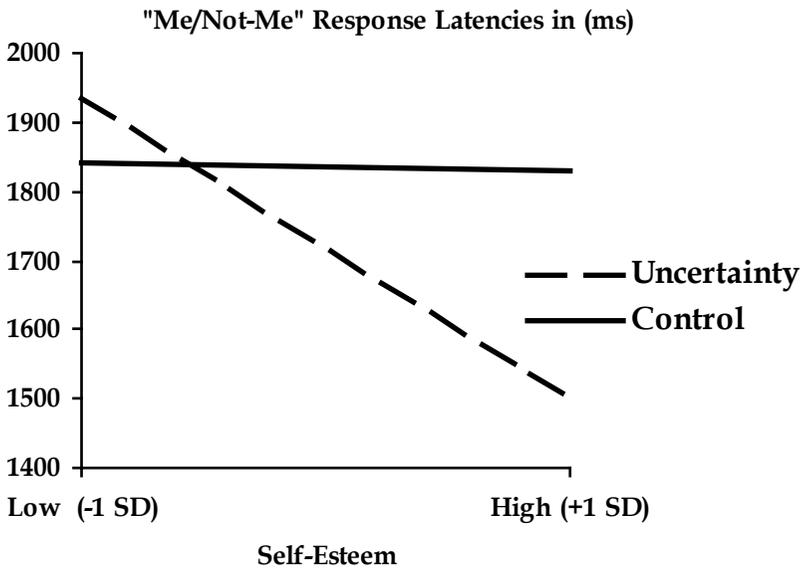
STUDY 5: COMPENSATORY CONVICTION ABOUT SELF-DEFINITIONS

Together, the experiments described here suggest that personal uncertainty can be uncomfortable and threatening to the self, and that participants cope with it by summoning conviction about other salient self-elements (attitudes about social issues, personal values, goals, and groups). Study 5 (McGregor & Golson, 2001) was devised to replicate the finding that compensatory conviction is a function of the induced-uncertainty by self-esteem interaction using an implicit measure of conviction about self-definition. If so, this would suggest that compensatory conviction is a relatively automatic defense and is not self-presentational.

After participants completed a self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), we manipulated personal uncertainty using the own-dilemma materials from Studies 1 and 2. In the control condition, participants completed the friend's dilemma exercise from Studies 1 and 2. The dependent measure was a response-latency based assessment of self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990). Participants responded to trait adjectives that were presented on a computer screen by pressing buttons marked "me" or "not me." Faster responses were taken as evidence of conviction about one's self-definition.

A regression analysis with average response latency regressed on condition (uncertainty vs. control), self-esteem, and the condition by self-esteem interaction revealed a significant condition by self-esteem interaction (main effects of condition and self-esteem were not significant). As shown in Fig. 4.3, the highest conviction (i.e., fastest responding) was for HSE participants in the uncertainty condition. Simple effects analyses revealed that this was significantly higher than for HSE participants in the control condition and that the simple slope of self-esteem in the uncertainty condition was also significantly negative. For descriptive purposes, we assessed the correlation between self-esteem and conviction in the uncertainty and baseline conditions. In the uncertainty condition, it was significantly positive. In the control condition it was close to zero. Thus, as in Studies 1 and 4, HSE individuals were more likely to respond to uncertainty with compensatory conviction than LSE individuals. The replication of the compensatory conviction effect with an implicit measure demonstrates that compensatory conviction can be relatively

Fig. 4.3. Response latencies to "me/not-me" decisions about personal characteristics



as a function of self-esteem and induced uncertainty.

automatic and suggests that it is not self-presentational.

DISCUSSION

In five experiments, personal uncertainty was induced by highlighting inconsistent or uncertain self-elements. The results presented here converge on the conclusion that compensatory conviction is used as a defense against personal uncertainty. In Study 1, salience of dilemma-related uncertainty caused conviction about attitudes toward social issues. In Study 2, dilemma-related uncertainty caused conviction about values and personal goals. In Study 3, two existential uncertainty manipulations caused conviction about personal goals. In Study 4, the same two existential uncertainty manipulations caused conviction about group identification. In Study 5, dilemma-related uncertainty caused increased conviction about self-definition (among HSE participants).

