

The Self and Intergroup Attitudes: Connecting “Fragile” Personal and Collective Self-Concepts

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## INTRODUCTION

But the truth is, is that, our challenge is to get people persuaded that we can make progress when there's not evidence of that in their daily lives...And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations (Barack Obama, April 6, 2008).

In this much-maligned comment by Obama during a fundraiser early in his Presidential campaign, he hints at a general perception that individuals who are alienated or frustrated due to their circumstances may turn to certain group identities and corresponding attitudes in an effort to feel better about their situation. Is this the case? If so, are certain individuals more likely to confront the frustrations that sometimes encourage hostility and antipathy toward other groups? Or, are group identities and intergroup attitudes driven by a qualitatively different process than personal goals and individual frustration? We suggest the answer is a qualified “yes” to the former question – specifically, it may be those individuals who pursue certain self-concept related goals that are most likely to exemplify the kind of person described in the Obama quote.

In this chapter, we explore how the nature of the self-concept and personal goal pursuit influence interpersonal and intergroup perceptions, both at the individual and collective levels of self-construal. More specifically, we define what we call the “fragile” self (e.g., Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2008) and discuss its potential characteristics within both personal and group identities. Such fragile self-concepts are defensive by nature and require protection and enhancement in response to perceived threat. After discussing how attitudes toward others (and outgroups in particular) can serve an individual's salient goals when threatened, we introduce a new model of functional self-regulation through group identity and intergroup attitudes. Finally, we present new data that begin to test the general structure of the model, including the common elements of “fragile” personal and collective identities across two important groups (nation and religion).

Throughout this discussion of the self and intergroup attitudes, we emphasize the commonality in goals across various constructs that have been used to assess the functioning of both personal and social identity, including individual narcissism vs. self-esteem, nationalism vs. patriotism, and religious fundamentalism vs. more open-minded and inclusive religious attachment. In general, we attempt to demonstrate that identity is never a unitary construction. Just as we should avoid concentrating solely on one's level of personal self-esteem (i.e., is it also narcissistic or "fragile"?), we should also avoid concentrating solely on one's level of identification with a social group (i.e., what functions are served by the particular identity?). For example, national identity may be more or less nationalistic (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989), while religious identity may be more or less fundamentalist (e.g., Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). In the end, the important goals that are pursued and the functions that group identities come to serve for the individual, above and beyond level of self-esteem or group identification, may have important implications for intergroup attitudes and relations between groups.

We focus in particular on goals and beliefs relevant to narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), such as superiority, competitiveness, entitlement, and recognition, versus more universal and adaptive motives related to acceptance, belonging, and affiliation to illustrate this perspective. Our main thesis is that "fragile" selves, united by commonalities in content, structure, and goal-pursuit across levels, leave individuals vulnerable to self-concept threat, which may be defended against through hostile attitudes directed at outgroups. Thus, what unites the narcissist and the nationalist, for example, is the common pursuit of superiority goals and the use of the national group to further such goals, often resulting in hostility toward other groups that may be perceived as threatening that superiority.

#### WHAT IS A FRAGILE SELF?

The starting point for the model and research presented in this chapter is that the self is a construct that connects the individual to his or her social environment through motivated and strategic interpersonal behavior. We argue that much of our social behavior is in the service of *interpersonal* self-regulation (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2008). It is an idiosyncratic use of the term “self-regulation”, in that we mean seeking and interpreting interpersonal feedback that protects and maintains desired self-conceptions and related self-esteem. It is the individual’s self-concept or identity that is being “regulated” through interaction with others, as well as the interpretation of others’ reactions to them. The key question in this view asks, how does the individual use the interpersonal (and even intergroup) environment to assist in the process of defining and constructing the self and affirming important beliefs and goals?

We contend that “self-regulation” processes are triggered when a social cue signals that impending events are self-relevant. The self-system is far from a passive entity but, rather, works by actively operating on information received from the environment (reactive regulation), while also actively manipulating the information it is exposed to (proactive regulation). The important dynamic interaction between self-knowledge and self-regulation is linked by a hierarchical structure of motives and goals that give meaning to the specific elements of self-knowledge, and direct the situations that are ultimately chosen, the strategies and actions that are pursued, and the standards of progress (success/failure) that are monitored (e.g., Cantor, 1990; Dweck, Higgins, & Grant-Pillow, 2003).

