

Deriving Solace from a Nemesis:

Having Scapegoats and Enemies Buffers the Threat of Meaninglessness

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People often believe that individuals and groups are systematically plotting their downfall, and furthermore they tend to perceive these enemy figures as exceptionally intelligent, powerful, and resourceful. For example, although most Americans believe that the failed Times Square bomb attempt in 2010 was planned by Faisal Shahzad, many Pakistanis believe that the culprit was a secret American “think tank” that controls virtually every aspect of the American government and is responsible for pretty much everything that goes wrong in Pakistan (Tavernise, 2010). Similarly, millions of Americans tune in to watch television personalities such as Glenn Beck “connect the dots” in an attempt to expose President Barack Obama as an evil mastermind bent on replacing the American way of life with a totalitarian regime. At a more personal level, 70% of Americans report having had, at some point in their lives, a powerful enemy who seeks to sabotage their goals and inflict harm (Holt, 1989). While enemies can certainly exist and pose a legitimate threat to one’s well-being, people nevertheless seem almost irrationally motivated to perceive enemies in their social environment, and to perceive them as powerful.

On the surface this tendency is puzzling. Why would people want to believe that powerful others aim to cause them harm? In this chapter we propose that having enemies, although superficially undesirable, fulfills a protective function for the individual by providing a buffer against the threat of meaninglessness. Briefly, our analysis states that people are always potentially aware that they live in a meaningless world in which they can be negatively affected by myriad hazards stemming from impersonal forces that are beyond their capacity to understand or control. To keep this threatening awareness at bay, people “narrow down” the multifarious

sources of potential misfortune to a focal individual or group that can be understood and perhaps controlled.

In this chapter we present this analysis in more detail and show how it has been empirically supported by recent lines of experimental research. Specifically, we summarize research showing that increasing the salience of uncontrollable hazards leads people to attribute exaggerated influence to their enemies, and that exposure to powerful scapegoats and enemies has the somewhat counterintuitive effect of decreasing perceptions of risk in one's environment and bolstering feelings of personal control. We conclude by discussing directions for future research and practical implications.

### **Meaning, Meaninglessness, and Fetishism**

Our analysis of enemy perceptions is based on Ernest Becker's (1969) broad theoretical account of the motivations behind *fetishism*, a construct that appears in the psychoanalytic literature (e.g., Freud, 1927/1963) and can be linked to a host of so-called perverse behaviors, including sadomasochism, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and paranoia. Becker reformulated traditional psychoanalytic explanations of fetishism in light of insights from existential psychiatry into people's experience of meaning and meaninglessness. He began with the notion that people are fundamentally motivated to view themselves and their actions as valuable. People maintain subjective certainty of their personal value by perceiving themselves as capable of effectively negotiating their environment. *Meaning* is the perception that one's environment affords clearly defined and reliable standards for such effective action. That is, the individual sees meaning in the world to the extent that he or she can decipher dependable "rules" or contingencies that can be followed to establish a sense of personal efficacy and, thus, confidently held feelings of personal value. As Becker (1969) put it, "To negotiate dependable action is to

imbibe in meaning; to build up a world of known and expected consequences is to create meaning” (p. 8).

Driven by the psychological imperative to attain personal value, people create and adhere to systems of meaning that afford reliable routes to valued action. For one, they subscribe to a cultural worldview, which is a set of socially constructed beliefs that provides an account of the nature of reality, principles to live by, and prescriptions for sanctioned conduct. The individual internalizes the worldview through an immersive socialization process that reinforces prevailing norms, values, and ideals through life-long participation in collective ceremonies, rituals, and rites of passage, and through constant engagement with cultural products that embody those ideologies. In this way, the worldview provides the individual with the broad outlines of what it means to live a valuable life.

