

The Extremism of Everyday Life

Fetishism as a Defense against Existential Uncertainty

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Many of the chapters in this volume address the role that personal uncertainty (in one form or another) plays in the expression of extremism. In this chapter, we introduce a novel account that draws on insights from existential psychology to inform our understanding of the uncertainty–extremism relation in two ways. First, we propose that *existential uncertainty*—uncertainty about how, and whether it is possible, to achieve a significant life—is particularly threatening because certain belief in life’s significance serves as a shield against anxiety-arousing thoughts of death. Second, we propose that people may compensate for high levels of existential uncertainty by means of *fetishism*—investing in narrow dimensions that afford certain (albeit circumscribed and rigid) bases for affirming their life’s significance. In the first section we articulate our theoretical account, showing how it builds on, but goes substantially beyond, terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008). Next, we review two recent lines of research that have produced findings in accord with hypotheses derived from our account. We then apply our account to analyze extremism in the real world, showing how environments that engender high levels of existential uncertainty predispose people to invest in rigid, “fetishized” views of the social world that can foster interpersonal and intergroup conflict.

Theory

"Normal" Defense against Existential Uncertainty: Investment in Mainstream Cultural Bases of Personal Significance

Life is filled with uncertainties, from the location of one's keys to the outcome of medical tests. Of course, not all uncertainties are aversive; indeed, people seem to enjoy the uncertainty of visiting exotic locales, playing the Lotto, and reading mystery novels. In general, though, people dislike uncertainty about the larger significance of their lives, that is, uncertainty about whether their life amounts to anything, whether anyone will remember them after they die, whether anything is protecting them from harm, and whether they are valuable enough in the eyes of others. We label this *existential uncertainty* after the existential philosophers (e.g., Kierkegaard, 1848/1997) who drew attention to people's abiding struggle to establish a secure sense of life's global meaning and significance.

Why, at core, is existential uncertainty threatening, and how do people normally cope with it? According to TMT, humans are motivated to continue living but are aware that their death is always potentially imminent and ultimately inevitable. This awareness creates an ever-present potential for overwhelming anxiety, or *terror*. From this perspective, existential uncertainty is threatening because it signals the possibility that no part of one's life or self will continue on in a significant way past physical death, a possibility that conflicts with the person's fundamental urge to continue living.

Normally, people minimize existential uncertainty, and thus avoid the conscious experience of terror, by investing faith in a *cultural worldview*, a widely shared system of beliefs that portrays the world as meaningful, prescribes what to do in order to accrue personal value, and promises culturally valued individuals a way to transcend death, such as gaining admittance to a literal afterlife or establishing a legacy through their creative works. By maintaining faith in the validity of the cultural worldview and perceiving themselves as living up to its prescriptions for valued conduct, people can be confident that their life has significance that will survive their demise. For example, American soldiers participating in their country's "crusade" to vanquish evil, members of Thailand's Mien tribe performing a ceremony to invite good spirits into their homes, and social psychologists whittling their days away staring at a computer screen can all view their actions as following culturally sanctioned routes to lasting personal significance.

These claims are supported by a large body of empirical research, a full review of which is beyond this chapter's scope (see Greenberg et al., 2008). Very briefly, studies show that when people confront stimuli that undermine their confidence in central tenets of the cultural worldview (e.g., the belief that the world is just, the

inherent goodness of one's nation), death-related thoughts come to the fore of consciousness, suggesting that faith in the worldview serves to keep those thoughts at bay. Also, numerous studies show that reminding people of their mortality instigates a wide range of cognitive and behavioral efforts to affirm aspects of the worldview (e.g., dominant norms, political ideologies) and culturally-derived bases of personal significance, and to respond negatively to anything that questions the validity of those structures.

Cracks in the Armor: Sources of Existential Uncertainty

From the perspective of TMT, the more certain people are that their cultural worldview is an absolutely true account of how the world is structured and how to lead a significant life, the less existentially uncertain they are, and the more they are able to defend against death anxiety. But how do people sustain this certainty when worldviews are essentially fictional accounts of reality comprised of abstract symbols and supersensible constructs (e.g., divine realms) that can never be empirically validated?