Thus, a central element of self-regulation is the strategic use of the social environment to garner support for one’s desired self-conceptions. All people require social feedback to support their self-concept and self-esteem and, at times, actively seek such feedback. For many individuals, the regulation of the self through interpersonal negotiation is adaptive (Hardin &

Higgins, 1996; Higgins, 1996; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Swann, 1983), in that it builds predictability and positive social connectedness. In some instances, however, individuals come to rely too much on others for their self-definition, such that their self-worth is defined solely by obtaining recognition, regard, approval, and/or acceptance from others (see also Crocker & Park, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003).

The extent to which people rely on social feedback to sustain their self-concepts is a function of whether the self is secure versus fragile. Again, self-esteem is a central element because it serves as a marker of those with fragile self-concepts (see Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003). Fragile self-esteem is self-esteem that is contingent on meeting external or introjected standards, or too focused on a particular domain of importance. Moreover, it is clear that individuals with fragile or insecure self-esteem are striving to reduce their insecurity by eliciting feedback from others that support their self-conceptions. However, people seek confirmation of any number of characteristics and competencies. In our view, it is the specific self-domain for which one seeks affirmation that impacts intergroup attitudes and behavior. For example, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) list a number of domains upon which a person's self-esteem might be contingent, including social approval, academic achievement, virtuousness, and competition (which we interpret as relative superiority concerns). Thus, a person whose self-esteem is contingent on social approval is motivated to have others regard them in an accepting way, while a person whose self-esteem is contingent on superiority is motivated to have others regard them in an admiring way.

Building on the ideas that people with fragile self-concepts use their interpersonal relations to pursue social goals, we have asked two central questions in the present research. First, do different social goals differentially influence people's intergroup attitudes and

behaviors? Second, can we identify those individuals who are most likely to respond to threats to the self by endorsing negative outgroup attitudes and hostile intergroup behavior?

*The Fragile Personal Self: Narcissism*

Our research suggests that individual differences in narcissism might serve as a personal marker of goals and behaviors that lead to the employment of hostile intergroup attitudes in the service of the self. Narcissists possess the characteristics of a) grandiosity, self-importance, and perceived uniqueness; b) preoccupations with fantasies of unlimited success, wealth, beauty, and power; c) exhibitionism and attention seeking; and d) emotional lability, particularly in response to criticism or threat to self-esteem, manifesting in feelings of rage, shame, or humiliation (*DSM-IV-TR*, American Psychiatric Association, 2000). According to the *DSM-IV-TR*, narcissists are also prone to interpersonal difficulties that likely are attributable to their own interpersonal style. With regard to self-esteem, the *DSM-IV-TR* specifies that "self-esteem is almost invariably very fragile; the person may be preoccupied with how well he or she is doing and how well he or she is regarded by others" (p.350).

The key point of our research is that it is useful to characterize narcissism as a set of processes concerned with interpersonal *self*-regulation (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt & Morf, 2005; Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2008, in press). There is an accumulating and broad research base supporting this model of narcissism, though most relevant to the present discussion is a set of findings that suggest that 1) the narcissist's self-esteem is positive but fragile, 2) narcissists' self-esteem is more reactive to social feedback than is the self-esteem of less narcissistic individuals, 3) narcissists pursue social, interaction goals that involve seeking admiration and superiority as opposed to approval and acceptance, and 4) narcissists are more likely than others

to respond with hostility and aggression when their selves are threatened (see Rhodewalt & Peterson, in press, for a review).

Most pertinent to the present discussion is the fact that narcissists are not interested in just any positive feedback; but are interested in feedback that *affirms* their superiority. For example, Raskin and colleagues (1991) assessed the relations between narcissism and what they termed “true” self-esteem versus defensive self-enhancement. Defensive self-enhancement was further subdivided into grandiosity, or the need to be admired, and social desirability, or the need to be liked. Narcissism (as assessed through the NPI; Emmons, 1987) correlated positively with true self-esteem and grandiosity, but was uncorrelated with social desirability. In other words, narcissists need to be admired but not necessarily liked. Additionally, on Crocker and Wolfe’s (2001) Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, the only domain on which narcissists consistently report basing most of their self-worth is the general domain of “competition” (Rhodewalt, Tragakis, & Peterson, 2003). Finally, narcissists report feeling most socially integrated when they feel admired and influential in a group (Rhodewalt, 2005).