In addition to the cultural worldview, people derive meaning from well-structured (i.e., clearly defined, consistent, stable) conceptions of the people, objects, and events that they encounter in their social environment. Although these conceptions refer to relatively mundane aspects of one’s environment and experience, they provide the infrastructure for people’s efforts to maintain adequate faith in the validity of their worldview, and from there, to live up to the worldview’s standards of value. For example, as Goffman (1959) so well articulated, to dependably negotiate social interactions and influence how other people regard one, a person has to perceive other people’s characteristics and behaviors as fairly consistent from one moment to the next. Similarly, to anticipate the consequences of one’s actions and feel secure that long-term projects will unfold reliably over time, the person must believe that favorable and unfavorable outcomes have clear causes and do not occur on an arbitrary and random basis. Conversely, if people lacked these structured conceptions – if, for example, other people’s behavior seemed

contradictory or arbitrary, if the flow of time appeared disordered, or if events seemed haphazard – they would perceive their environment as meaningless and consequently have difficulty establishing and maintaining a confident sense of personal value.

The more people can feel confident that their cultural worldview prescribes legitimate routes to attain value, and that their immediate social environment has a predictable structure, the more they can view their life as meaningful. Of course, the sense that life is meaningful need not be a radical epiphany. Most of the time people take their cultural worldview and structured social conceptions for granted – they accept the identities, long-term projects, and routines that are offered to them by virtue of their membership in certain social groups and, in this way, they maintain a secure sense that they are doing something significant.

However, because these systems of meaning are essentially symbolic constructs that resist conclusive verification, they can be threatened by social experiences and environmental conditions. Such threats put the person at risk for feelings of *meaninglessness*, or the sense that one lacks the infrastructure necessary for effective action and the attainment of lasting personal value. For example, when, say, a woman encounters someone who subscribes to an alternative worldview, she may question the validity of her own worldview (“If *they* have it right, what happens to *me*?”). She might also witness other people meet with favorable and unfavorable outcomes regardless of their adherence to the worldview’s prescriptions for valued action, and this can undermine her confidence that by following those prescriptions she will be rewarded with lasting value. Similarly, meaning may be threatened if a person witnesses or falls victim to randomly occurring catastrophes, accidents, and chance occurrences that undermine the stable order on which all long-term strivings for value are predicated.

To minimize the threat of meaninglessness, Becker claimed, people often rely on

fetishism, a broad psychological strategy that involves reducing one's conception of the world and oneself to exceedingly narrow dimensions that afford well-defined, concrete opportunities to effectively act in a valued manner. Because people view their fetishes as affording a stable basis for establishing their personal value, they invest them with undue psychological importance and rely on them to understand and relate to the world. Becker illustrated the process of fetishism in his account of people's occasional desire for fetishes in the sexual realm. On this account, if, say, a man feels insecure in his ability to relate to his sexual partner's ambiguous emotions or spontaneous displays of intimacy, he may compensate by "boiling down" the sexual encounter to a narrow dimension, such as an isolated aspect of his partner (e.g., a high-heeled shoe), that affords clearly defined (albeit limited) routes to effectively act in a valued manner.

### **Scapegoating and Enemyship as Buffers Against the Threat of Meaninglessness**

Becker extended his analysis of fetishism beyond the sexual realm to explain the motivations that shape people's perceptions of enemies, both real and imagined. He argued that people may feel threatened by the fact that they are limited in their ability to anticipate and control the hazards lurking in their environment, since this implies that their well-being (and their *being* at all) is subject to the influence of impersonal and indeterminate forces beyond their control. To avoid being overwhelmed by feelings of meaninglessness in the face of uncontrollable hazards, people may view negative outcomes as stemming from the intentional actions of a focal individual or group that can be effectively controlled, managed, or (at minimum) understood. Becker summarized the process thus:

The paranoid fantasy builds on one's insecure power base, his helplessness in the world, his inability to take command of his experience, to get on top of the evil in the world...One feels overwhelmed and has to make sense out of his precarious position. And

the way to do this is to attribute *definite* motives to *definite* people. This seems to straighten the situation out, to put one back into things. There is now a focus, a center, with lines running from others to oneself and to one's objects and loved ones. There is something one can *do* from his position of utter helplessness....and even if he can't do anything, or especially if he can't do anything, at least he can order the world in his thought, see and make connections between things that are so unconnected....Above all, he masks his feelings of impotence in the face of events; his helplessness is now no longer his own tragic shortcoming, but a realistic reaction to the real actions of others. (p. 126; italics in original)

To put the matter more plainly, we need fetishized, human sources of evil and misfortune because they help avert a more profoundly distressing realization, namely, that we are incapable of controlling the myriad chaotic forces in the natural and social world that threaten to block our goals, harm us, or annihilate us altogether.