Evidence that these effects are self-defensive comes from the finding in Study 1 that compensatory conviction effectively eliminated felt-uncertainty, and from the findings in Studies 1, 4, and 5, that conviction in the face of uncertainty was most pronounced for high self-esteem individuals. Past research, and some presented in this volume has found that defensiveness is most pronounced for individuals with high scores on self-esteem scales. Jordan and Zanna (Chapter 6) found that individuals with high explicitly measured self-esteem and low implicitly measured self-esteem were particularly defensive and Duggan and McGregor (2002) recently found that such defensive self-esteem individuals react with the most compensatory conviction in the face of uncertainty.

Why Does Compensatory Conviction Help?

Lewin (1933, 1935) proposed two general strategies for coping with conative conflict. One is to get out of the field somehow, removing the inconsistencies from awareness (e.g., he noted that children variously accomplished this by physical hiding, superficial play, or flight into fantasy). The other is to appeal to some authority source (e.g., the parent). Similarly, but from a more existentially-tinged perspective, Fromm (1941, p. 155) proposed escapism and fascism as two prevalent strategies for coping with uncertainty about what to do and value.

Escapism/fleeing the field may be effective because discomfort associated with cognitive inconsistency is reduced to the extent that the offending cognitions are out of awareness ([McGregor et al., 1999](#); [Newby-Clark et al., 2001](#)). Compensatory conviction may be an effective way to psychologically flee the field. It may ameliorate discomfort by reducing the accessibility of the offending cognitions (cf., [Koole, Smeets, van Knippenberg, & Dijksterhuis, 1999](#)). Compensatory conviction may also accomplish the same result as fascism, albeit to an internal dictator. Compensatory conviction may alleviate personal uncertainty by allowing one to focus on the more important values and goals of an inner authority, which may effectively trivialize one's internal conflict by way of a contrast effect. Thus, heightened conviction may effectively narrow the aperture on the wandering spotlight of self-consciousness ([Kruglanski, 1989](#)) and fix the focus on the topic of the conviction. Doing so may render other contradictory or uncertain self-elements less important and accessible to awareness. Indeed, [McGregor, Kang, Espinet, and Clark \(2002\)](#) have recently found that expressing conviction about attitudes and values reduces subjective accessibility to awareness of personal uncertainties.

Is There a Dark Side of Compensatory Conviction?

Human existence is fraught with uncertainty. Relatively attenuated instinctual imperatives and enlarged neocortexes have given us the adaptive capacity for abstract thought and the ability to consider alternative courses of future action. These capacities support the instrumental advantages of language and planning, but come with a side effect of potentially paralyzing ambivalence (McGregor, 1998). Human choice is vulnerable to multiple approach-avoidance conflicts worse than those faced by Lewin's mythic donkey that was caught in a double approach-avoidance conflict between two bales of hay. For humans, choosing one action often means abandoning a whole set of other potentially rewarding alternatives, about which the relative utilities are unclear. Values, identities, groups, and worldviews can serve as arbiters for choice, but those too are uncertain, a reality underscored by awareness of committed adherents to diverse and contradictory orientations.

In the face of such fundamental uncertainty, compensatory conviction may be an attractive and even essential response. This is not necessarily a problem. People are zealous about many things, some of which are either relatively benign (e.g., being a golf devotee or a believer in aliens), or even seemingly prosocial (e.g., being a committed environmental or social activist). Problems may arise, however, when convictions collide, interpersonally or between groups. Non-rigid conviction may be tolerant and even sympathetic toward competing orientations, but defensive conviction may be less magnanimous.

If conviction is a defense against uncertainty, then consensus is vital because other people can serve as important bolstering elements when they agree or as poignant threats to certainty when they disagree. In his discussion of "social fields of force," Lewin (1935, p. 175) noted that the goals and valuations of others can be as influential as one's own. Festinger similarly noted that we turn to others to reduce uncertainty (1954) and that the opinions of others can cause or help to eliminate dissonance (1957, p. 177). [Schachter \(1959\)](#) similarly concluded that ambiguous situations motivate affiliation. More recently, dispositional and situational variables related to the desire for certainty have been found to cause increased tendency to join groups ([Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998](#)). Hogg and Mullen (1999) contend that one of the most important functions of groups is, in fact, uncertainty reduction.

If there is a need to go public, and to reify one's self-image through the eyes of others (cf. [Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982](#)), then private zeal is not enough. Compensatory conviction may thus be a zero-sum game that seeks allies and tolerates no opposition. A natural outgrowth may be exaggerated group identification (as found in Study 4) and intergroup hostility. One may find groups or relationships to bolster self-related cognitions, but one is also continually confronted by individuals and groups with orientations that radically diverge from one's own. Derogating, rejecting, and aggressing against others with opposing convictions may be one way to cope with the uncertainty that

they impose.

