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Personal Projects as Compensatory Convictions: Passionate Pursuit and the Fugitive Self

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“His unaffected piety and unremitting zeal in the discharge of sacred duties ... gained him the respect and esteem of all who knew him;” “the cathedral and orphanage are enduring monuments to his zeal and charity.” (From memorial plaques in St. John’s Basilica, Newfoundland, Canada.)

By the early 19th century a wind-battered rock in the icy Newfoundland Atlantic had evolved into an important first-stop port on the European-American trade route. Waves of wobbly-legged sailors came and went from this Eastern-most crag of Canada after enduring weeks of bewildering exposure at sea. Local fishermen eked out a similarly precarious existence at the mercy of the implacable maritime elements. Against this backdrop of human uncertainty and vulnerability, in 1831, a remarkably passionate project arose. Inhabitants single-mindedly threw themselves into the project of building what was to be the largest basilica in North America. In a frenzy of conviction and generosity, locals donated their savings, stripped building materials from their own property, and helped en masse in any way they could, even if it meant transporting gravel in their aprons. The clergy found themselves in the strange position of having to remind the faithful helpers not to neglect their own families in their zeal to help.

This chapter presents theory and experimental research on causes of such passionate conviction, which throughout history has fueled some of the most inspiring but also some of the most horrible of human pursuits. Why do people adhere to their convictions so tenaciously? People’s convictions (especially other peoples’) can seem bizarre, whether they be about a sports team, personality research methods, national pride, or religious zeal. Most matters of opinion have extremists on both sides, avidly maintaining their positions even when confronted with diametrically opposing claims.

What motivates black and white conviction in the face of usually gray social reality? This chapter proposes that conviction is appealing and prevalent because it alleviates distress about what to do, restores single-mindedness, and liberates action.

The chapter begins with a review of neuropsychological and cultural factors that incline Western individuals toward passionate conviction. After exploring the central role of conviction in Western philosophy and religion, it then reviews research showing that some people react to experimentally induced uncertainties with compensatory conviction about unrelated concerns (as illustrated in Figure 1). Experimental results that illuminate the psychological appeal of conviction are then reviewed. Conviction confers a kind of cognitive myopia that helps distress-inducing uncertainties fade from awareness. The chapter concludes with two experiments showing that uncertainty also causes alcohol consumption. Conviction and alcohol are seen as alternative routes to cognitive myopia. Both invigorate passionate pursuit by dissolving uncertainty and restoring single-mindedness. It may not be purely coincidental that residents of St. John's Newfoundland were as famous for their love of Screech rum as for their religious conviction.

Uncertainty, Culture, and the Brain

“As long as I did not know why, I could do nothing and could not live...I did not know what I wanted, I could give no reasonable meaning to any actions of my life...”
(Tolstoy veering close to suicide, 2005/1884).

“Lets go.”

“OK lets go.”

They remain motionless... (The culturally bereft characters in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett, 2005/1948)

Our human brains are jointly wired for uncertainty and for culture. Uncertainty was adaptive because it liberated us from our primate ancestors' fixed instincts. It gave us the capacity to consider multiple alternatives for accomplishing goals and enabled simulation and selection of optimal courses of action. Thus, the evolution of uncertainty allowed for a human explosion in creative possibilities for achieving goals. But the evolution of uncertainty also left meaning as an open question. In the face of awareness of our finite and apparently absurd existence, what is most worth doing? What are the meanings toward which we shrunken-snouted cortically-impressive humans should direct our impressive means?

Necessarily, the capacity for culture symbiotically co-evolved with our bulging frontal lobes, to provide an authoritative guidance system to constrain human uncertainty. Together, the symbiotic co-evolution of culture and personal uncertainty afforded an immense adaptive advantage. Culture could harness multiple creativities in service of consensual convictions. In addition to supporting communal efficiencies, culture also facilitated agency by saving individuals from the potential mire of personal ambivalence and interpersonal conflict about what to do. When culture breaks down, fertile imaginations can become malignant. Unconstrained individuals become tangled and paralyzed by uncertainty (Durkheim, 1952/1897).

Insight into why uncertainty about what to do should be so problematic comes from over 40 years of research on the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS; Gray, 1982) in people and animals. Brain lesion and drug studies indicate that the BIS, centered in the septal-hippocampus of all vertebrates, produces anxiety when a focal action is seriously impeded either by failure, conflict or uncertainty. For most animals, the typical kind of

BIS activation scenario involves either a blocked or conflicted goal, or a novel and uncertain situation in which it is not clear what to do. The BIS responds to such action-impedance scenarios with anxiety to discourage persistence at the focal activity, direct motor suppression of the focal activity, and scanning for alternative courses of action. The animal becomes anxious, immobilized, and vigilantly preoccupied until the problematic situation is either overcome or abandoned.

Like other animals, humans rely on the basic self-regulatory function of the BIS. It prevents over-persistence and facilitates disengagement from untenable focal goals. But the human ability to promiscuously imagine alternative courses of action raises goal conflict and uncertainty as potentially chronic, BIS activators. The human BIS has direct links to the prefrontal cortex, and so multiple *imagined* alternatives can activate approach-approach conflicts. As Lewin (1935) noted, approach-approach conflicts can become uncomfortable double approach-avoidance conflicts if approaching one alternative means losing out on others. Lewin's protégé, Festinger (1957), and other cognitive consistency theorists (Abelson et al., 1968) extended and popularized the view that conflicting or "non fitting" thoughts can be as aversive as more concrete conflicting goals, especially if they are self-relevant. More recently, self-regulation theorists have similarly emphasized the importance of having clear, non-conflicting self-guides for organizing and directing action (Beckman & Irle, 1984; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Higgins, 1996). From this independent-self perspective, individuals need inner meaning to lend direction to the self and action (McGregor & Little, 1998). Without it, wandering uncertainties and approach-approach conflicts chronically activate BIS anxiety and

motor-inhibition, adding resistance to action as if the cognitive break pedal were always depressed.