This analysis helps to explain scapegoating, or the tendency to attribute blame to a person or group for a particular negative outcome that is due, at least in part, to other causes (T. Douglas, 1995). If people are confronted with a hazardous event or circumstance that lacks an easily comprehensible and controllable cause, they may avoid the potential threat of meaninglessness by projecting responsibility for that negative outcome onto a focal individual or group that can be understood and controlled. That is, focusing attention on the scapegoat as the primary causal agent behind hazard or misfortune affords the reassuring (yet often erroneous) sense that negative outcomes do not "just happen" – rather, they are due to the actions or mere existence of an individual or group that can be pointed at, monitored, and even destroyed.

In addition to explaining the motivation behind scapegoating in response to a particular hazard, Becker's analysis suggests that people seek out powerful enemies to cope with the more general awareness that multiple sources of potential hazard are spread diffusely throughout their environment. To the extent that an enemy is perceived to be an influential source of misfortune, having an enemy allows people to avert the threat of meaninglessness by perceiving their environment as containing less randomly distributed risk. Hence, people may imbue real or imagined enemies with undue power as a way of transferring ambient danger onto a more concrete and comprehensible adversary. Becker's analysis thus explains enemyship in general as the attempt to maintain clear meaning in the world by fetishizing an isolated individual or group as the source of all hazard and misfortune (including those hazards with which they cannot be logically connected).

This analysis yields additional insights into how people tend to perceive their scapegoats and enemies. In the case of scapegoats, the central issue is whether the scapegoat is "viable," meaning whether the person or group in question is perceived as sufficiently powerful and malevolent to perpetrate the threatening outcome that needs to be explained (Glick, 2005). Since scapegoats are relied upon to explain how a particular threatening event (that either has occurred or is likely to occur) is traceable to a human source, those who wish to blame the scapegoat need to understand exactly how the scapegoat was capable of perpetrating that event. If a person or group appears patently incapable of having caused the event – for instance, if they appear too weak to have exerted the amount of influence necessary – then they are "non-viable" as a scapegoat and will not restore feelings of control and a sense of clear meaning in the face of the threatening event.



Moving beyond the case of using a scapegoat to defuse a single threatening occurrence, the fetishization of enemy figures as a response to myriad sources of chaotic hazard involves seeing the enemy not only as possessing power in an absolute sense, but as possessing a certain kind of power. According to M. Douglas (1966), people often see their enemies as having ambiguous natures and possessing ambiguous powers. By describing an enemy as “ambiguously” powerful, we imply the following: that the enemy’s characteristics and actions do not lend themselves to clear interpretation, but rather can be interpreted in a number of possible ways (e.g., the enemy may not be what he appears to be, or the enemy may be driven by different possible motivations); that the full extent and variety of the enemy’s powers are only poorly understood; and that the enemy seems to exist and operate outside of conventional patterns, meaning his character and actions are covert, atypical, and even potentially “magical.” This is to be contrasted with those agents whom we imbue with “explicit” power, most typically ourselves, our heroes, and the government. Individuals and entities perceived to be explicitly powerful are seen as: having a character and performing actions that are clearly interpretable; possessing capabilities that are well understood in respect to both their nature and their extent; and conforming to conventional categories and patterns for character and behavior (e.g., they operate within the bounds of physics as we understand them).