According to sociologists Berger and Luckmann (1967), faith in the worldview is sustained primarily by means of consensus: the more people who subscribe to the worldview, the more veridical it appears to be. This consensus is established and maintained through a number of mechanisms found universally in all cultures. Even before individuals are born (e.g., at baby showers) they are the target of an immersive socialization process (with both intentional and unintentional components) that inculcates them into prevailing norms, values, and beliefs. These cultural constructs are further reinforced through lifelong participation in collective ceremonies, rituals, and rites of passage, and through constant engagement with cultural products (e.g., fairy tales, restroom signs) that embody local ideologies.

Nevertheless, a number of social experiences and environmental conditions threaten to arouse existential uncertainty by compromising faith in the worldview and its prescriptions for lasting significance. For one, consensual support for the worldview is undermined by routine encounters with individuals who subscribe to alternative worldviews. For example, Christians who discover that Hindus believe the soul is reincarnated after death may doubt their conception of heaven ("If they have it right, what happens to me?").

Feelings of existential uncertainty may also be aroused by perceptions of internal inconsistencies and ambiguities in the mainstream worldview's bases for personal significance. Consider undergraduates who pursue careers in science because their professors convinced them that science represents an elegant, democratic, and humanistic worldview, but after years of labor and sacrifice they discover that their field is plagued by petty squabbles and rampant self-promotion. These individuals are now faced with ambiguous and conflicting value standards,

not knowing whether to remain true to the pure scientific vision or to instead seek prestige using the less noble tactics widespread in their field. On a more macro level, people living during times of widespread social upheaval (e.g., eras of colonization, rapid modernization) or economic instability may have difficulty believing that the local standards for obtaining personal value are operating properly, or may be uncertain as to what those standards are in a world of change and confusion (Durkheim, 1951, referred to this uncertainty of social norms as “anomie”).

Similarly, people may be uncertain whether their efforts to live up to the culture's standards of value will pay off in the long run. Van den Bos and colleagues (this volume) point out that most people live in “delayed-return” cultures in which there is a long delay between the effort they exert and the feedback they receive about their value. For example, students who forgo a weekend of socializing to work toward a PhD in literary studies may be at least implicitly uncertain whether the broader culture will still value literary studies, and thus their personal achievements, 10 years down the road.

Environmental conditions can also arouse existential uncertainty. At some level people realize that randomly occurring hazards—from a falling chunk of masonry to a bite from an infested insect—can instantaneously negate all of their strivings for value. At the same time, people may witness others who do not believe in or conform to the worldview prosper for equally incomprehensible reasons. When the environment seems to allot favorable and unfavorable outcomes to people regardless of their adherence to the worldview, people may have serious difficulty sustaining confidence that following the worldview's prescriptions for value will ensure their life's significance.

These common experiences with the social and natural world continually threaten to undermine faith in the mainstream cultural worldview, thereby rendering people existentially uncertain to varying degrees. Under conditions where existential uncertainty is highly salient and cannot be adequately assuaged solely by means of worldview investment, people may defend against it using more “extreme” psychological strategies.

Fetishism as an “Extreme” Defense against Existential Uncertainty

Ernest Becker's (1969) analysis of fetishism provides a useful perspective on the nature of these extreme strategies. Readers may be familiar with the use of the term “fetish” by anthropologists (e.g., Pietz, 1988), Marxist theorists (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/2009; Lefebvre, 1947/2002), and other scholars to refer specifically to the imbuing of inanimate objects (e.g., religious icons, consumer products) with inordinate significance. Becker uses the term more broadly to connote the extreme investment of meaning into any narrow aspect of life, including other individuals, circumscribed ideologies and activities, and groups.