Imagine fictitious Lance, a proud young Newfoundland cod fisherman out at sea in the morning fog, contemplating the government's recently announced ban on cod fishing due to decimated stocks. As he ponders the question, "what will I do?" he becomes bewildered by the flurry of ideas that come to his mind. Start an internet business? But he loves working outside. Take his family's advice and become a priest? Follow his more bohemian bliss, and travel in Europe, trusting that something would come up? Re-equip his boat with lobster traps? Or get a simple job as a clerk and be poor but happy, as in his childhood? Or, maybe get rich working at sea on an oil rig like his uncle Ishmael. But working and living in such close quarters might be intolerable...

As Lance's confusion grew, he realized that he was sitting motionless, staring at the gray horizon with a lump in his throat. He called his brother Lorne, who earnestly reflected that Lance sounded bewildered. He probed Lance about what he *really* wanted to do and what kind of person he *really* wanted to be. Lance snapped back that he had many ideas, but no way to decide. In frustration, he hung up and went to the local bookstore to peruse the self-help section (the whole second floor). Book after book chanted the same theme: follow your bliss, do your own thing, be yourself, to thine own self be true, look out for number one, love yourself, be real, find your authentic path...

To Western sensibilities, Lance's quest for true self is a familiar part of human development. Classic psychological theorists have advocated individuation, becoming, integration, self-acceptance, identity achievement, authenticity, and self-actualization, as hallmarks of mental health. But as desirable as such exhortations sound, self-discovery

can be a bewildering task. It is not clear how to look for a true self, and some theorists have even concluded there is no true self to find (Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1991). Indeed, the quest for a unique, self-fashioned identity is a relatively recent cultural phenomenon.

Cultural Meanings and the Western Mutation

Meanings were historically provided by consensual cultural worldviews. People turned to their cultures to help untangle uncertainties about what to think and do because self and social reality are ambiguous and often have no objective referents for truth. The validity of social and moral truth has traditionally depended on a kind of 'inter-rater reliability.' Accordingly, humans have typically clung to consensually agreed upon beacons to navigate the bewildering horizon. Shared meanings can guide us through the welter of possibilities, freeing us from debilitating ambivalence and conflict. As such, the capacity for culture and uncertainty symbiotically evolved. The capacity for culture supported the evolution of uncertainty's creative advantages; and the evolution of uncertainty promoted the evolution of culture and its collateral collective advantages.

Early human civilizations appear to have had a relatively easy time harnessing human imaginations with consensual cultural worldviews that were authoritatively legitimized by a local deity or tribal leader. However, in what has been referred to as the Axial Age, between around 800 and 200 BCE, perhaps due to growing affluence and freedom from necessity, along with increased intercultural mobility and dissent, grand philosophical and religious systems emerged bearing authoritative codes of conduct. Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic, Zoroastrian, Taoist, Confucian, and Greek worldviews flowered with prescribed morals for how to live and what to do. The Greek response is particularly

germane to the present chapter, because it spawned our hyper-individualistic and zeal-prone Western worldview.

In contrast to the relatively stable economic, political, and geographical factors that nourished the development of consensual norms for guiding behavior in China, such as Confucianism, the social ecology of ancient Greece militated against the development of stable consensual norms (Diamond, 1997). Economic prosperity and cross-cultural exposure brought by trade and war combined with a geography that discouraged agriculture, producing fertile conditions for the emergence of the paradoxical quasi-culture of rugged individualism. In place of stable consensual norms, the appropriate locus for validation of thought and action shifted to a kind of ‘internal-consistency’ reliability. Greek thought became analytic (as opposed to holistic) and emphasized separation of parts (i.e., self from others), abstract essence, reason, and personal agency (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001).

In this individualistic ethos, Pythagoras (c. 580 BCE) devoted himself to knowledge, and the transcendent perfection of natural laws. He zealously practiced and taught an ascetic and introverted idealism that involved harmony of the soul through quiet understanding of underlying truths. This introspective theme of Greek philosophy (Tarnas, 1992) reverberates in phrases attributed to Socrates, such as, know thyself, the unexamined life is not worth living, and the truth shall set you free. Plato’s similarly advocates that an individual should keep “his eye ever directed towards fixed and immutable principles...all in order moving according to reason; these he imitates, and on these, so far as he can, he will mold his life.” Even Aristotle’s philosophy, although ostensibly less idealistic, is suffused with the same premium on personal integrity,

claiming that the highest happiness comes from acting in accordance with one's essence, and since human essence is rationality, "the proper working of man is the working of the soul in accordance with reason" (Durant, 1939).

It is important to emphasize, also, that integrity and the zealous quest for truth were not just a grim moral directives. Greek philosophers were passionate lovers of truth. Plato's experience of philosophical unity and transcendent ideas was intensely emotional, even resembling mystical rapture (Tarnas, 1992). For the Greeks, rational, true essences, forms, or ideas that exist behind the jumble of phenomenal reality were not merely correct, they were experienced as delightfully beautiful and worthy of religious devotion. Divine truth in this perfect spiritual realm was brilliantly transcendent. Once one was oriented to it, the shadowy phenomenal world of change, conflict, and uncertainty felt banal and false by contrast.

Why did the Greeks love truth so zealously? Perhaps it was because their culture lacked consensual norms for guiding behavior. Perhaps they needed a surrogate guide for their actions that could keep them from being chronically mired in BIS-activating uncertainty about what to do, and personal conviction was that surrogate. As described below, the zealous legacies of all three monotheistic religions are supported by this highly individualistic Greek foundation.