From our perspective, enemies are typically perceived as ambiguously (as opposed to explicitly) powerful for two reasons. First, since ambiguity is associated with the absence of clear meaning, people can rely on ambiguous enemies to help define the borders of their meaningful worldview. The ambiguous enemy represents the boundary line where that which is good and meaningful passes into that which is evil and meaningless. Thus ambiguous enemies help define us and our sense of meaning by showing us what we are not. Second, the present

perspective further suggests that people fetishize their enemies and imbue them with ambiguous power because this makes their enemies seem capable of perpetrating the widest possible range of misdeeds. Although superficially it may seem preferable to see one's enemy as having explicitly defined, well-understood powers, our analysis counterintuitively suggests that ambiguously powerful enemies serve as better fetish objects – and thus better help individuals maintain a sense of meaning in a chaotic world – because they can be seen as responsible for a wider possible array of seemingly random threats.

The notion that enemies are often construed as ambiguously powerful points to an important distinction between the closely related defensive processes of scapegoating and fetishistic enemyship. Scapegoating involves blaming a person or group for a particular threatening event. Accordingly, for a scapegoat to maintain meaning in the face of potential meaninglessness, the scapegoat must be perceived as viably capable of having perpetrated the event in question. This often involves imbuing the scapegoat with explicitly defined capabilities in order to demonstrate the scapegoat's responsibility for a specific outcome. By contrast, fetishistic enemyship involves using enemy figures (either persons or groups) to maintain a sense of meaning when one becomes aware that multiple diffuse and uncertain threats exist in one's environment. To serve this function, enemies are preferably seen as ambiguously powerful: capable of perpetrating a wide range of misdeeds. Of course, there have been some historical instances in which scapegoats have been blamed for a particular event and simultaneously imbued with ambiguous powers. The psychological processes of scapegoating and enemyship sometimes overlap. By and large, however, our analysis suggests that when people are confronted with a particular inexplicable threatening event, they will look for a viable scapegoat to blame; whereas when people are confronted with the reality that their environment is full of

multifarious hazards, they will imbue focal enemies with ambiguous powers in an attempt to restore meaning.

## **Research**

Summarizing our theoretical analysis, the threat of meaninglessness stems from the awareness that one's environment contains multiple, randomly occurring hazards that are difficult or impossible to fully understand, anticipate, and control. People can shield themselves from this threat by tracing the causes of hazards -- both particular hazards and hazard in general -- to the willful actions of a scapegoat or enemy. This analysis yields three testable hypotheses:

1. Framing a particular threatening event as caused by chaotic forces beyond one's control should prompt people to attribute greater responsibility for that event to a scapegoat (and, consequently, express a stronger desire to punish the scapegoat).

2. Increasing the salience of uncontrollable hazards in general should lead people to attribute increased power and influence to an enemy, even if the enemy's perceived influence is superficially unrelated to the salient hazards.

3. When people are exposed to a particular chaotic hazard, subsequent exposure to a scapegoat who can be viably blamed for the particular hazard should bolster people's feelings of personal control. Similarly, when people are exposed to the idea that multiple diverse potential hazards exist in their environment, subsequent exposure to an ambiguously powerful enemy should have the somewhat counterintuitive effect of also bolstering their feelings of personal control.

We (Rothschild, Landau, & Sullivan, 2011) recently tested the first of these hypotheses in a series of studies looking at people's tendency to attribute responsibility to scapegoats for particular hazards, in this case harmful climate change. In one study, participants told that

climate change was due to unknown chaotic forces (chaos threat condition) attributed more responsibility for climate change to oil companies, and reported a greater desire to punish those companies, compared to participants who were not primed with chaotic causes of climate change (no threat condition). Consistent with our analysis, this effect was mediated by decreased feelings of personal control, but not by feelings of guilt or other negative self-relevant perceptions.

But what role does the specifically *chaotic* nature of harmful events play in increasing scapegoating? A second study addressed this question by adding to the chaos threat and no-threat conditions a third condition in which participants were provided with an outgroup (other than the scapegoat target) who could be causally linked to climate change. To further isolate control-restoration as the underlying motivational process, we tested whether the effect of priming a chaotic hazard on increased scapegoating would be attenuated if participants had the opportunity to affirm perceptions of personal control in a domain superficially unrelated to climate change.