To elaborate, Becker argued that individuals maintain subjective certainty of their personal value by perceiving themselves as capable of acting efficaciously. People view their environment as “meaningful” insofar as it affords them clearly defined and reliable standards for effective action and, thus, confidently held feelings of personal significance. Therefore, when the standards for effective action in a situation are ambiguously defined or unreliable (i.e., when the situation lacks meaning), people can become uncertain about their personal value. To compensate for this uncertainty, people sometimes reduce their conception of the world and themselves to exceedingly narrow dimensions, or “fetishes,” that afford well-defined, concrete opportunities to act efficaciously and thus maintain feelings of personal value. People invest their fetishes with undue psychological importance, and rely on them to understand and relate to the world, because they help fend off the uncertain and negative self-views that might arise from relating to the environment in a more open, flexible manner.

The word “fetish” is commonly associated with the sexual domain (Freud, 1927/1966), and indeed Becker first applies his analysis to explain sexual fetishism. He describes how the sexual encounter loses meaning when people are uncertain how to effectively navigate its more subtle or abstract dimensions (e.g., emotional intimacy). To avoid feelings of uncertainty and negative self-regard, they may “fetishize” the sexual encounter by reducing it to a narrow dimension, such as an isolated aspect of their partner (e.g., a boot, a breast) or a strictly choreographed sequence of events, that affords clearly defined routes to effective action and thus a confident (albeit limited) basis for feeling significant.

Becker's analysis is remarkable, though, for showing how the process of fetishism underlies diverse patterns of “extreme” thought and behavior in domains other than sex. For example, he argues that the perception that one has personal enemies, although superficially negative, can serve as a focal point for broader concerns about chaotic hazard in the world. People may feel threatened by the fact that they are limited in their ability to anticipate and control the multifarious hazards lurking in their environment, since it implies that their wellbeing and even existence are subject to unpredictable changes of fortune. To avoid being overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness in the face of chaotic hazards, people might construct images of personal enemies in order to view negative events in their lives as stemming from the intentional actions of a single individual, rather than diffuse environmental forces.

This analysis similarly sheds light on the creation of enemies at a group level. If people realize that diffuse hazards and economic forces beyond their control or understanding threaten their group's livelihood, their collective existential uncertainty may drive them to label another group or subgroup as a scapegoat who acts as a source of evil and misfortune that can be effectively related to. Becker (1975) eloquently pointed out how this process of focalizing collective uncertainty can result in intergroup conflict:

The fact is that self-transcendence via culture does not give man a simple and straightforward solution to the problem of death; the terror of death still rumbles underneath the cultural repression . . . The result is one of the great tragedies of human existence, what we might call the need to "fetishize evil," to locate the threat to life in some special places where it can be placated and controlled . . . men make fantasies about evil, see it in the wrong places, and destroy themselves and others by uselessly thrashing about. (pp. 5, 148)

By fetishizing evil in the shape of a group scapegoat, people (falsely) view the source of their existential uncertainty as external and eradicable instead of internal and abiding. Later we will consider other expressions of fetishism, including a preference for simple good versus evil views of the world, the creation of conspiracy theories to explain mysterious events, and a preference for concrete representations of personal value. First, however, it is important to clarify our conceptualization of fetishism as a unique and "extreme" psychological defense against existential uncertainty.

Fetishism is a defense against existential uncertainty, not general uncertainty
According to our analysis, fetishism is a psychological defense against existential uncertainty rather than uncertainty about matters unrelated to the broader significance of one's life. Reducing any form of uncertainty—existential or not—involves the reduction of available information to simplified knowledge structures (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956). The essential difference between standard uncertainty-reduction and fetishism is that, in addition to reducing uncertainty related to a given domain (e.g., sex), a fetish serves as a basis for viewing the self as valuable and life as significant. Therefore, unlike most uncertainty-reducing structures, fetishes are imbued with undue psychological importance, and they serve as organizing constructs for making sense of diverse, superficially disparate aspects of the world and the self. In contrast, nonexistential uncertainty does not bear on the self's broader significance; thus, people rely on knowledge structures to reduce uncertainty in a given domain, but do not invest those structures with undue personal significance or use them to organize their global conception of the world and themselves.