Religious Passion in the West

The Greek premium on ideal truth was imported to feature prominently in Jewish and later Islamic thought via philosophers such as Philo, Plotinus, Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides (Armstrong, 1993; Durant, 1944, 1950). A prevalent neo-platonic theme was the identification of God with Logos—timeless, perfect, Supreme Intelligence. Saints

Paul, John, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas also gave this theme a central focus in the Greek version of Christian theology that undergirds evangelical Christianity to this day. Salvation from the chaos of the world comes from union with transcendent, Divine Truth.

William James (1958/[1902](#)), in his survey of Christian mystical and religious experiences, concluded that “the absolute determinability of our mind by abstractions is one of the cardinal facts in our human constitution...passionate enthusiasms make one feelingless to evil.” Religious conviction can have a “magnetizing and polarizing” effect on one’s experience. When in the grips of fervent zeal, true believers bubble over with descriptions of their experiences of joy, e.g., “My soul was so captivated and delighted with the excellency of God that I was even swallowed up in him...in the state of inward joy, peace, and astonishing,” “the stillness was marvelous and I felt supremely happy,” “my soul enjoyed sweet peace.”

The metaphors typically used to describe zealous religious experience are of illumination, unity, and clarity. Life is no longer murky, all is unified, and all paths clearly merge in the same direction. One convert, for example, recounted that upon conversion there was “a strange seizure on my spirit...brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart of all those tumultuous thoughts that before did use, like masterless hellhounds, to roar and bellow and make a hideous noise within me.” Others beamed that they felt, “the glorious brightness of the noonday sun shine into my heart,” “all the world was crystalline, the heavens were lucid, and I sprang to my feet and began to cry and laugh,” and “as if I had been in a dark dungeon and lifted into the light of the sun” (James, 1958/[1902](#)).

James' believers' accounts of fervor also often involved reports of increased energy, courage, and buoyancy for action. One convert reported, "I was amazed at my increased energy and vigor of mind," another that "I feel such an increased desire to do something useful that it seems as if I were a boy again and the energy for play had returned," others likened the feeling to being "as light as if walking on air" and "soaring on the wings of faith." James presciently accounted for these testimonials of joy, clarity, and energy from a cognitive associationist perspective, noting that activated groups of ideas may have very little overlap with other groups of ideas, such that "when one group is present and engrosses the interest, all the ideas connected with other groups may be excluded from the mental field." He concludes that religious rapture and moral enthusiasm are "unifying states of mind, in which the sand and grit of the selfhood incline to disappear." They unify the "discordant self" (James, 1958/1902).

From a contemporary social cognitive perspective it makes sense that competing ideas would recede when one is gripped by passionate conviction. Highly important focal thoughts trivialize the importance of other thoughts by contrast (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995), and reduced importance translates into reduced accessibility to awareness (Krosnick, 1989). Thus, with one dominant, internally consistent group of ideas salient to the individual, and other competing thoughts relegated to inaccessibility, the self feels unitary, clear, and poised for decisive action.

Further, convictions usually refer to highly desirable and familiar ideals that may placate the BIS. Even if goals in the external world are in a shambles, zealous devotion to favorite ideals in the privacy of one's mind may serve as a haven of coherence where soothingly untainted perfection can seize attention and down regulate BIS activation.

Decreased BIS activation might further decrease ruminative self-focus (which may be the neo-cortical version of the BIS's vigilant scanning for alternative courses of action), and allow the individual to become all the more myopically focused on the zeal.

Another possibility is that idealistic zeal may be a way for people to distract attention from their anxiety-ridden, avoidance-motivated right hemisphere, and shift it to a more implemental approach-motivated left-hemisphere. Focus on approaching incentives such as imagined certainty, worth, togetherness, symbolic immortality, or any variation of such potent approach motivations may accomplish a kind of “approach myopia.” Left hemisphere activation is associated with approach-motivation, narrowed cognition to thoughts that support focal goals, and suppression of inconsistent cognitions (Drake, 1993; Harmon-Jones, 2004; [Harmon-Jones & Allen, 1997](#); Sutton & Davidson, 1997; Tomarken & Davidson, 1994). Perhaps approach-mediated escape from the anxiety of conflicting thoughts partially accounts for the psychological and health benefits of approach-motivation (cf. Elliot, this volume).

Passionate convictions may thereby allow individuals to become intoxicated by their zeal. The word ‘intoxication’ comes from the root word meaning ‘poison.’ The dictionary meanings refer jointly to blissful liberation and unrestrained action. Convictions may be intoxicating because they mask accessibility of BIS-activating goal disruptions that sap vital energy from action. Like weed-killer in a choked garden, conviction may allow the will to grow forth in a singular direction by quelling the tangle of conflicting alternatives that deplete and constrain the self. With the BIS deactivated, anxiety recedes, the cognitive brake pedal is released, and one is ready to roll with uninhibited vigor toward zealous goals. One feels holy.

