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Zeal Appeal: The Allure of Moral Extremes

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Considerable evidence now indicates that poignant self-threats cause compensatory zeal about opinions, values, goals, groups, and self-worth. Evidence for the self-threat→zeal link is reviewed from research on zealous reactions to epistemic, self-worth, relationship, and mortality salience threats. Two new studies demonstrate that zealous pride and conviction insulate individuals from concern with uncertainty threats. The new studies further demonstrate that this insulation effect does not result from distraction, mood, or state self-esteem. It is proposed that the appeal of zeal arises from its ability to activate the approach-motivation system and to down-regulate the avoidance motivation system's vigilant concern with threats.

In 1095 C.E., France was miserable. The glory of Charlemagne had been followed by crippling civil wars, repeated Norse attacks, and the spread of Islam to the French doorstep. When Pope Urban II went on a speaking tour in that year to rally support for the first Crusade, the bewildered French were especially receptive to his call:

Oh race of Franks! race beloved and chosen by God! ... an accursed race, wholly alienated from God, has violently invaded the lands of these Christians, and has depopulated them by pillage and fire ... [be encouraged by] the glory and grandeur of Charlemagne ... Let the Holy Sepulcher of Our Lord and Saviour, now held by unclean nations, arouse you ... wrest that land from a wicked race ... Undertake this journey eagerly ... and be assured of the reward of imperishable glory in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Durant, 1950)

After roaring the response, "God wills it!" a first wave of 12,000 ill-prepared Crusaders charged from France without waiting for the decided date. In a frenzy of zeal they attacked and pillaged unarmed Jews and even Greek Christians on their way to the Holy Land, only to be annihilated by the first wave of armed resistance they faced. The next wave of 30,000 better prepared Crusaders that broke from Europe the following year had more success. After a grueling 3-year campaign, the motley half who survived penetrated Jerusalem, gleefully slaughtered its 70,000 Muslims, and burned thousands of Jews to death in their synagogue. Following the massacre, the jubilant Crusaders gathered together in the

church of the Holy Sepulcher, wept with joy, and praised God for their victory (Durant, 1950).

Zeal is powerful. Throughout history it has animated dedication to truth, love, and beauty. But it also seems to regularly fuel militant religious and political conflicts with devastating social consequences, such as the Crusades, genocides, ethnic cleansings, terrorist attacks, and callous foreign policies. The present investigation examines the social cognition of zeal in an attempt to better understand the subjective appeal of going to extremes.

The term *zeal* came into common usage in reference to a sect of 1st-century *c.e.* religious fanatics who carried daggers under their cloaks and killed others who did not fully support their views. Such extremism brought reprisals that ultimately crushed their sect. Accordingly, zeal refers to proud conviction that seems unreasonable or self-defeating (McGregor, in press-c). Just as the original Zealots' aggressive fervor led to the annihilation of their sect, thousands of naïve crusaders were killed in their quest to seize Jerusalem for their proud, ideological cause. In both cases, the Zealots' righteous euphoria made them insensitive not only to obstacles and hardships but also to the atrocities they committed. One look at the evening news will reveal that such callous zeal is not just a historical curiosity. Zeal remains prevalent even today. Why might people allow themselves to be carried away by proud, ideological extremes? The research reviewed and new results presented here suggest that zeal insulates people from concern with self-threats.

The guiding premise is that zeal about idealized self-worth and value conviction feels good because it powerfully activates the approach-motivation system, and down-regulates the vigilant concern, and ultimately the anxiety associated with avoidance-motivation (McGregor, in press-a, in

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press-b; cf. Gray, 1982; Amodio, Shah, Sigelman, Brazy, & Harmon-Jones, 2004). As such, approaching zeal is a defense mechanism for avoiding distress. Indeed, William James, Sigmund Freud, and several neo-analytic theorists explicitly contended that people use zealous fantasy as a defense mechanism (McGregor, in press-a, in press-b, in press-c). Accordingly, there is now considerable evidence that people do indeed turn to zeal after distressing experiences.

My colleagues and I have repeatedly found that various self-threats cause individuals to exaggerate aspects of righteous zeal. One threat that has repeatedly caused such apparently defensive zeal in the laboratory is personal uncertainty. Induced rumination about troubling personal dilemmas has caused participants to exaggerate conviction for their value-laden opinions (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001, Study 1), to bolster zeal for their life values and goals (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 2), to become less tolerant of an out-group religion (Haji & McGregor, 2002), and to exaggerate self-concept clarity, as assessed by response latencies to me-not-me decisions (McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Study 1). Together, these studies demonstrate that thinking about personal uncertainties can motivate compensatory conviction about opinions, values, goals, and identities.