Investing in fetishes versus the cultural worldview to defend against existential uncertainty

We have posited that people normally defend against existential uncertainty by investing in a mainstream worldview, but that, when feelings of existential uncertainty are acutely salient, they may resort to creating and investing in fetishes. Both defensive strategies function to provide a basis for confident perceptions that one is a valuable member of a meaningful reality, and ultimately serve to buffer the individual from death-related anxiety. In a broad sense, both strategies represent

efforts to minimize existential uncertainty by constraining one's understanding of the external world and one's own behavioral repertoire to narrow, prescribed dimensions, ignoring and actively downplaying alternative ways of viewing the world and orienting one's life.

These strategies, however, are distinguishable in important ways. As already mentioned, faith in the mainstream cultural worldview is sustained primarily by social consensus: greater consensus affords stronger confidence in the worldview's absolute validity and thus a more secure basis for obtaining lasting personal significance. In contrast, fetishes serve to reduce existential uncertainty primarily by virtue of their *concreteness*—their ability to offer highly structured perceptions of reality and clearly delineated opportunities for establishing personal control and value. Fetishes are thus highly stereotyped, resistant to change, and are typically embodied in some concrete aspect of the world that can be pointed to and understood with objective certainty (e.g., a tangible enemy; a sacred object). Thus, part of what makes fetishism an "extreme" defense is its marked narrowness and concreteness.

Also, because the defensive function of fetishes does not primarily rely on consensus, fetishism tends to be *idiosyncratic*—one might say *creative*—in a way that mainstream worldview investment is not. People who cling to their worldview as the primary basis for personal value are, for the most part, internalizing a socially-shared matrix of beliefs and conventions. In contrast, people who cling to fetishes for security abstract some narrow dimension of reality—from mastering technological gadgets to compulsively organizing their living spaces—and invest their sense of self-worth in it, but they need not perceive that other people share their fetish to derive security from it. Thus, fetishism is "extreme" not only in the sense that it entails excessively rigid patterns of thought and behavior, but also in the sense that it satisfies the individual's need to minimize existential uncertainty in a way that is not tethered to the beliefs and values of society-at-large.

Of course, investing in the cultural worldview and investing in fetishes are not mutually exclusive strategies for defending against existential uncertainty. Indeed, they often cooccur. For example, the Christian worldview addresses the "big" cosmological questions (e.g., "Where did we come from?"), but it does not prescribe what to do when one is driving on the highway, getting a tooth removed, or searching for one's keys. Should individuals view these domains as relevant to their life's global significance, they may need to supplement the mainstream worldview with fetishes that provide opportunities to act with confidence and security. This helps to explain why some Christian sects have constructed an elaborate pantheon of patron saints who act as the intercessors and advocates of domains as various and specific as music, sports, lost objects, and coffee houses. Belief in the saints' powers of intercession affords people certain means of understanding and navigating a given domain that is viewed as important to personal value but that is not given structure by the mainstream worldview's sweeping

enemy would increase feelings of risk, our analysis suggests that, when existential uncertainty is high, fetishizing a focal enemy figure reduces the threatening diversity of risk in the world, and thus restores a sense of control.

Finally, we determined that perceptions of the broader social system are an important moderator of the tendency to fetishize enemies. Specifically, we manipulated whether American participants saw the United States as a relatively ordered system, in which economic and law enforcement institutions can be relied upon for security, or a relatively disordered system, in which attempts to establish value are threatened by a fragile economy and unreliable government. As expected, participants fetishized an enemy figure under conditions of personal control threat only when the system appeared disordered—that is, when they were led to focus on their precarious condition in an uncertain world unable to offer dependable avenues for value and action.