Indeed, Schachter (1951) found that opinion deviates were rejected and derogated by groups. More recently, Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Lerner, & [Green \(2000\)](#) found that just having participants read about individuals whose opinions and actions contradicted their own "sacred values" caused the participants to respond with "moral outrage" involving anger, contempt, and readiness to ostracize and punish the subjective deviant. Participants also initiated "moral cleansing," reactions involving heightened conviction about their attitudes and values (significantly correlated with the moral outrage measures). Similarly, terror management theorists have repeatedly found that personal mortality salience causes increased favorability toward those who share one's attitudes and values, and increased derogation, hostility, and aggression against those whose actions or statements are discrepant with their own values ([Greenberg et al., 1997](#)). Personal uncertainty was the most commonly mentioned feeling in response to mortality salience in my pilot research (see also van den Bos & Miedema, 2000, and Leary, 2000, for similar findings).

In summary, the dark side of conviction may lie in its essentially interpersonal character. There are few objective referents to guide moral decisions about what kind of person to be. In the face of such fundamental uncertainty, compensatory conviction may be a subjectively attractive response. But the opinions of others are critical for maintenance of conviction. Because there will always be others and groups of others who stand for convictions that contradict one's own, rejecting, derogating and aggressing against such subjective deviants may be a reflexive way of consolidating conviction. Furthermore, publicly demonstrating one's conviction may also be essential because one's conviction may need to be witnessed by others for it to feel real ([Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982](#)).

Concluding Comments

This research provides the first evidence for spontaneous compensatory conviction in the face of personal uncertainty. In five experiments, participants (especially those high in self-esteem) responded to everyday kinds of personal uncertainty by claiming increased conviction about various self-elements, as if to consolidate a sense of knowing who they were and what they stood for. Compensatory conviction may be personally adaptive if it ameliorates potentially immobilizing uncertainty and makes people feel better (as shown in Study 1). And in many cases, it may be relatively benign, socially, and manifest itself in zeal about hobbies and habits, pet peeves and projects, axes to grind, rants to be given, and perhaps even prosocial devotion. It seems plausible to speculate, however, that like other defensive distortions, compensatory conviction may sometimes have adverse personal and social side effects (e.g., [Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995](#); [Janoff-Bulman, 1989](#)).

Examples of personal convictions associated with self-destructive and violent

explosions against those who offend them come easily to mind. Harris and Leibold killed Columbine high school students who were Christians and/or athletes. Timothy McVeigh's blowing up of an Oklahoma federal building and many of its occupants was linked to his anti-government convictions. Benjamin Smith's shooting rampage against Blacks, Jews, and Asians was linked to his White supremacist convictions. Ted Kaczynski's letter bombs to professors and university administrators were linked to his anti-technology convictions. Pro-life zealots blow up health care workers at abortion clinics in service of their anti-abortion convictions.

Groups, too, often revolve around rigid conviction. Cults, gangs, religious fundamentalists, political parties, and extremist organizations often use conviction as a fulcrum for harmful agendas. Part of the appeal of joining cults, gangs, and extremist organizations may be the consensual, ideological certainty that such organizations offer, which may be particularly attractive to the often adolescent recruits who are actively trying to consolidate a clear sense of identity. More mainstream groups, too, seem to regularly become infected with rigid conviction. The Holocaust is a prototype for the malignant ethnic, religious, national, and cultural convictions that we have recently seen erupt into violence and vengeance in, for example, South Africa, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. Although a variety of factors undoubtedly contribute to the fulmination of such extreme outcomes, our research suggests that compensatory conviction may be an active ingredient.

This chapter investigates a possible contributing factor to the making of a zealot. Rigid conviction can be puzzling. People hold a wide range of zealous beliefs and worldviews with tenacity, and to the less zealous observer, it seems that a moment's reflection should dampen the zealot's fervor. Why do zealots not think, "Gee, if we all believe our diverse positions so strongly, then some of us must be wrong or at least not completely right. Maybe it is me?" The results of the five experiments presented here demonstrate that people (especially those with high self-esteem) are motivated to forego even-mindedness for conviction, because conviction can relieve discomfort associated with uncertainty. Given the fundamental uncertainty that permeates the human condition, it seems plausible that compensatory conviction may contribute to the zeal of everyday life and the fanaticism that is so regularly featured in the evening news.

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