Given this interpersonal orientation, it is not surprising that narcissism has been linked to hostility and aggression when such individuals perceive that their selves have been threatened. . In general, narcissists hold negative evaluations of others, especially when those others threaten the narcissist in some way (Kernis & Sun, 1994; Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993). Ruiz, Smith and Rhodewalt (2001) projected measures of hostility and narcissism onto the interpersonal circumplex (Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990) and found that both hostility and narcissism were associated with low affiliation, but that only narcissism was associated with high dominance. Most importantly, Bushman and Baumeister (1998; see also Twenge & Campbell, 2003) showed that narcissists respond with greater aggression when threatened. Thus, there is clear evidence

that in response to threat at the interpersonal level, narcissists respond with greater hostility and aggression, and that such responses are linked to a desire to be viewed as superior.

*The Fragile Collective Self: Nationalism and Fundamentalism*

As can be seen through the example of narcissism, one way in which the self can be “fragile” is if it embodies an over-riding concern with being better than other people (relative superiority and competition). Superiority goals necessitate constant vigilance in the social environment and leave the individual vulnerable to self-esteem threats, as it is difficult to always match up to others in the way that one desires (while also receiving the desired public recognition for this perceived “greatness”). These threats elicit defensive self-regulatory behaviors, including hostility, derogation, and aggression. However, this concern with relative superiority, dominance, and competition is not unique to the personal self. Goals involving the superiority of one’s group can also leave the collective self (or social identity, Tajfel & Turner, 1986) “fragile” and vulnerable (e.g., Brewer, 2001; Jackson & Smith, 1999). For example, Brewer (1999) proposed several criteria for how “ingroup love” can cross the threshold and come to breed hate and antagonism toward other groups, including perceptions of one’s group as superior and sensitivity to threats from outside the group. Similarly, Eidelson and Eidelson (2003) described five “dangerous ideas”, or core beliefs that encourage conflict between groups, which can be seen both individually and as shared beliefs among group members. Included in this list are convictions of superiority and entitlement, vulnerability to threat, and distrust coupled with attribution of hostile intent to others. Both authors focus on a sense of superiority and entitlement that is attached to the group identity (see also Struch and Schwartz, 1989). It is important that realistic conflict (Sherif & Sherif, 1953) is not necessary, though social competition for a relatively positive evaluation of one’s own group is crucial (Mummendey &



Wenzel, 1999). These characteristics of a “fragile”, defensive group identity are very similar to the characteristics commonly displayed in narcissists, as described above.

How do such superiority concerns manifest themselves in important group identities? Relating specifically to the national group, a great deal of research in both psychology and political science has focused on the distinction between patriotism and nationalism (e.g., Druckman, 1994; Federico et al., 2005; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Li & Brewer, 2004; Peterson, 2008a; Schatz et al., 1999; Weaver, 2006; Worchel & Coutant, 1997). In terms of national loyalty, patriotism corresponds to selfless ingroup love, while nationalism incorporates a selfish superiority and dominance associated with intergroup hostility (Worchel & Coutant, 1997). This is reflected in scales designed to measure nationalism that emphasize superiority of the national group and dominance over other countries (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989) as well as “blind patriotism” (i.e., unquestioning support, Schatz et al., 1999), which introduces certainty concerns along with relative superiority. In other words, nationalists may also use the exclusivity of a narrow definition of what it means to be a member of the group (“American”, for example) to promote their superiority, while also addressing epistemic concerns by keeping diversity out (Peterson, 2008a). Not surprisingly, nationalism has been associated with more “hawkish” attitudes toward war (e.g., Federico et al., 2005), intolerance for diversity (Li & Brewer, 2004), and hostile attitudes toward various groups, including immigrants and neighboring countries (e.g., de Figueiredo & Elkins, 2003; Peterson, 2008a).