Zealous single-mindedness is associated with spiritual enlightenment in all three Western monotheistic systems ([Armstrong, 1993; 2000](#)). (Judaic, Christian, and Muslim systems are considered Western because of the influence in each from Greek philosophy. Forms of meditation in Eastern religious and philosophical traditions also emphasize single-mindedness, but it is less of a defining characteristic; Durant, 1950; [Smith, 1986](#)) Indeed, the first three of the Ten Commandments revered in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, refer to the importance of single-minded devotion to God. From the present perspective, this is because being captured by conviction liberates the individual from the torment and drag of uncertainty. When in the grips of zeal, no active self-regulation is required, no inhibition of thoughts and competing impulses necessary. One can find peace in a hermetically sealed conative universe of ideals, unsullied (and unchecked) by the grime of reality. Just as thought conflict produces the same kind of anxiety as action conflict (Festinger, 1957; Lewin, 1935), so should absorption in harmonious thoughts provide the same kind of bliss as flow in harmonious action (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

When under the spell of zeal, related personal projects are infused with buoyancy and vigor. Obstacles that would seem insurmountable to the non zealous, seem relatively trivial (Lydon & Zanna, 1990). James' accounts of religious converts caught up in the glow of conviction typically involve imagery of effortlessness—of floating, gliding, soaring, and bursting with vital energy. Zealots like John the Baptist indulge hardships like vermin-eating and abject solitude willingly, and other famous saints have been known to engage in gratuitous acts of self-denial and hardship, such as joyfully kissing lepers and cleansing the suppurating boils of hospital patients with their tongues ([James, 1958/1902](#)). If passionate conviction can insulate one from worldly anxieties, then this

helps to explain the naming of St. John's Newfoundland, and why it was chosen as the site of what was to be the largest basilica in North America. Life was particularly uncertain and precarious for the fishermen and sailors of St. John's. Atop the gateway to St. John's basilica, a towering statue of St. John the Baptist overlooks the city and the ocean harbor, and calls the shaken to come for salvation. John the Baptist is referred to in the bible as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." He lived semi-naked and alone on a diet of grasshoppers, and preached that worldly suffering could be transcended by zealous faith and devoted action. The naming of St. John's is a testimony to the power of conviction, and reflects the opinion of the influential Roman Bishop, St. Ambrose (c. 390 AD): "amid the agitations of the world, the Church remains unmoved; the waves cannot shake her. While around her everything is in a horrible chaos, she offers to all the shipwrecked a tranquil port where they will find safety" (Durant, 1950).

Other Domains for Passionate Conviction

Religious passion shaped the Western world and continues to fuel patriotic and passionate pursuit today (Durant, 1950; Armstrong, 2000). In 2004 the religious right in the United States carried to victory a president with an arguably disastrous record of domestic and foreign policy, because of his comforting claim to be a man of unwavering conviction—a born again Christian who believes in moral absolutes (and is in love with his wife). But this chapter is not just about religious conviction. It is about conviction and passionate pursuit, more generally. For Westerners who are not passionately religious, what other conviction opportunities are there?

Idealized love, another predominantly Western phenomenon (Dion & Dion, 1993), has been a perennial favorite. Even during the middle ages, when a dour version of

zealous Christianity gripped vulnerable Europe, the people demanded a Mary. The Trinitarian God of omniscience and judgment was too remote and scary for simple souls who preferred to idealize Mary's warmth and safety. After a period of objection the obliging Catholic Church absorbed the popular longing for a mother goddess into its dogma, and by the time of the Gothic flowering in the 12th and 13th centuries, many of Europe's most impressive cathedrals were dedicated to Mary (Durant, 1950). At the same time, chivalry introduced a lay-worship of feminine perfection. Troubadours and Minnesingers sang about the ideal of courtly and romantic love, putting it on a pedestal where its purity could be revered from preserving distance. Accordingly, Dante saved a rosy place of honor in the highest sphere of heaven (on cloud nine with Christ and Mary) for his idealized lover, Beatrice. Even today, if one were to judge by representation in the popular Western media, one might conclude that romantic love is the primary domain of passionate conviction. Indeed, readers may recognize in James' accounts of religious ecstasy, the soaring experience of falling in love.

For more sober individualists, however, personal pride and self-confident understanding continue as other favorite Western domains for conviction ([Heine](#), [Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999](#); [McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang, 2004](#)). As Catholic ideals began to fade under the light of an increasingly skeptical and affluent Europe, heady free thinkers like Abelard, Erasmus, and Voltaire came full circle, re-identified themselves with the Greek's proudly passionate pursuit of unfettered knowledge, and ushered in the Age of Reason. As described earlier, for Greek philosophers, the individualistic pursuit of truth was as intoxicating as religious or

romantic passion. What serious scholar, aglow with a flash of insight or recognition would not place Socrates or Aristotle next to Mary and Beatrice on cloud nine?

Conviction, whether it be about religion, romance, self-satisfied knowledge, or any other passionate pursuit has a particular appeal for Westerners, whose individualistic Greek heritage has left them “twisting slowly in a void” ([Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985](#)) Westerners are uniquely unable to rely on consensual culture to guide their uncertainties. This chapter proposes that passionate pursuit of grand ideals about God, Love, Work, Knowledge, Self, Country, or Personal Opinions can dissolve uncertainty and liberate action. The following experiments test this proposition.

Laboratory Experiments on Compensatory Conviction

The historical and theoretical account generated thus far might seem to present a somewhat cynical perspective on human strivings. On the one hand, it shows Westerners heroically reaching for magnificent meanings despite the sometimes chaotic and bleak conditions they have faced. But on the other hand, it may seem to desecrate meaningful quests by framing them as pathetic defense mechanisms. It is important to emphasize that I am not implying that passionate human strivings are *just* defense mechanisms. I do hope, however, that experimental research on conviction might contribute to understanding or even loosening some of the more curiously rigid forms of zeal that can have important personal, interpersonal, and societal implications.

Experimental research may strike some readers as a rather sterile approach to understanding passionate conviction. But experiments may be particularly appropriate when studying such highly charged topics as conviction and uncertainty. There is considerable research evidence that when the stakes are high, many people tend toward

motivated thinking and are adept at believing their desired conclusions (e.g., [Kunda, 1990](#); [Landau et al., 2004](#)). For example, if you ask them, over 90% of American professors will tell you that they are better than average (Gilovich, 1991) and undergraduates who are highly motivated to think well of themselves automatically fill their minds with thoughts about their strengths and virtues, precisely when confronted with threats (Dodgson & Wood, 1998).