We (Rothschild, Landau, & Sullivan, 2010) have also applied our analysis to understand why people are often motivated to quantify their self-worth—equating their personal value with simple metrics such as IQ or hours spent volunteering—their equally positive qualitative representations of personal value (e.g., being a good friend or creative artist) might afford more flexible self-conceptions (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In addressing this issue, Becker (1969) argued that in situations where the standards for performance in an ego-relevant task are ambiguous—that is, when it is unclear what one needs to do to act effectively—people experience aversive feelings of existential uncertainty. To reduce this uncertainty, they seek out concrete, objective representations of their value, even in an unrelated performance domain, because such representations afford more confident bases for self-evaluation than abstract, qualitative representations.

In three studies assessing this analysis, participants completed a visual skills task which had either clear or ambiguous standards for performance (both tasks were equivalent in overall difficulty). Participants then indicated their preference for two types of feedback on an ostensibly unrelated test of their verbal intelligence. Although the feedback types were equivalent in their overall valence, one was couched in quantitative terms (e.g., “87%”) while the other was couched in qualitative terms (e.g., “Good”). As predicted, participants confronted with ambiguous (vs. clear) performance standards on the first task preferred quantitative assessments of their value on a subsequent task over equally positive qualitative feedback.

Also, this effect occurred only among individuals with a high dispositional preference for clear and confident knowledge (as measured with the personal need for structure scale; Thompson, Naccarato, Parker, & Moskowitz, 2001), which is consistent with our claim that relative preference for quantitative feedback reflects participants’ desire for *certainty* about their value on an ego-relevant task, and not simply an increased motivation to enhance self-esteem by exaggerating one’s perceived success on that task. Indeed, two additional studies replicated this

tenets. In this way the belief in saints serves as a fetish that operates alongside faith in the mainstream worldview to guard against existential uncertainty.

To sum up this section, people are generally disturbed by uncertainty about their life’s ultimate significance because it alerts them to the terrifying possibility that life is completely pointless and fated only to end with death. Normally, people reduce existential uncertainty by investing in the mainstream cultural worldview as a basis for understanding reality and guiding their actions in the pursuit of enduring personal value. However, people remain existentially uncertain to varying degrees because their cultural worldview can never be validated with absolute certainty. Indeed, the fact that the mainstream worldview is based on widespread consensus, and consists of beliefs and tenets largely outside of individual control, almost guarantees a degree of existential uncertainty.

Normal investment in the cultural worldview and extreme investment in fetishes share a common psychological function of constraining people’s perceptions of reality and their behavioral repertoire in the service of reducing existential uncertainty. Whereas worldview investment reduces existential uncertainty through consensual support (and thus perceived validity), fetishism reduces existential uncertainty by affording well-defined avenues for effective action and, consequently, confident bases for viewing the self as significant. Inspired by this analysis, we have recently conducted laboratory research on the causes and consequences of fetishism. We summarize this work next.

Research

Our account suggests that heightening existential uncertainty will increase fetishism in people’s perceptions of the social world and themselves. We recently assessed this broad possibility in the context of perceptions of personal and political enemies (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010). We predicted that inducing existential uncertainty by reminding individuals of the unpredictable, hazardous nature of their environment would prompt them to attribute undue influence to focal enemy figures in an attempt to fetishize otherwise random hazards in the world. Accordingly, when participants dispositionally low in perceived control contemplated negative events that could befall them at any time (e.g., natural disasters), they attributed increased influence to an enemy figure in their personal lives. We replicated this effect on the eve of the 2008 US presidential election, finding that, after contemplating uncontrollable hazards, participants expressed greater belief that the candidate opposing their preferred candidate was orchestrating a conspiracy to steal the election.

We also found that being exposed to a powerful enemy decreased perceptions of environmental risk, which in turn bolstered feelings of personal control. That is, whereas common sense would suggest that exposure to a powerful and malicious

interaction and showed that it was mediated by feelings of self-esteem certainty, but not by self-esteem level.

These emerging lines of research on enemy perceptions and self-value quantification both demonstrate that heightened existential uncertainty can motivate people to invest in fetishized perceptions of the social world and themselves. In the next section we use our analysis to explicate the psychological motivations that drive extremist behavior outside the laboratory.

