



The emotional roots of conspiratorial perceptions, system justification, and belief in the paranormal



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Uncertain emotions activate a need to imbue the world with order and structure.
- They increase government defense and belief in conspiracies and the paranormal.
- Only the uncertainty of emotions and not their valence affects compensatory control.

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ABSTRACT

We predicted that experiencing emotions that reflect uncertainty about the world (e.g., worry, surprise, fear, hope), compared to certain emotions (e.g., anger, happiness, disgust, contentment), would activate the need to imbue the world with order and structure across a wide range of compensatory measures. To test this hypothesis, three experiments orthogonally manipulated the uncertainty and the valence of emotions. Experiencing uncertain emotions increased defense of government (Experiment 1) and led people to embrace conspiracies and the paranormal (Experiment 2). Self-affirmation eliminated the effects of uncertain emotions on compensatory control (Experiment 3). Across all experiments, the valence of the emotions had no main effects on compensatory control and never interacted with the uncertainty of emotions. These studies establish a link between the experience of emotions and the desire for structure.

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Introduction

"It's not the despair, Laura. I can take the despair. It's the hope [I can't stand]."

[—John Cleese in the movie *Clockwise* (1986)]

Hope and despair have little in common. Hope is a positive emotion that holds out the possibility that events will turn out well. Despair is a negative emotion, where one feels trapped in an inescapable and futile state. Yet the above quote suggests that despair may at times be preferable to hope. Despite being relentlessly negative, despair offers one thing that hope does not: certainty. Although their valence differs, hope, worry, surprise and fear share a common thread and threat: they all reflect a phenomenological feeling of uncertainty about the world.

It has long been known that people experiencing uncertainty engage in processes intended to reduce that uncertainty (e.g., Clary & Tesser, 1983; Hastie, 1984; Kelley, 1973; Lerner, 1980; Louis, 1980). We propose that emotions which embody an underlying appraisal of uncertainty about the world will instigate processes of compensatory control, e.g., attempts to regain a sense of perceived control over the uncertain landscape. When people are gripped in the emotional vise of uncertainty, regardless of the valence of that emotion, they will engage in mental gymnastics to imbue the world with order — from putting faith in external sources of control like the government (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008) to seeing illusory patterns, i.e., identifying a coherent and meaningful interrelationship among a set of unrelated stimuli (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

The current research not only establishes that the certainty of an emotion matters more than its valence in triggering compensatory control processes, but also resolves a critical theoretical question — does the experience of uncertainty about the world produce the same effects as lacking control? As we detail below, this is an important question because although uncertainty and lack of control are often correlated, they are also conceptually distinct. We seek to provide a clear understanding

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of the connection between uncertainty and lacking control by showing that emotions which embody an underlying appraisal of uncertainty will instigate processes of compensatory control.

Compensatory control and uncertainty

People experience a lack of control when they believe that they cannot direct, control, or influence events or others (Kelly, 1955; Perkins, 1968; Presson & Benassi, 1996; Seligman, 1975, 1976; Skinner, 1995; White, 1959). A number of findings have shown that when people experience a lack of control they seek to regain a sense of control perceptually (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009) by seeking and seeing structure.

Thus, people who lack control often respond by seeking structure in the world around them. One of the most fundamental compensatory processes available is the perception of patterns – i.e., identifying a coherent and meaningful interrelationship among a set of stimuli (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008) – both the discovery of true patterns (Proulx & Heine, 2009), and illusory ones (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Whitson and Galinsky found that lacking control led people to perceive imaginary figures in visual static, form superstitious connections, and construct conspiratorial links. Subsequent research has also found similar effects with regard to horoscopes (Wang, Whitson, & Menon, 2012). Other research has found compensatory control to manifest itself through the emphasis of external sociocultural forms that impose structure, such as the support for extant governmental arrangements and greater belief in a controlling, interventionist god (Kay, Moscovitch, & Laurin, 2010; Kay et al., 2008, 2009; Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008).

A unified quality of these sources of structure – whether images in static, defense of government, or conspiratorial beliefs – is that they provide perceptions of stability and order in the world. Though perceiving structure does not directly provide perceivers with greater control, a view of the world as ordered and stable does minimize perceptions of randomness and chaos; this in turn suggests that the benefits provided by structure-seeking may also make it appealing to individuals experiencing emotions that are derived from being uncertain about what is happening or what is to come. By seeing order and structure in the world, people can engage with the world and pursue their goals rather than retreat from it (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014).