Accordingly, consider once again our bewildered fisherman Lance. According to the ideas presented in this chapter, his uncertainty about his future might well contribute to compensatory religious conviction. But he would not admit that his heightened conviction was related to, or some kind of escape from, feelings of impotent uncertainty. According to the theory presented here, the purpose of Lance's zeal would be to mask his despair in the first place. Thus, one might expect Lance to blithely report that being laid off was not so bad, and that he was giving more time to the church because he had been meaning to do that anyway. With this in mind, I hope the reader will forgive the abrupt shift from rich theory to sterile experimentation.

The studies reported below were inspired by an attempt to bottle the phenomenon of compensatory conviction in the experimental social psychology lab. The guiding assumptions are that if convictions are indeed used as a refuge from topically unrelated anxieties, then there should be evidence that a) people turn to compensatory conviction when faced with uncertainty; b) compensatory conviction effectively takes people's minds off of their uncertainties; c) compensatory conviction is most evident among people who are most bewildered by uncertainty and adept at motivated thinking; and d) uncertainty causes other cognitive escapes, as well. Several studies investigate causes,

consequences, and personality moderators of compensatory conviction. The final two studies probe commonalities between conviction and alcohol intoxication as escapes from uncertainty.

Does Personal Uncertainty Cause Compensatory Conviction?

Results from several experiments indicate that people do indeed cling more zealously to various convictions when faced with uncertainty-related threats. In one compensatory conviction study Reeshma Haji and I (2002) randomly assigned Canadian undergraduates to either ruminate about a personal dilemma that they were currently grappling with (personal uncertainty condition), or to complete parallel but relatively neutral materials about friends' dilemmas (control condition). We then assessed Canadian national pride and opinions about Islam. As expected, participants in the uncertainty condition praised Canada more extremely and with more conviction than did those in the control condition. A darker side of this compensatory conviction was revealed in the evaluations of Islam, however. Participants in the uncertainty condition also reacted with more zealous disdain for Islam. Importantly, these results were most pronounced among participants with high scores on the Preference for Consistency scale, which assesses discomfort with self-inconsistency (Cialdini, 1995). Thus, it appears that compensatory conviction is particularly appealing for people most sensitive to cognitive conflict.

A related study found a similar result using a different measure of conviction (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001, Study 1). As in the previous study, participants were assigned to uncertainty or control conditions. The main dependent variable then assessed participants' conviction about unrelated social issues (capital punishment and abortion). For each issue, participants selected an opinion statement from

a diverse list ranging politically from far left to far right, and then rated their conviction for that opinion. Again, uncertainty caused apparently compensatory conviction for opinions. Moreover, the exaggerated conviction served to quell the agitated feelings that had been aroused by the dilemma in the uncertainty condition. Finally, participants who had been randomly assigned to a third condition in which the personal uncertainty manipulation was followed by instruction to express a core value-conviction showed no evidence of subsequent compensatory conviction or agitated feelings. Thus, expressions of conviction, whether spontaneous or mandated, provided insulation from uncertainty-related discomfort.

Three further studies showed that various other kinds of personal-uncertainty-related threats caused a heightened quest for meaning in life, exaggerated conviction for communal values and identifications, and the passionate pursuit of personal projects related to cherished meanings (McGregor et al., 2001, Studies 2-4). In the personal projects studies (2 and 4) in which personal projects were used as the dependent variables, uncertainty caused participants to lace their projects with conviction. Participants in the uncertainty condition planned on doing more important, value congruent, identity-consistent, and meaningful projects than participants in the control condition. Together these three studies indicate that, personal uncertainty causes exaggerated conviction at all levels of action control in the self-system, from the most abstract meanings, communal values, and identifications, down to specific personal projects.

Dozens of related experiments show that thinking about ones own death similarly causes people to more rigidly cleave to their values, identifications, and worldviews (for

partial review, see Greenberg et al, 1997). Recent evidence suggests that personal uncertainty may be a particularly active ingredient in mortality salience. In one Study, focusing people on their personal-uncertainty-related issues and feelings caused even stronger defense of consensual values than mortality salience, and mortality salience only caused defensiveness when it reminded people of existential uncertainties (van den Bos, 2004). In another study mortality salience caused compensatory conviction about social issue opinions (McGregor & Thakurdeen, 2004). Together, these findings indicate that threats related to personal uncertainty cause exaggerated zeal about aspects of the self, and a tendency to cleave to communal norms and identifications. Uncertainty seems to make people in individualistic Western cultures yearn to scaffold themselves with quasi-cultural architecture of personal conviction.

In contrast, people in more collectivist, Eastern cultures, who tend to rely more on authoritative social norms and situational cues to guide their behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; [Nisbett et al., 2001](#)), can be less defensive when confronted with uncertainty-related threats (e.g., [Heine & Lehman, 1997](#)). To the extent that the independent, internally consistent self is not relied upon to decide what to do, awareness of self-disintegrity should not be threatening. If action is validated by social norms and contextual cues, the coherent, independent self can be relatively epiphenomenal. The key issue is that the individual must have some authoritative arbiter for deciding what to do. The authority can be personal or social, as long as it provides unequivocal guidance for action.

From this perspective of differential cultural reliance on self-consistency, the compensatory conviction results may help to explain why the history of zeal is

predominantly a Western phenomenon. The passionate conviction that fueled the triumphs of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries and the motley Christian crusades in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth has no equivalent in East-Asian cultures ([Nisbett et al., 2001](#)). Eastern cultures, being more perfused with authoritative collective norms, place relatively more emphasis on paradox, dialectical thinking, situationally malleable truths, and the preferences of others for guiding behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; [Nisbett et al., 2001](#)). No wonder faith-based monotheism never flourished in the East. Where consensual culture is strong, zealous personal conviction is less necessary.