Fetishism and Extremism

We propose that political and religious extremists are often individuals who are motivated (most likely implicitly) to minimize existential uncertainty by creating and subscribing to concrete, fetishized conceptions of the world and themselves.

If this is true, the first thing we should see is that environmental conditions that are likely to arouse existential uncertainty tend to promote extremist activity. In fact, extremist activity often occurs in situations marked by political disorder and ideological instability. Richardson (2006) explains how rapid political, social, and economic changes resulting from modernization foster instability by negating traditional conceptions of reality. It is often under these conditions that people create and affiliate with extremist ideologies that provide simple conceptions of the world and clearly delineated standards for valued conduct. For example, when Maoist China experienced massive famine and poverty as a result of attempted modernization in the 1950s, the violently extremist ideology that was to become the basis of the Cultural Revolution gained favor among millions (Glover, 1999; Lifton, 1968). This analysis is further supported by research by Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver (2006) showing that cultures characterized by ethnic heterogeneity, a history of territorial conflict, and ecological threats (e.g., natural disasters) tend to have "tight" (vs. "loose") social structures, including clear power hierarchies, intolerance of internal dissent, and a strong conviction of moral righteousness, which are characteristics commonly associated with extremism.

Also consistent with our analysis, extremist activity often occurs in situations where conventional strivings for value appear inadequate in the face of an insensitive and chaotic world. Extremists such as Osama Bin Laden of Al-Qaeda, Renato Curcio of the Red Brigade, and Vellupillai Prabhakaran of the Tamil Tigers all describe becoming radicalized after witnessing or learning about innocent people being killed in a senseless manner (Bin Laden, 2004; Sooriyapiragasam, 1995). As discussed, such events heighten existential uncertainty by questioning the likelihood of gaining clear value in a world where living up to local standards does not guarantee protection from suffering and death.

Our guiding analysis also suggests that seemingly disparate patterns of extremist thought and behavior can be profitably understood as manifestations of a

common tendency toward fetishism. Supporting this notion, a quintessential feature of extremist ideologies is a conception of reality in which everything is labeled in absolute terms as either good or evil, with little gray area between these categories (Richardson, 2006). Also, paralleling the results of Sullivan et al.'s (2010) aforementioned laboratory research, extremism very often involves the focalization of chaotic hazards to the intentional actions of a single enemy figure (Sargent, 1995). Once evil is given tangible form, extremists can establish concrete feelings of efficacy and value by orienting their life toward eradicating this embodiment of evil by any means necessary (Lifton, 1968). Also, extremist groups typically set explicit, unambiguous prescriptions for valued conduct, which afford group members a certain sense of how to establish their life's significance (Richardson, 2006).

These fetishistic tendencies are evident in the case of "visionary" killer Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber. Kaczynski originally retreated from civilized society for a life of self-reliance, which he felt afforded him value, but his lifestyle was threatened by developers who cleared the wilderness around his home (Chase, 2000). We might expect that these conditions rendered Kaczynski existentially uncertain. Indeed, it was at this time that Kaczynski invented a reductionist conception of the "techno-industrial complex" that was responsible for nearly all the world's suffering and moral decrepitude. This fetishized conception of the world gave Kaczynski the ideological grounds to pursue a heroic mission to eradicate the focalized enemy. He ultimately murdered 26 innocent individuals whom he perceived as complicit in the evil conspiracy.

In addition to the creation of enemy figures and rigidly defined standards of valued conduct, extremist groups and individuals also display fetishism in their tendency to attribute undue power and influence to focal leaders. Living under conditions of heightened existential uncertainty, people may be attracted to larger-than-life authority figures who present a clear vision of the world that offers straightforward means of establishing self-worth. Thus, some extremist group leaders, such as Shoko Asahara of the violent cult Aum Shinrikyo, take on a divine status in the eyes of their followers (Lifton, 1968; Richardson, 2006). Adolf Hitler is perhaps the most famous example of a leader who, in a time of destabilizing economic depression, assumed a heroic position as the sole savior of the German people (while simultaneously providing the German people a focal scapegoat group in the form of the Jewish population). Hitler was a fetish object in so far as he became the concrete personification of the entire Nazi party, and allowed his followers to take part in his "heroic" mission to build up Germany's value and power over the world (Glover, 1999).