Other epistemic threats have had similar effects. In one study a classic, induced-compliance cognitive dissonance manipulation caused some participants to become righteous about unrelated value-laden opinions (McGregor & Crippen, 2003). In others, threats to system-justice beliefs and personal meanings caused similar defensive zeal outcomes (McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang, 2005, Study 3; McGregor et al., 2001, Studies 3 and 4). Thus, there is substantial evidence that various epistemic threats can motivate compensatory zeal.

Experiences that reflect negatively on self-worth also seem to motivate defensive zeal. Two studies recently found that failure on a difficult statistics exercise caused students to become more extreme and to exaggerate zeal for their personal opinions about capital punishment, abortion, suicide bombing, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq (McGregor et al., 2005, Study 1; McGregor & Jordan, in press). Another study found that even just reflecting on past academic failures caused self-righteous disdain for Islam among Canadian students (Haji & McGregor, 2002).

Relationship threats cause the same kinds of zeal reactions. An imagery exercise that required participants to imagine moving to an inhospitable foreign country, cut off from contact with loved ones, caused exaggerated opinion conviction (McGregor et al., 2005, Study 2). So did contemplating real-life relationships that were not going well and that were in danger of dissolution (McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Study 3).

Finally, reflecting on one's own mortality, which arguably presents a compound epistemic-self-worth-relationship threat (McGregor, in press-a), motivates personal zeal. Describing their own physical death caused participants to ex-

aggerate perceptions of meaningfulness and likelihood of success in their idiosyncratic personal projects and self-identifications (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 4; McGregor & Gailliot, 2005, Study 2). Together, these results provide solid evidence for the conclusion that poignant self-threats—whether epistemic, esteem, relationship, or mortality related—can motivate righteous zeal. It is important to note that arrogant zeal reactions to threats are particularly pronounced among individuals with defensively high self-esteem (HSE) and defensively haughty personality tendencies toward narcissism and avoidant attachment (McGregor et al., 2005; see McGregor, in press-a, for review; cf. Vohs & Heatherton, 2001). Why should proud zeal be such an appealing defense for them?

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

The present research investigates whether focusing on zealous pride is a defense that can reduce subjective salience of unrelated threats, and make them feel easier to ignore. Two previously published experiments have shown that zealous conviction and consensus can reduce subjective salience of participants' unrelated personal uncertainties (McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Study 4; McGregor et al., 2005, Study 4). The current research extends these past findings, and assesses whether zealous pride can similarly quell threats.

In addition, the present research also probes the mechanism of how zeal quells threats. A *distraction mechanism* would be expected to show weaker and weaker threat-relieving effects of zeal on later items in a scale that assesses subjective salience of threats because each subsequent item would remind participants of the threat and undermine zealous distraction. An *insulation mechanism* would remain unaffected by repeated reminders of the threat and would be expected to reveal at least as much insulation on later as on early subjective salience scale items. We expected insulation effects, and not distraction effects, because self-affirmation research has found that affirmations defuse threats without making them less memorable (Correll et al., 2004).

To assess the insulation hypothesis, we focus on the last three items of the previously used 8-item Subjective Salience Scale, which asks participants to report how psychologically large a threat feels like it is looming at the moment. Strongly persistent effects on the last three Subjective Salience Scale items would indicate that zeal can insulate one from threatening thoughts, even after repeated reminders of those thoughts.

Method

After completing a self-esteem scale and then nominating an important personal dilemma, 15 male and 67 female undergraduates were randomly assigned to one of the following three conditions: (a) dilemma-rumination/pride-expression,

(b) dilemma-rumination/no-pride-expression, or (c) no-dilemma-rumination/no-pride-expression. The experimentally manipulated dilemma-rumination and pride-expression aspects of the three conditions are described in the following paragraphs. After the experimental manipulations, participants rated their mood and state self-esteem, followed by the eight questions about how subjectively salient the dilemma they had nominated earlier felt at the present moment. The mean of the last three items of the 8-item scale served as the main dependent variable.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale items (Rosenberg, 1965) were rated on a 5-point scale and were embedded among several other personality scale items. Previous research has indicated that the more arrogant varieties of defensive zeal are only evident among individuals with HSE (see McGregor, in press-a, for review). Accordingly, the threat-relieving effects of zealous pride were expected to be most pronounced among individuals with HSE.