Implicit Self-Esteem and Compensatory Conviction

If Westerners rely on the authoritative self to guide behavior, then those with implicit confidence in their self-value should be able to remain most calm when faced with uncertainty about what to do. They would have experiential assurance that they could prevail, and so uncertainty and conflict situations would not seem desperate. Conversely, Westerners with shakier implicit selves should be more easily overwhelmed by uncertainty and in need of escape from it. Accordingly, when faced with uncertainty, individuals with low implicit self-esteem (low ISE) should be most inclined to lunge toward passionate convictions as a way to make threatening thoughts fade from awareness.

ISE can be assessed with the Implicit Association Test (IAT) that assesses experiential associations that are not necessarily accessible to conscious awareness, as opposed to explicit measures, which reflect people's conscious self-thoughts (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Reaction times on cognitive tasks that jointly involve self and positive categories are compared to those that jointly involve self and negative categories.

According to a rationale similar to that underlying the Stroop measure of cognitive interference, participants who are relatively slow at self/positive and fast at self/negative categorization tasks are considered to have relatively negative implicit self-evaluations.

We felt this IAT measure would be a better marker of functional self confidence than explicitly reported self-esteem because there is evidence that some people with high explicitly reported self-esteem use their lofty explicit self-evaluations to mask feelings of inferiority and are particularly inclined to distort reality make themselves feel good (e.g., Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2004; Dodgson & Wood, 1998; [Jordan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2003](#)).

These motivational factors associated with high ESE may explain the absence of correlation between ESE, and objective measures of esteem-worthiness (Baumeister et al., 2004) or ISE (McGregor & Marigold, 2003). Indeed, they lead to the hypothesis that the combination of *low* ISE and *high* ESE should be associated with the greatest tendency to react to self-threats with exaggerated conviction in the face of uncertainty. Uncertainty should be particularly bewildering for low ISE individuals, and high ESE individuals should be particularly adept at using motivated thinking to escape from it.

In two studies, my colleagues and I assessed both ISE and ESE, and investigated whether people with low ISE but high ESE would be most inclined to react to uncertainty with compensatory conviction. In one study (McGregor & Marigold, 2003, Study 3), participants were randomly assigned to either write about an uncertain personal relationship (uncertainty condition) or a friends' uncertain relationship that did not invoke feelings of personal uncertainty (control condition). The main dependent variable assessed conviction for opinions about social issues. As predicted, only participants with

the combination of low ISE and high ESE reacted to the uncertainty threat with compensatory conviction.

A related study (McGregor et al., 2004, Study 3) assessed whether low ISE/ high ESE participants would similarly react to a confusion threat by exaggerating another aspect of conviction. Undergraduate psychology majors were randomly assigned to summarize either an extremely confusing statistical passage from a graduate psychology text (confusion condition), or an easy passage about the usefulness of statistics (control condition), and were told that the passages were examples of the kinds of tools that psychologists frequently used in their work (which we expected would make the psychology majors' confusion self-relevant). As in the previous study, results revealed that only participants with low ISE and high ESE reacted to the confusion threat with defensive conviction. This time the measure of conviction assessed participants' confidence that a high percentage of people in general would agree with their opinions. Low ISE/ high ESE participants in the confusion condition suddenly became convinced that their convictions were very popular.

Together, these two studies indicate that individuals with shaky experiential selves but a penchant for motivated thinking react to uncertainty and confusion threats by exaggerating two aspects of conviction, certainty and consensus. Certainty and consensus are the very ingredients missing from Western culture. Thus, defensive conviction appears to be a spontaneous attempt to patch the culture-shaped hole in uncertain Western selves.

Zealous Intoxication

The main idea in this chapter is that vulnerable Westerners exaggerate their conviction as a means of escaping from uncertainty about what to do. I have proposed that focusing on convictions can crowd other troubling uncertainties out of awareness, either by direct BIS deactivation or by trivialization of the offending thoughts. Is there evidence that convictions can effectively mask uncertainties that are unrelated to the topic of conviction?

In five experiments, my colleagues and I assessed the effects of conviction manipulations on the subjective salience of participants' topically unrelated personal uncertainties (reviewed in McGregor, 2004). The subjective salience scale assesses items such as the extent to which personal uncertainties feel important, big, hard to ignore, urgent, and pressing at the moment. In all studies, participants were first instructed to write about their personal uncertainties (i.e., about personal dilemmas, which, as the reader will recall, caused defensive reactions in the experiments reviewed earlier). Then participants were randomly assigned to write essays related to aspects of personal conviction, or in the control conditions, about related topics for which they did not hold particularly zealous thoughts. In the five experiments, writing about conviction related to opinions, values, successes, loves, or group identifications significantly decreased subjective salience of unrelated personal uncertainties. Importantly, in four of these five experiments, this effect was strongest among individuals with high ESE, that is, among participants who are most motivated to mask unpleasant topics with pleasant ones (Dodgson & Wood, 1998; [Smith & Petty, 1995](#)).

These findings provide some evidence for a kind of zealous intoxication, and may help explain why people exaggerate their conviction when troubled, and why mystical

experiences with transcendent truths can feel so wonderful. As illustrated in Figure 1, when intoxicated with important and consensual convictions, the fluxing jumble of conflicting thoughts fades into an unimportant background. The individual becomes myopically fixed on a focal ideal that shines as essential reality.

Alcohol Intoxication

“The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature...” (James, 1958/1902).

“One can live only so long as one is intoxicated, drunk with life” (Tolstoy, 2005/1884)

The above defensive conviction studies demonstrate that Westerners with low ISE and high ESE use a kind of zeal intoxication to escape from uncertainty. Low ISE gives them the need to escape, and the high ESE can be used as a marker of ability to cognitively twist reality to support desired conclusions. What strategies are available, however, for individuals whose low ISE inclines them to escape, but who do not have high ESE?