Ironically, the type of natural and social environments that provoke existential uncertainty and fetishistic reactions are often created by the violent actions of extremists. For instance, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 led many Americans to endorse a worldview—remarkably similar to that of the

attackers—in which good and evil could be clearly divided in a simple and irreconcilable dichotomy (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Within this narrow conception of reality, America's fetishized sources of evil were a terrorist mastermind hidden in a cave and a ruthless dictator constructing sinister weapons, and they turned to (then) President George W. Bush to triumph over these evildoers. However, the Bush administration's military actions against Afghanistan and Iraq further destabilized regions already characterized by economic and sociopolitical uncertainty, turning them into breeding grounds for terrorists and guerrillas who fetishize the West (and the US in particular) as the all-encompassing repository of evil (Mason, 2008). Thus the cycle of existential uncertainty breeding extremism, and extremist action breeding further existential uncertainty, is perpetuated.

Such discussion may tempt one to attribute the fetishistic tendencies of extremist groups and individuals exclusively to psychopathology or the abnormality of extreme social situations; but it is important to stress (as we have throughout this chapter) that existential uncertainty can stem from many sources in one's everyday life, and in fact many "well-adjusted" individuals often engage in some form of fetishism. Take the example of superstition. Gallagher and Lewis (2001) found that 70% of college students admitted to practicing some form of superstitious behavior, including relying on lucky charms and circumscribed repetitive behaviors such as knocking on wood. The superstitious object or practice represents a fetish in so far as it is imbued with an excessive or unrealistic degree of influence, and individuals' feeling of power over the object or practice gives them an inflated sense of control over superficially unrelated outcomes (Langer, 1975). In a sense, conferring the supernatural ability to win a baseball game on a "lucky" cap serves the same psychological function as the extremist individual's fetishism of an enemy figure: namely, to reduce existential uncertainty by narrowing down a chaotic universe to the powers of a few concrete actors and objects, and thereby establishing a sure sense of control and personal value.

It is also important to realize that there is no qualitative difference between the "normal" defense against existential uncertainty through worldview adherence and an extremist, fetishistic defense. To make this point, consider once again people's tendency to quantify abstract concepts. Quantification helps reduce generic uncertainty about the world by systematizing and concretizing potentially vast amounts of abstract information. Accordingly, every mainstream worldview prescribes quantification conventions for time, accomplishments, and other domains bearing on the significance of one's life, conventions that are "normal" because they are followed by most members of a culture. For example, social psychologists typically take stock of their worth by counting the number of publications on their CVs. Yet even widespread means of reducing uncertainty in this way can adopt a fetishistic quality, as in the American fascination with the number three (Bromley, 1982), which lends our lives pervasive and reassuring (though arbitrary) structure: three strikes in the baseball game, "the third time's a

charm," the Holy Trinity, and so forth. At the extremist end of the continuum is an anonymous psychiatric patient who filled multiple notebooks with the number 666 before enacting violence in the alleged service of Satan (Tucker, 1995). In all these cases, reliance on simplified knowledge structures (in this case, numbers) embedded in a broader meaning system gives the individual a feeling of structure, value, and certainty; it would appear that only the degree to which one relies on a given structure to reduce uncertainty separates the publication-counting social psychologist from the Satanist.

Future Directions

Future research would provide a clearer picture of the unique psychological significance of existential uncertainty by contrasting it with sources of uncertainty that do not adopt existential significance nor invoke rigid, fetishistic responses. Recall our claim that people respond to both existential and nonexistential uncertainty by seeking clear answers that narrow down the total range of possibility, but that only existential uncertainty prompts fetishism. Fetishistic defenses involve an additional investment of undue importance in the fetishized object or person, and a tendency to rigidly rely on the fetish to organize one's broader understanding of the world and the self.