Dilemma nomination and dilemma difficulty. All participants named a dilemma in their life they currently felt torn about.

Dilemma rumination. Some of the participants were randomly assigned to complete a two-page, dilemma-rumination exercise (from McGregor et al., 2001, Studies 1 and 2; adapted from Taylor and Gollwitzer, 1995) to heighten dilemma salience. They answered a series of questions about both poles of the dilemma and the uncertain long-term and short-term outcomes that could result from pursuing either pole. They then used a 5-point scale to answer the question, “How uncertain do you feel about your dilemma now, after having written about it on the last two pages?”

The no-rumination participants completed materials about goals and decisions that were matched in length but did not require rumination about the dilemma they had nominated earlier.

Pride expression. The pride-expression materials gave participants half a page to describe “a time when you succeeded at something, were proud of your accomplishment, and felt really good about yourself as a result.” The no-pride-expression materials gave participants the same amount of space to describe “a time when a public figure that you know of ... succeeded at something that you have no knowledge, skill, or aptitude for.” All participants then answered the following two questions on a five point scale: a) “How personally important to you is the success that you wrote about above?” b) “How personally significant to you is the success that you wrote about above?”

Uncertainty, positive affect, negative affect, and state self-esteem. After completing the experimental materials, all participants rated their “current feelings” by rating words or phrases from the 19-item Felt-Uncertainty Scale (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 1); the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988); and a three-item State Self-Esteem index comprised of three highly face valid items from the State Self-Esteem Scale (SSE; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The three SSE items were (a) dissatisfied with self, (b) inferior to others, and (c) good about self. For all items, participants rated each word on the “extent to which you feel this way right now, that is, at the present moment.” Ratings were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Subjective salience personal dilemmas. Finally, all participants were asked to think back to their own dilemma that they had named at the beginning of the session and to rate its subjective salience by answering the following questions on a scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*): (a) How pressing is it on your mind right now? (b) How preoccupied do you feel by it right now? (c) To what extent are you still thinking about it in the back of your mind? (d) How hard would it be to ignore it for a while? (e) How important does it feel to you right now? (f) How urgent does it feel to you to resolve it immediately? (g) How significant for you does it feel right now? (h) How big of a decision does it feel like right now? (adapted from McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Study 4). The present study focused on the last three Subjective Salience Scale items to assess an insulation (as opposed to distraction) mechanism of threat-relief.

Results

Preliminary analyses. As usual, the dilemma Subjective Salience Scale was unifactorial, and reliable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$).

After completing the own-dilemma deliberation materials, participants ratings of how uncertain they felt about their dilemma ($M = 3.15$) did not differ significantly from 3.00 (just as uncertain as before deliberating about it), $t(53) = 1.41, ns$.

A manipulation check revealed that personal importance/significance of the successes written about in the pride-expression condition ($M = 4.35$) was significantly higher than in the no-pride-expression conditions ($M = 2.68$), $t(77) = 7.17, p < .01$, indicating that participants recounted their own success experiences with considerable fervor.

Main analyses. To assess the insulation effect of zeal on subjective salience, the mean of the last three subjective salience items was regressed on gender, centered self-esteem scores, condition (with two dummy coded vectors), and the Self-Esteem \times Condition interaction. (Gender did not inter-

act with the other predictor variables.) The first-order effects of gender and condition were not significant ($ps > .30$), but there was a significant first-order effect of self-esteem, $\beta = -.30$, $t(71) = 2.67$, $p < .01$, that was qualified by a significant Condition \times Self-Esteem interaction effect, $F(2, 71) = 4.05$, $p < .05$. This interaction could not have been mediated by mood or state self-esteem because none of the mood or state self-esteem measures were significantly predicted by the Self-Esteem \times Condition interaction ($ps > .13$).

As illustrated in Figure 1, simple-slope analyses revealed that in the critical rumination/pride-expression condition, the predicted value of the last three subjective salience items was significantly lower at HSE ($PV = 2.48$) than at LSE ($PV = 4.04$), $\beta = -.73$, $t(71) = 4.21$, $p < .01$. (Values at one standard deviation above and below the mean were used for HSE and LSE.) This significant simple slope of self-esteem in the pride-expression condition indicates that HSEs make use of pride to reduce the subjective salience of troubling thoughts. Indeed, at HSE a simple effect analysis revealed that the mean of the last three subjective salience items was significantly lower in the rumination/pride-expression condition than in the rumination/no-pride-expression condition, $\beta = .38$, $t(71) = 1.99$, $p = .05$. (Simple-effect and slope analyses were computed as recommended by West, Aiken, & Krull, 1996.)