Alcohol may be a more democratic solution, available to individuals with low and high ESE, alike. As cited above, William James noted the similarities between zealous and alcoholic intoxication. His observation is corroborated by the recent research finding that meaningful personal projects and alcohol use are inversely related, which suggests the possibility that conviction and alcohol may serve a common function (Lecci, MacLean, Croteau, 2002). I propose that cognitive myopia is the common function.

Claude Steele and colleagues introduced the term ‘alcohol myopia’ to refer to a kind of short-sighted information processing caused by alcohol intoxication, wherein

only the most salient cues are accessible to awareness. Alcohol myopia effects relieve uncomfortable cognitive dissonance ([Steele, Southwick, & Critchlow, 1981](#)) by preventing individuals from noticing both sides of a cognitive conflict. This cognitive simplification associated with alcohol myopia can liberate vigorous and uninhibited action much in the same way that zeal myopia can (e.g., MacDonald, Zanna, & Fong, 1996). All but focal thoughts are relegated to the periphery of awareness. Importantly, in contrast to exaggerated conviction, motivated drinking does not require capacity for motivated thinking, and so should be available to low and high ESE individuals, alike.

My lab has conducted two experiments to investigate alcohol intoxication as a defensive reaction to personal uncertainty. In the first study, Laura Mills and I ran 199 undergraduates through a “marketing study on personality and beer preferences.” They began by describing their weekly alcohol consumption and completing personality scales including ESE and the PFC (which, recall, assesses preference for self-inconsistency). They were then randomly assigned to the dilemma based uncertainty or control conditions described earlier. Finally, they were invited to sample two kinds of beer and a sports drink from chilled jugs. They were told to sample as often as necessary to form an opinion about how much they liked each. The main dependent variable was the amount of beer drunk (residualized on sports drink to ensure that it was beer drinking and not just drinking in general that was being assessed). The beer was actually non-alcoholic beer, but we sprayed the rim of the jug with pure alcohol, which seemed to convince participants that it was alcoholic beer. They estimated that it contained over 4% alcohol, on average. Results revealed a significant three-way interaction between PFC, weekly consumption, and uncertainty condition. High PFC participants who were relatively

heavy habitual drinkers responded to the personal uncertainty manipulation with the highest beer consumption of all. These results indicate that people who are averse to cognitive conflict, and who have had experience with the myopia-inducing effects of alcohol (experienced drinkers), turn to alcohol when faced with cognitive conflict. Importantly, ESE did not moderate the results. Thus, alcohol appears to be an available way for the humble and the proud alike to flee from personal uncertainty.

This is the first laboratory experiment to causally demonstrate increased alcohol consumption as a means of coping with a prior psychological stressor. Past attempts may have failed because alcohol myopia is a particularly good solution to uncertainty and conflict, but an aggravator of more singular threats and stressors. When singular threats, such as failure, humiliation, and separation loom, alcohol myopia could magnify the discomfort by highlighting the threat as the only thought on one's mind. Uncertainty threats, however, require the ability to think of multiple perspectives at the same time, and so should be uniquely soluble in alcohol.

Encouraged by this initial finding, Chloe Leon and I conducted a second study to explicitly link the self to use of alcohol as an escape from personal uncertainty. Recall that only individuals with shaky ISE (but high ESE) reacted to personal uncertainty with defensive conviction. We wondered whether all individuals with shaky ISE, regardless of ESE, would be drawn to alcohol when faced with personal uncertainty. Lack of implicit self-confidence would make the myopic escape particularly appealing.

The experimental set up in this second study was similar to that of the previous study, with the following changes. First, we recruited only 100 female participants in order to evade male 'drink to party' motives that additional analyses identified in the

previous study (cf. Cooper, Frone, Russel, & Mudar, 1995). Second, we included a measure of ISE as well as ESE. Third, all participants began the study by writing a paragraph about relationship uncertainties which made uncertainty salient for them all. Fourth, we manipulated self-focused attention by randomly assigning participants to either complete the study in front of a large mirror, or no mirror (e.g., Silvia, 2002). We expected that the primed uncertainty would be particularly aversive for low ISE participants whose shaky self-concepts were highlighted by self-focus. Results indicate that this was the case. Beer consumption (again controlling for amount of sports drink consumed) was significantly highest among participants with low ISE in the self-focus condition. Importantly, as in the previous study, there were no effects of ESE.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter began with the claim that humans are jointly wired for uncertainty and for culture. The symbiotic dialectic between individual uncertainty and consensual cultural norms allows for creative choices in the service of communal ends. Western ‘culture’ paradoxically promotes individualism, however. It advises that actions should be based on personal convictions, and independent assessments of the true and good. This individualistic norm is potentially problematic because people are capable of imagining alternative ways of being good and true, and without consensual norms as arbiters of truth, people are at risk of being mired in uncertainty, conflict, and action paralysis. The Western solution to this predicament, promoted by the likes of Pythagoras, Plato, St. Paul, and St. Augustine, is passionate conviction. Conviction allows one to transcend the chaos of non-consensual temporal life. It absorbs attention, masks conflicting thoughts, and invigorates singular action.