Supporting hypotheses, results showed that participants primed with chaotic causes behind harmful climate change were more likely to blame and penalize international corporations for their role in climate change than were participants in the no-threat and non-chaotic threat conditions. Also supporting hypotheses, this effect was significantly attenuated if participants affirmed their personal control, but not if they affirmed their moral character, despite these affirmations being equivalent in overall valence. These findings suggest that people compensate for the salience of a particular hazard that seems out of their control by projecting power onto a scapegoat who can serve as a comprehensible source of that hazard, and that they do so specifically to restore perceived personal control after it has been threatened.

We then tested the first part of the third hypothesis described above: If people encounter a chaotic hazard, and are then presented with a viable scapegoat, they should report a stronger sense of personal control than those presented with a target that is not a viable scapegoat for the same chaotic hazard. Supporting hypotheses, when participants were led to believe that global warming is due to unknown causes, and were subsequently given the chance to blame oil companies (a viable scapegoat), they reported feeling significantly more control over their lives compared to participants given the chance to blame the Amish (a non-viable scapegoat) for global warming.

In a related line of research, we (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010) investigated people's perceptions of enemies in the personal and political realms. To assess the second broad hypothesis described above, in one study we tested whether reminding participants of a wide variety of unpredictable hazards in their environment would prompt them to attribute undue influence to a focal enemy figure. We found that, when participants dispositionally low in perceived control contemplated negative events that could befall them at any time (e.g., airborne infections), they attributed increased influence to an enemy figure in their personal life; however, these participants did not attribute increased influence to a person who is annoying but not maliciously inclined, suggesting that priming potential hazards specifically influenced perceptions of others with malicious intent, and not simply disliked others.

We replicated this effect on the eve of the 2008 U.S. 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. However, participants primed with uncontrollable hazards were no more likely to view their political enemy in more generally negative terms (i.e., as less kind), suggesting that attributing

power to an enemy is a uniquely effective means of managing the threat of meaninglessness. Note that perceiving Barack Obama or John McCain as perpetrating a conspiracy does not bear any obvious relation to the potential hazards participants were primed with, such as natural disasters and the suffering of family members. Thus, these findings suggest that attributing surreptitious power to a focal enemy figure can function in a flexible manner to assuage the threatening awareness of one's vulnerability to chaotic hazards.

It is important to note that threat inductions similar to those used by Sullivan et al. (2010) have been shown in other lines of research to increase affirmation of *benevolent* sources of power and influence. For example, prior research shows that threatening people's sense that they have control over outcomes in their life increases their investment in a controlling God and political and institutional sources of order (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008). These findings have been interpreted as providing support for the compensatory control model, which posits that perceiving the self as in control, and perceiving external systems as in control, are intersubstitutable means of maintaining a consistent level of perceived order in one's environment and avoiding threatening cognitions about randomness.

Taking these findings into account, Sullivan et al. (2010) examined the conditions under which people respond to the salience of uncontrollable hazards by ascribing power to an enemy versus affirming benevolent systems of institutional control. Based on relevant anthropological work (M. Douglas, 1966), we hypothesized that one important moderator is the perception that the benevolent system in question in fact possesses the necessary resources to act in one's best interests. If the external system appears ineffectual, then people will not invest in it as a means of minimizing the threat of meaninglessness; instead, they will find alternate, personal means of

maintaining the perception that the world is ordered and meaningful, such as ascribing increased power and influence to an enemy.

We tested this hypothesis by manipulating 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 the economy is fragile and the government unreliable. When participants were primed to view governmental institutions as intact and capable, those primed with uncontrollable hazards ascribed increased power and influence to the U.S. government (e.g., replicating Kay et al., 2008), but their enemy perceptions were unaffected. In contrast, when the same governmental institutions were portrayed as ineffectual and unable to provide protection from external threats, participants primed with uncontrollable hazards did not affirm that system; rather, they were more likely to view a personal enemy as responsible for seemingly random misfortunes in their life (e.g., lost computer files, contracting food poisoning).