Importantly, and in support of an insulation mechanism over a distraction mechanism, the Self-Esteem \times Condition interaction effect did not significantly predict the mean of the first 3 subjective salience items, $F(2, 71) = 1.16$, $p > .32$. A distraction explanation would predict the largest effect on early scale items; that is, before increasingly repeated reminders of the threat by each scale item. The obtained pattern of results support the insulation hypothesis because it shows that even after repeated reminders of the threat (from initial subjective salience scale items), zealous pride continued to effectively quell threat salience.

DISCUSSION

The present results demonstrate that zealous expressions of pride can relieve concern about important life problems. These findings extend past research that has found that other, conviction and consensus related aspects of zeal similarly relieve concern about personal troubles (McGregor & Mari-gold, 2003, Studies 3 and 4; McGregor et al., 2005, Study 4). Moreover, the present results illuminate the social cognition of how zeal works. It is important to note that the present results indicate that the insulation effect of zeal is not merely a result of distraction. Insulation effects actually became stronger after repeated reminders of the threat. Repeated threat reminders would presumably have attenuated protective effects of zeal that relied on a distraction mechanism.

The insulation effects are intriguing, but do they explain the motivational mechanism that underlies defensive zeal more generally? To extend the range of the insulation account, a conceptual replication study was conducted to assess whether zeal about value conviction might provide convergent evidence for an insulation mechanism. If so, then a more general conclusion about insulation effects of zeal could be warranted.

REPLICATION STUDY

The replication study, with 6 male and 35 female participants, used the same design as the main study reported in the preceding paragraphs, but it assessed the threat-salience relieving effects of value-conviction expression instead of pride expression. Thus the three experimental conditions were as follows: (a) dilemma-rumination/value-conviction-expression, (b) dilemma-rumination/no-value-conviction-expression, or (c) no-dilemma-rumination/no-value-conviction-expression.

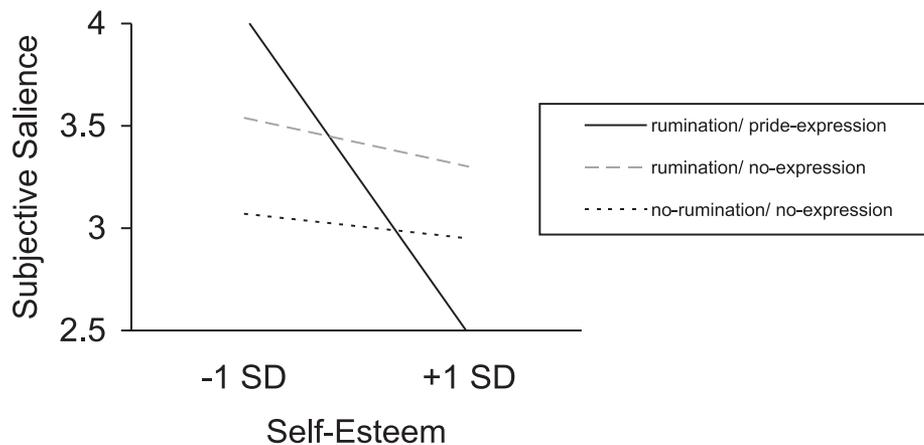


FIGURE 1 Dilemma subjective salience as a function of self-esteem and experimental condition.

The value-conviction-expression materials required participants to select the value that was most important to them from a list of six options (success, relationships, knowledge, social action, art, or religion) and to write a paragraph that described “why this value is important to you and how you have acted consistently with this value in the past and plan to act consistently with it in the future.” The no-value-conviction-expression materials instead required participants to select the value that was least important to them and write about how that value could be important to other people (materials from McGregor et al., 2001, Study 1).

On the basis of past findings that have indicated that uncertainty threats cause zeal about non-contentious values regardless of self-esteem level (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 2) and that value-conviction-expression can relieve felt-uncertainty about dilemmas regardless of self-esteem level (McGregor et al., 2001, Study 1), a main effect of condition was expected. HSEs are most inclined toward the more arrogant varieties of zeal (McGregor, in press-a; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001), but earnest expressions of less contentious values do not seem to require HSE. Accordingly, significantly higher subjective salience was expected in the rumination/no-value-conviction-expression condition than in the other two conditions.