Several experiments showed participants exaggerating their conviction about religions, meanings, values, and personal projects in response to personal uncertainty. Moreover, other experiments found that this defensive zeal was most pronounced among individuals with low implicit self-esteem. Western individuals lack consensual norms for behavior and those with low implicit self-esteem also lack experiential confidence in the goodness of the self. Low implicit self-esteem Westerners are thus particularly vulnerable when faced with uncertainty. They have no arbiter, cultural or personal, for navigating it. As a means of escape, these individuals engage in defensive compensatory conviction, which achieves a kind of zeal myopia. As conviction and imagined agreement of others are exaggerated, uncertainties fade into relative unimportance. Several studies indicated that defensive conviction is only a viable defense for individuals with high explicit self-esteem, however. Low explicit self-esteem individuals appear unable or unwilling to mount the cognitive distortion required to exaggerate personal certainty and imagined agreement of others. Accordingly, several studies demonstrated that conviction only reduced subjective salience of personal uncertainties among individuals with high explicit self-esteem claims.

Two final studies showed that alcohol intoxication is another way that Westerners cope with personal uncertainty. Alcohol intoxication may be a popular antidote because, like zeal intoxication, it dulls awareness of the conflicting cognitions associated with the uncertainty. Both studies showed that people specifically increased their alcohol consumption when faced with uncertainty. Those particularly averse to uncertainty, or with low implicit self-esteem highlighted by a self-focus manipulation were especially likely to react to uncertainty by drinking more alcohol. Thus, across the conviction and

alcohol studies, individuals with shaky implicit selves were particularly defensive, perhaps because they have no confident resource, collectivistic or individualistic, for guiding action in the face of uncertainty. To escape from the cognitive conflict, they turn to exaggerated zeal or alcohol for intoxicated single-mindedness.

This chapter began with the suggestion that St. John's Newfoundlanders may have become famous for their passionate conviction because of the extraordinary amount of vulnerability and uncertainty there. Interestingly, St. John's is also famous for its love of bad tasting "Screech" rum dregs with redeeming alcohol content. Today, Newfoundlanders are faced with considerable vulnerability and uncertainty from the elements, but also from the unemployment caused by the collapse of the cod fishery. Consider once again, proud Christian Lance and his humbler brother Lorne, two unemployed cod fisherman huddled in a cabin waiting out the frigid St. John's winter. The research presented in this chapter suggests that since their lay offs, Lance and Lorne might find themselves drinking more hot toddies than usual. But Lance might be more likely than Lorne to get up in the morning for Mass.

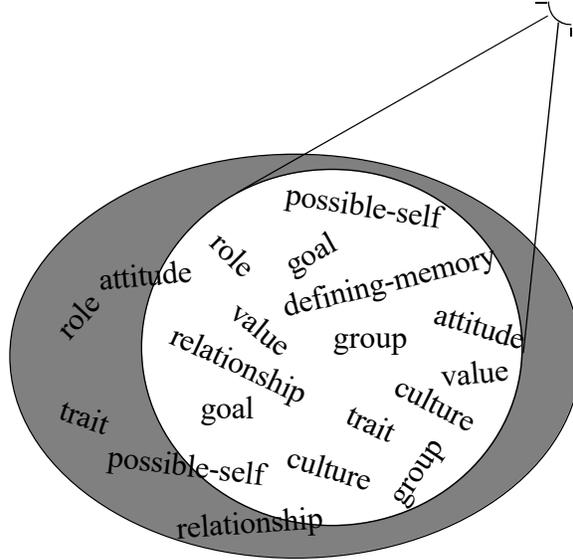
More broadly, this chapter implies that the compensatory convictions of a lot of Lances, have contributed to the uniquely passionate projects of the Western world. Admittedly, it is a far distance to travel in one's imagination, from random assignment and manipulation of independent variables, to Europe's cathedrals and the Crusades. But group projects are often sustained by, and reflective of, the passionate pursuits of individual Lances. If it seems cynical to taint sublime human passions with the attribution of compensatory conviction, it may be easier to do depict some of the West's more shocking and awful passionate projects as such.

When Pope Urban II went on a nine-month speaking tour in 1095 to rally support for the first Crusade, France had shrunk to a fraction of its former size and was in one of its darkest periods. The glory of Charlemagne had been immediately followed by wars of succession, wave after wave of Norse attacks in the ninth and tenth centuries, and a perceived threat from advancing Islam. By the end of the 11th century France was a fragmented tangle of mutually hostile principalities, independently ruled by despotic Dukes. From a compensatory conviction perspective, it is not surprising that the bewildered and vulnerable French were the most numerous and zealous of the Crusaders. On his speaking tour, Urban proclaimed (with eerie familiarity),

“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...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).

With a battle cry of “God wills it!” a first wave of 12,000 ill-prepared Crusaders independently broke from France without waiting for the decided date. In an orgy of zeal they attacked and pillaged Jews and Greek Christians on their way to the Holy Land. The first armed resistance they faced annihilated them.

Personal Uncertainty



Compensatory Conviction

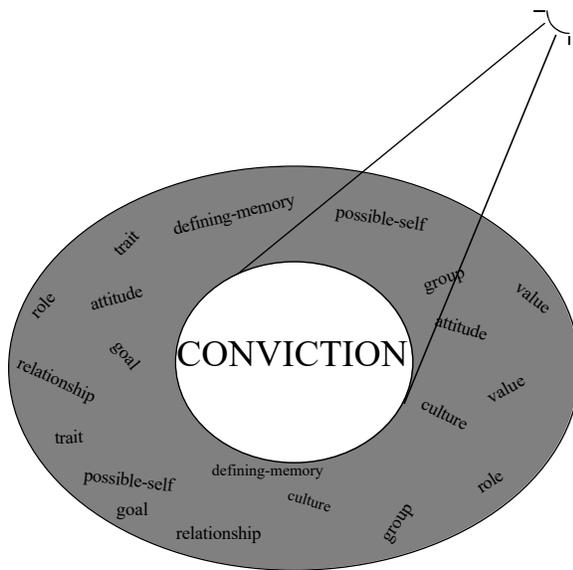


Figure 1. Compensatory conviction decreases subjective salience of uncertainties

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