In relation to religious identity, there is also a long history in psychology of attempts to differentiate a more secure and selfless attachment to one’s religious group from an identification that is as much about the self and excluding others who are different (e.g., Allport & Ross, 1967; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Batson & Burris, 1994; Pergament, 2002; Ryan, Rigby, & King,

1993; Ruthven, 2004). For example, Allport & Ross (1967) made the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity, and found that those who are religious for more extrinsic (or selfish) reasons tended to be the most prejudiced. More recently, the most common construct used to distinguish a defensive (or “fragile”) type of religiosity is religious fundamentalism (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; 2004). Religious fundamentalists may be best characterized as defensively certain about the “rightness” of their chosen religious beliefs. Other researchers have attempted to show that this defensive certainty also masks (or enables) a belief in the superiority of the religious group and its beliefs (e.g., Peterson, 2008c). Like nationalism, fundamentalism has been related to increased hostility toward outgroups, including other religions (e.g., Altemeyer, 2003; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999) and those whose lifestyles may challenge the beliefs of the ingroup (e.g., homosexuals; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Hunsberger, 1996).

Recent research has begun to explore the connection between the defensive personal self and its implications for the collective self. For example, individuals who tend to see themselves as superior to others in general also tend to see their groups as superior to other groups (Gramzow & Gaertner, 2005; Hornsey, 2003). In a study by Stangor and Thompson (2002), a composite “need for self-enhancement” measure that included narcissism was one of the best predictors of negative attitudes toward outgroups. A recent set of studies (Peterson, White, & Rhodewalt, 2008a) found that narcissists were more likely to project the characteristics of an important ingroup onto a higher-order category containing both the ingroup and outgroup. In this way, one’s group is perceived as more representative of the inclusive category relative to the other group, a form of collective superiority (Wenzel et al., 2003). Finally, Peterson (2008a) has demonstrated that narcissism (especially entitlement beliefs) is moderately correlated with

nationalism (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989) and negative attitudes toward immigrants.

Other writers (e.g., Weaver, 2006) have described nationalism as a type of “national narcissism”.

Following Peterson and colleagues (2008a), we argue that such evidence suggests that the narcissist may “transfer” the beliefs and goals of the personal self to important group identities. Moreover, we propose that narcissists employ the group identity in the service of defensive self-regulation to verify and defend important aspects of the personal self, especially when threatened. That is, people in general and narcissists in particular may call on important group identities (or adopt new groups) to defend against personal self-threats, and this process may be especially attractive to those with “fragile” goals and beliefs

#### *Intergroup Attitudes as Defensive Self-Regulation*

It is clear from the discussion above of “fragile” selves – including narcissism, nationalism, and religious fundamentalism – that perceived threats to the self-concept can initiate defensive responses including hostility and negative evaluations of other individuals and groups. Indeed, increasing amounts of research evidence demonstrate that threats to self-esteem may encourage intergroup bias and discrimination (e.g., Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Jordan et al., 2003, 2005; McGregor et al., 2001; Shah, Kruglanski, & Thompson, 1998), as well as derogation of outgroup members (e.g., Crocker et al., 1987; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Kernis et al., 2005). For example, Crocker and colleagues (1987) found that high self-esteem participants were more likely to derogate an outgroup member following threat, using both real and experimentally-created groups. In a similar study, Fein and Spencer (1997) demonstrated the motivational aspect of such outgroup derogation by showing that this response was mitigated when participants were given an opportunity to self-affirm important values following the threat. More recently, Jordan and colleagues (2005) found that a certain subset of high self-esteem individuals who also had

low implicit self-esteem (Greenwald & Farnham, 2001) were most likely to discriminate against an outgroup member following the threat. Kernis and colleagues (2005) found a similar effect when manipulating implicit self-esteem experimentally. Other research speaks to the defensive nature of this combination of high explicit and low implicit self-esteem, and also relates it to narcissism (Jordan et al., 2003). Finally, recent research by Peterson, White, and Rhodewalt (2008b) on policy attitudes involving illegal immigration, terrorism, and same-sex marriage found that hostile attitudes and support for discriminatory policy was highly related to perceived personal threat from members of the outgroups involved in such issues (illegal Mexican immigrants, Arabs/Muslims, and same-sex couples). This perceived personal threat was also strongly related to both nationalism and religious fundamentalism, and accounted for a significant portion of the variance in the relationship of these constructs with hostile attitudes and policy support.