Consistent with this expectation, results revealed a significant main effect of condition on the mean of the last three items of the subjective salience scale $F(2, 38) = 4.40$, $p < .05$. (The Condition \times Self-Esteem interaction was not significant, $F > 1$). Most important, a simple effect analysis showed that as compared with subjective salience in the rumination/no-value-expression condition ($M = 4.00$), $t(38) = 2.11$, $p < .05$, subjective salience was significantly lower in the rumination/value-expression condition ($M = 3.13$)—approaching the level of subjective salience ($M = 2.73$) reported by participants in the no-rumination/no-value-expression condition who had not even ruminated about their dilemmas in the first place. Moreover, the comparable analysis of the main effect of condition on the mean of the first 3 subjective salience items was not significant ($F > 1$). Together with the results of the main study reported in the preceding paragraphs, this replication study provides convergent evidence for an insulation mechanism of the threat-relieving effects of zeal. Across the two studies, zealous expression of pride and value-conviction continued to quell threat salience even after early scale items had presumably provided repeated reminders of the threat. (In both studies, overall effects for the entire 8-item scale were at least marginally significant but were not as strong as they were for the last three items).

Finally, as in the main study, the zeal manipulation in the replication study did not significantly influence state self-esteem or affect ($ps < .29$), which rules them out as possible mediators of the insulation effect. Over time, zealous expression might eventually improve mood (as in McGregor et al., 2001, Study 1), but the present results suggest that any mood

effects would have to be a consequence and not a cause of reduced threat salience.

HOW DOES ZEAL INSULATE AGAINST THREATS?

One promising explanation for how zeal relieves threats, if not by distraction or mood, relates to Higgins' (2005) theory of regulatory fit. Higgins found that experiences “loom largest” when they resonate with individuals' regulatory focus and that they seem less compelling when they are outside the purview of active regulatory focus. Whereas promotion focus involves preoccupation with desirable incentives and ideals, prevention focus involves preoccupation with avoiding unwanted outcomes. Higgins and colleagues have found that when individuals are dispositionally or situationally promotion focused, they overvalue phenomena related to approaching incentives, and undervalue phenomena related to avoiding discomfort.

Other evidence has suggested that such “regulatory fit” effects (Higgins, 2005; Sullivan, 2004; Tomarken & Keener, 1998) may be due to reciprocal inhibition of neural processes that differentially specialize in promotion and prevention motivation (Amodio et al., 2004; cf. Jackson et al., 2003). Thus, to avoid preoccupation with threats that loom large, a good defense may be to mount a strong offense that can orient the individual toward powerful ideals, activate the approach motivation system, and thereby down-regulate the avoidance motivation system (McGregor, in press-a, in press-b). Such offensive strategies may be superior to less focused defensive attempts to simply suppress or distract from unwanted thoughts, which can backfire and cause rebound hyperaccessibility of the unwanted thoughts (Wegner, 1994).

CONCLUDING COMMENT

As appealing and effective as offensive zeal may be for relieving preoccupation with threats, it has a dark side. Throughout history, zealous conviction, consensus, and pride have reliably been associated with atrocities, from the Crusades and ethnic cleansings to terrorist attacks and callous foreign policies. Reliance on zeal to insulate the self may be seen as a kind of unhealthy addiction, akin to narcissism, that provides short-term relief but that has negative longer term side effects for the self and society (cf. Baumeister & Vohs, 2001; Bonanno, Rennieke, & Dekel, 2005; Robins & Beer, 2001). Indeed, mortality salience threats have not only caused zeal about in-group preferences and other forms of worldview defense (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), but they have also increased Americans' support for internationally aggressive policies and Iraqis' support for terrorist strikes (Pyszczynski et al., 2006; Landau et al., 2004). Other kinds of self-threats similarly have caused increased

extremism and zeal about suicide bombing, the American invasion of Iraq, and capital punishment (McGregor & Jordan, in press).

In social conflicts in which opposing groups feel threatened by one another, indulging in awesome displays of pride and militant conviction may insulate the self but, unfortunately, may also shock one's opponent with additional threats. In response, opponents may likely mount reciprocal zeal and further fuel the cycle of zealous extremism. Research on defensive zeal, the present findings, and lessons gleaned from history's zealots and crusaders indicate that although zealous responses to threats may be alluring, they can also be self-defeating. Even though zealous responses to threats may intuitively feel right because they relieve concern, strategically they may be woefully wrong.

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