Personal versus external uncertainty

Uncertainty occurs when people do not understand what has caused a situation they are in, how the factors currently within a situation are interacting, or how events will play out going forward. Essentially, people are uncertain when they do not understand what is happening now or what will happen next – when they cannot predict things or know with complete confidence what will happen. As a result, the experience of uncertainty is threatening because humans have the need to view the world as essentially nonrandom (Lerner, 1980).

The type of uncertainty we just described has been called external uncertainty or uncertainty about the world. Adding another layer of conceptual richness to our analysis is previous research examining compensatory responses to *personal* uncertainty. That research has observed a robust tendency for people to zealously affirm their already held beliefs and ideologies following personal uncertainty inductions, in essence shoring up the self-clarity and conviction needed to continue to approach important goals in the face of threat (e.g., McGregor & Marigold, 2003; McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001). Notably, this is distinct from the type of compensatory response we are predicting: a coping response characterized not by a strengthening of whatever worldview one already holds, but a unidirectional preference for external sources of structure. To understand why our prediction differs from related past research, it is important to realize that while uncertainty is a broad term, it can reflect very different experiences. And while all types of uncertainty may trigger similar neurocognitive

and affective reactions (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012), the way the individual down-regulates this threat can vary as a function of what ultimately caused it (Jonas et al., 2014; Shepherd, Kay, Landau, & Keefer, 2011; Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997).

Researchers interested in establishing a link between personal uncertainty and personal zeal were careful to trigger uncertainty via a specific type of self-relevant concern: issues of “who are we?” or “what do we stand for?” Manipulations used in this research had participants engage in activities or recollections that were designed to call into question their sense of self-consistency, the coherence of their values, or the worth of their goals (a collection of constructs sometimes referred to as “self-integrity”; McGregor et al., 2001). For example, participants have been asked to think about how much their identity has changed over time or to consider conflicting values or goals they hold.

This is in contrast to what we are interested in and what we manipulate here. Our manipulations are not designed to create a sense of self-consistency, self-clarity, or self-coherence. Instead, we ask participants to recall emotions that can only occur if people are experiencing some degree of uncertainty surrounding issues of orderliness or predictability – what we referred to above as external uncertainty or uncertainty about the world. To experience hope, surprise, fear, or worry is, in essence, to not be perfectly certain about what the future holds or what will happen to you. While one could, in theory, feel *surprised* about the lack of consistency in their own attitudes or feel *hopeful* that they will achieve self-clarity, these types of emotions are much more clearly tied to predictability (i.e., world uncertainty) than self-clarity or self-coherence (i.e., personal uncertainty). Thus, for the remainder of the paper, we will use “uncertainty” to mean “world-uncertainty”.

Emotional valence, uncertainty, and structure-seeking

We next discuss how particular emotions might be associated with a greater or lesser sense of uncertainty. According to appraisal theory, emotions differ in their appraisal-tendencies, which have been defined as reflecting the core meaning of an event that elicits a particular emotion (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Initially, the appraisal-tendencies of emotions were categorized only by valence. For example, positive emotions consistently increase the use of general knowledge constructs, reduce systematic processing, and increase heuristic processing (Bless, 2000; Hirt, Melton, McDonald, & Harackiewicz, 1996; Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

However, research has moved beyond valence to distinguish appraisal-characteristics at a more fine-grained level (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Smith and Ellsworth noted that appraisals also differ on the key dimension of certainty. Evidence has emerged that the certainty appraisal of an emotion can often have a greater psychological effect than its valence. Lerner and Keltner (2000, 2001) predicted that positively-valenced emotions would encourage subsequent optimism; however, they found that although fear (a negatively-valenced, low-certainty emotion) reduced optimism, anger (a negatively-valenced, high-certainty emotion) increased it. Similarly, Tiedens and Linton (2001) found that an emotion's certainty more than its valence determined whether people engaged in heuristic versus systematic processing.

This past research suggests that uncertain emotions increase systematic processing (Tiedens & Linton, 2001). The current research proposes a more precise effect of emotions associated with uncertainty – they activate compensatory control processes and the desire for structure. Thus, we suggest that research showing a link from uncertain emotions to systematic processing is encompassed by the broader idea that uncertain emotions lead people to seek control and structure. Sometimes systematic processing is the route to structure. But past work has found that other forms of structure seeking, such as superstitions and belief in the paranormal, tend to consist of heuristic connections (Rogers, Davis, & Fisk, 2009). Similarly, seeing government as legitimate does not involve systematic processing but does provide

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