In another study that assessed the second part of the third broad hypothesis described above, we reasoned that if people contemplate uncontrollable hazards but, in addition, are exposed to an ambiguously powerful enemy capable of perpetrating a wide range of seemingly chaotic hazards, they should perceive *less* harmful risk in their environment and, consequently, perceive themselves as having more control. That is, whereas common sense would suggest that exposure to a powerful and malicious enemy would increase feelings of risk, our analysis suggests that narrowing down chaotic threats to an enemy figure will eliminate the increased perception of risk engendered by the salience of uncontrollable hazards and thus bolster perceived personal control.

Consistent with this reasoning, participants led to focus on uncontrollable hazards in their environment, but then presented with a portrayal of an enemy (Al-Qaeda) as possessing ambiguous, ill-defined powers, perceived less risk in their environment than did participants who were not primed with chaotic hazards. This effect did not occur, however, among participants exposed to a portrayal of Al-Qaeda as possessing explicitly defined powers, supporting the significance of the attribution of ambiguous powers to enemies. Participants who saw Al-Qaeda as ambiguously powerful also reported higher personal control than participants in the comparison conditions. Also supporting predictions, a mediation analysis showed that this increase in perceived control was mediated by decreased risk perceptions. Thus, contemplating a powerful enemy when one is motivated to minimize threats to meaning can increase one's perceived mastery of the world, but only when the capabilities of that enemy are not completely known.

Summing up the primary research findings reviewed in this section, when people are confronted with a particular hazardous event portrayed as due to chaotic causes, or when they are reminded of the multiple potential hazards lurking in their environment, they compensate by ascribing increased power and influence to a malicious individual or group. Support for the unique role of control motivation in scapegoating comes from evidence that the effect of priming hazards on scapegoating is mediated by perceived personal control and is attenuated if people affirm their perceived control in another domain. Furthermore, after being confronted with a particular hazard or multiple potential hazards, being provided with a malicious scapegoat or enemy figure bolsters global perceptions of personal control. Finally, the reviewed studies provide evidence concerning both the circumstances under which people are likely to engage in enemyship as a control-restorative strategy (namely, when the broader social system appears



disordered), and the type of enemy that best serves this function (an ambiguously, as opposed to an explicitly, powerful enemy).

### **Future Research Directions**

Although scapegoating and enemyship have been the topic of a considerable body of theoretical work, they have been largely neglected in contemporary empirical research. The research just reviewed represents an attempt to understand if and how these tendencies are motivated by a more distal psychological motive to maintain a buffer against the threat of meaninglessness. We operationalized this threat by reminding individuals that there are uncontrollable hazards in their environment that could seriously jeopardize all their efforts to negotiate their surroundings and establish their personal value. However, prior research has effectively threatened meaning using other procedures, such as exposure to relatively trivial expectancy violations (e.g., mismatched colors on a deck of cards; Proulx & Heine, 2009), exposure to information that is critical of one's cultural ideology (e.g., Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007), and even the mere contemplation of death (Vess, Routledge, Landau, & Arndt, 2009). Confronting people with any of these threats to meaning might increase the tendencies to ascribe power to, and perhaps even create, scapegoats and enemy figures in order to restore perceived order and control. These possibilities remain to be tested.

Beyond this fairly straightforward direction for future work, there remain a number of unanswered questions concerning the motivations underlying enemy perceptions. In particular, future research should focus on the likely possibility that perceptions of scapegoats and enemies are shaped by motives other than the need to maintain meaning per se. For example, Becker (1969) noted that sometimes people generate paranoid fantasies to compensate for their own feelings of guilt and inadequacy. In such instances people may very well feel that the world is

meaningful – that is, that their culture and immediate social environment afford reliable standards for valued action – yet they nevertheless perceive that they have personally fallen short of those standards. One means of compensating for this perceived failure is to invest in the belief that an enemy figure was responsible for that failure. For instance, a woman might convince herself that she could have become successful in her career if it had not been for the malicious intentions of a jealous co-worker or the surreptitious sabotaging efforts of a bitter ex-lover.