We are currently conducting empirical research assessing these claims. In one study, participants were made to feel either mundane uncertainty about executable aspects of a self-relevant goal, or existential uncertainty about the overall value of their goal. Participants then completed a simulated dishwashing task, and we manipulated whether the task had ambiguous or clearly defined standards for success. People who had been made either existentially or nonexistentially uncertain equally disliked the task when it had ambiguous standards. Critically, however, only existentially uncertain participants responded to an ambiguous cleaning task by fetishizing the construct of cleanliness/purity, using it to organize their attitudes toward superficially unrelated domains in ways outside the purview of mainstream worldview beliefs (e.g., by demonstrating more positive attitudes toward South African virginity testing).

Future studies could also be profitably guided by the acts of extremist individuals and groups themselves. It is interesting to note that extremist individuals and groups are often not content to simply codify their fetishes in pamphlets or harmless rituals; rather, many of them attempt to force their fetishized conceptions onto the world through violence. Becker (1969) argued that, given the often abstract and ambiguous standards by which value is judged in conventional society, the sadistic assertion of one's mastery over another through conspicuous physical violence can be appealing because it offers relatively indisputable evidence for one's value. After all, if one can prove oneself physically stronger than another,

or can gain power over the life of another, one's own value and beliefs can—at least temporarily—appear unambiguously superior.

It is possible that a desire for the apparent concrete certainty of physical conquest plays a role in the aggressive actions of extremists who have been continually frustrated in their attempts to assert worth through more abstract, conventional routes. Future research could assess this claim by testing whether, when frustrated in their attempts to establish value in traditional areas that are relatively abstract, or when confronted by ambiguous standards for obtaining value, people become more supportive of, or even actively participate in, the sadistic overpowering of others through physical means.

Our analysis also stands to shed light on the psychological foundations of another extremist activity: asceticism. Extremist individuals and groups, past and present, have often endured self-inflicted isolation, physical hardship, abstinence from sensory pleasures, and even corporal punishment (France, 1996). Given that normal social existence is already characterized by frequent events that might elicit pain or suffering, why would individuals ever willingly take on an ascetic lifestyle? In line with our analysis, Nietzsche (1887/2004) claimed that people are threatened by the perception that hazard and suffering are chaotic and impersonal, and so they inflict suffering upon themselves in order to understand and control it. Research should investigate whether asceticism or masochism is rooted in the desire to overcome existential uncertainty by taking control over one's suffering.

Of course, in addition to further investigating the causes and consequences of existential uncertainty, we should also investigate factors that remove the causes or mitigate the consequences. In other words, we should better determine how to encourage people to embrace more complex and diverse conceptions of the world and the self, in order to circumvent unnecessarily rigid fetishism that can occasionally result in violence. One possibility is to encourage people to zealously pursue more socially constructive fetishes. The same urges to concretize the abstract and find clear paths to self-value that have fueled destructive forms of extremism have, arguably, also catalyzed many of the great innovations and discoveries in art, science, and technology (Van Zuylen, 2005). All these creative works are ultimately efforts to supplement (or even overthrow) the mainstream worldview by creating and discovering new knowledge structures that will serve as firm bases for viewing the world as meaningful and one's life as significant.

Perhaps the best way to avoid extremist reactions to existential uncertainty is to tolerate it as far as we can. Ultimately people should be encouraged to cultivate increasingly complex and flexible conceptions of reality and themselves, even if this means accepting that existential uncertainty will always be a part of this reality. The fact that this will be a difficult achievement speaks to the importance (acknowledged by all the authors in this volume) of understanding not only the politics of extremism, but the underlying psychology of uncertainty. For as Becker (1969) wrote: "The perversions of our national life are not matters of

politics, of the frantic fetishization of force embodied in military and police power. Rather, they . . . are matters of educating a strong, independent, self-reliant people, who will be happy and patient to live with threatening complexity and overwhelming mystery" (p. 34).

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