In the same vein, classic theoretical perspectives on scapegoating suggest that people may scapegoat to compensate for feelings of personal inadequacy. Allport (1950/1983) in particular emphasized that scapegoating functions in part to alleviate the burden of responsibility for illegitimate harm committed by oneself or one's ingroup. This motive is conceptually distinct from the meaning-related motive that we have emphasized so far. The question then arises: Which motive underlies scapegoating? Do people scapegoat to reduce the overwhelming indeterminacy of the external world, or do they scapegoat to project negative feelings of moral culpability onto an external source?

Recently we took initial steps to address this question. Rather than argue that one motive is reducible to the other, we investigated the possibility that both motives contribute independently to scapegoating. That is, people may scapegoat to minimize concerns with either chaos or personal inadequacy, but these processes may nevertheless have distinct predictors, mediators, moderators, and downstream consequences. In fact, we tested this analysis in the three scapegoating studies reviewed above (Rothschild et al., 2011). What we did not mention earlier was that all the studies included a moral threat condition (for comparison with the chaotic threat condition) in which participants were exposed to an induction that framed ecological destruction as the direct result of participants' own behavior or that of their ingroup. Consistent

with our dual-motive analysis, we found increased scapegoating in response to both the salience of chaotic hazards and moral threat; however, the effect of moral threat on increasing scapegoating was mediated by feelings of personal guilt, not personal control, and furthermore this effect was eliminated if participants affirmed their moral value, but not their personal control, in an unrelated domain.

Also, whereas when climate change was framed as chaotic, perceiving a viable scapegoat increased feelings of personal control, when climate change was initially framed as being the ingroup's fault, perceiving a viable scapegoat decreased feelings of personal guilt as well as personal control. In other words, while scapegoating in some situations represents an attempt to create meaningful order out of apparent meaninglessness specifically to bolster feelings of personal control, in other situations scapegoating represents a defensive process meant to restore feelings of personal value after they are threatened, even at the apparent expense of personal control (i.e., by allowing a scapegoat to have "control" over one's outcomes).

Differentiating these motivational paths becomes important when considering the downstream consequences of scapegoating. For example, it is possible that guilt-motivated scapegoating will be more likely to breed apathy and inaction than control-based scapegoating. Once people have projected their guilt over their own harmful actions onto a scapegoat, they may feel freed from responsibility for preventing or reversing those harmful actions. One study provided initial support for this possibility. We found that participants presented with a viable scapegoat after initially being told that their ingroup was responsible for climate change reported significantly less willingness to help stop climate change compared to participants presented with a non-viable scapegoat, as well as those initially told that the cause of climate change was unknown. This raises the possibility that people may be more strongly motivated to take personal

or collective action in response to threats to meaning than they are in response to the threat of personal culpability – at least when they are provided with a scapegoat for these threats.

Another question that should be addressed in future research is whether focalizing the source of an unexplained event onto a scapegoat represents a unique buffer against meaninglessness, or whether it is ultimately interchangeable with other means of maintaining perceived meaning. For instance, if climate change is framed as a natural process resulting from scientifically well-understood but impersonal causal forces, would such an explanation serve to buffer the threat of meaninglessness in the same way as blaming a viable scapegoat, or would it fail because it does not afford the individual with clear routes for exercising control? If focalizing blame on a definite intentional agent does provide a superior resolution to the threat of a salient chaotic hazard, when given the choice, individuals faced with a such an event should prefer to blame a scapegoat as compared to adopting an alternative explanatory framework (e.g., scientific explanation) that does not provide a causal agent as the focal source of the misfortune.

### **Practical Implications**

Nietzsche (1878/2002, p. 183) said, “He who lives by fighting with an enemy has an interest in the preservation of the enemy's life.” The research reviewed in this chapter suggests that having an enemy serves an underlying psychological function, which raises the interesting possibility that people may unconsciously sabotage their efforts to vanquish their enemies. Quite frankly, people need their enemies to feel safe in the world. Having constructed a focal enemy figure responsible for chaotic hazard, people may even ignore legitimate problems; that is, if people can point to President Barack Obama or Al Qaeda as the source of all evil in the world, they may feel less motivated to uncover and combat the actual causes of their misfortune.

Another consequence of focalizing evil in the form of a distinct enemy figure, suggested by the final direction for future research mentioned above, is that it can lead to simple agent-focused solutions to complex problems. For instance, in 2006, a national Gallup poll assessing priorities for fighting terrorism found that Americans believed that capturing or killing Osama Bin Laden should be a higher priority than attempting to improve communication between Middle Eastern countries and the United States, establishing a stable democratic government in Iraq, resolving the conflict between Israel and Arab nations, or using strong military action against nations that sponsor terrorism (Carroll, 2006). Although apprehending Bin Laden may certainly be one part of a solution to terrorism, an overly narrow preoccupation with Bin Laden (or anyone else) as the all-encompassing embodiment of evil may result in inadequate attention paid to the more complex and nuanced aspects of the situation.

Of course, in addition to further investigating the causes and consequences of people's perceptions of scapegoats and enemies, 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 themselves in order to circumvent unnecessarily rigid focalization of evil or guilt onto a convenient source. In this regard, it is critical for future research to continue to explore strategies that facilitate less defensive reactions to the unpredictability of existence, and that more flexibly maintain the perception that life is meaningful. The question becomes how to sustain strong convictions about life's meaning while imposing the least harm on those outside of one's culture and on future generations.

Fortunately, some important research along these lines is already emerging. One possibility for reducing scapegoating and enemyship 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 enemyship and violence have, arguably, also catalyzed many of the great innovations and discoveries in art, science, and technology (Van Zuylen, 2005). All these endeavors essentially amount to creating and discovering new knowledge structures that will serve as firm bases for viewing the world as meaningful and one's life as significant.

Related to this possibility, it is likely that the need to rely on scapegoats and enemies to defend one's sense of self-worth could be lessened to the extent that people are encouraged to develop more intrinsic standards of value, and to move beyond an inflexible reliance on extrinsic standards for value and meaning. The conditions that allow people to develop and express such intrinsic standards are articulated in self-determination theory (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000). People pursuing intrinsic goals or possessing more intrinsic beliefs may adopt an open-minded approach to extracting meaning from life, and may therefore display less defensive reactions to events that threaten to undermine the symbolic edifice of meaning that people share within a culture (Jonas & Fischer, 2006, report evidence supporting this possibility). Thus, people with more internalized sources of meaning and value may be able to manage their anxiety in ways that do not require rigid fetishism.

Becker's analysis shows that the psychological investment in enemy figures reflects an impoverished behavioral repertoire – the sense that one's powers to act in the world are crippled or blocked. Ultimately people should be encouraged to cultivate increasingly complex and flexible conceptions of reality and themselves, even if this means accepting that feelings of meaninglessness will always be a part of this reality. In point of fact, contemplating those aspects of life that might make it seem meaningless need not always lead to rigidly defensive responses.

Some recent work suggests that deeper conscious recognition of existentially threatening outcomes can actually foster greater attention to intrinsic values, potentially leading to some of the positive outcomes associated with such a focus. Drawing on the post-traumatic growth literature, Cozzolino and colleagues (2004) have conducted a series of studies indicating that a more open and in-depth confrontation with the idea of life's finality can inspire greater attention to self-transcendent values and goals. Future research might similarly find that encouraging a focused consideration of chaos and meaninglessness may eliminate the need to defend against those existential realities by creating enemies and scapegoats.

Of course, sustained concentration on thoughts of chaos and potentially lethal catastrophes would likely interfere with the thousands of routine acts that are required to simply navigate the social and physical world every day. Still, the possible benefits of a more honest acknowledgement of life's potential inherent meaninglessness are worth exploring. As M. Douglas (1966) and others have noted, whole cultural realms of endeavor – such as art – have developed largely as “safe” zones in which individuals can temporarily contemplate and engage with the potential absurdities and hardships of existence, as well as life's inherent complexity and resistance to clear interpretation. By fostering widespread participation in such educational and reflective pursuits, we may help change people's psychological relationship to their own relative powerlessness, and lead them to sources of strength without the crutch of their enemies.

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