#### CONNECTING THE PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE: A FUNCTIONAL MODEL OF GROUP IDENTITY AND INTERGROUP ATTITUDES

With the growing emphasis on newer “process” models of personality (e.g., Cantor, 1990; Mischel & Shoda, 1995) and the self-concept (Rhodewalt & Peterson, 2008) that emphasize goals and characteristic patterns of pursuing those goals in different situations, it may be fruitful to start thinking about group identity in a similar way. For example, the group may be viewed as an outlet, or “situation”, in which individuals can characteristically pursue goals, with differential outcomes for intergroup relations depending on the nature of those goals. Just like any other situation a person might find themselves in, the group context can be seen as an “if...then” contingency (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) that allows full expression of the individual’s personal beliefs, goals, and motives. In this way, the self is dynamically involved in the

situations and groups we find ourselves in, as well as situations and groups we choose to seek out. In fact, many of these new, more functional, models of the self and personality (e.g., Snyder & Cantor, 1998) emphasize the role that goals play in the expression of our personality, and this is often reflected in the situations that we choose (i.e., places to live, work, socialize, and possibly groups to join and identify with). Thus, a group may serve as an affordance that is chosen and/or constructed by the individual, an outlet for self-expression and self-regulation toward important goals.

Extending the description of the fragile self outlined earlier, group identities may provide a means to address the personal threat (albeit indirectly) by shifting to a different domain that is still congruent with the threatened goals and beliefs (Tesser, 2000). In other words, the group identity could facilitate defensive self-regulation and help restore self-esteem. If goals are threatened and self-esteem falls in the interpersonal domain, it may be possible to “shift” up to the collective level (to *self-categorize* in relation to an important group; e.g., Turner et al., 1994) and mount a defense in the intergroup domain (i.e., through negative and hostile attitudes toward competing or threatening groups). It is noteworthy that all people pursue important goals interpersonally, though we often differ on the content and nature of our goals. If group identity can aid self-regulation, this would be expected regardless of the specific nature of the goals involved. People should look for groups that are consistent with their self-beliefs and goals, and construe established identities in a manner consistent with these (e.g., Swann et al., 2004; Wright et al., 2002). Thus, the expectation is that everyone uses groups to both self-verify and pursue personal goals.

But, more interesting predictions come into play if the personal goal is to protect a fragile self. That is because the goals and beliefs associated with a “fragile” self tend to contain

objectives (i.e., grandiose, unrealistic, concerned with superiority and competition) that leave the individual vulnerable to threat in the interpersonal environment. When considered in relation to the self-regulatory potential of group identities, this has several important implications beyond the more general process. First, the reasons driving such individuals to pursue a certain group identity are expected to be similar to those beliefs and goals that often cause problems interpersonally. This should not only influence the nature of their group identity, but would also leave the group identity open to threats similar to those often encountered in relation to the personal identity. Second, since these individuals are more vulnerable to threat and use defensive self-regulatory strategies more in general, they should be more likely to turn to such defensive group identities and attitudes if they effectively address personal threat. Finally, the defensively-oriented identity should allow a transfer of strategies often used in the interpersonal domain to the intergroup domain. Thus, threats to personal superiority often associated with interpersonal aggression could translate into derogation and hostility toward a threatening outgroup in a context that affords such behavior.

We offer a *functional* approach to identify how an individual's personal goals connect to the group in the identification process and influence the nature of intra- and intergroup behavior (Peterson, 2008b). The functional approach employed here calls on both classic analyses of the functions served by attitudes (e.g., Katz, 1960; Snyder & DeBono, 1989) and important motives that many have proposed as "key" to group identity within the social identity approach (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Hogg, 2000; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Swann et al., 2004; Wright et al., 2002). For example, Katz (1960) proposed four main functions that attitudes may serve: instrumental-adjustive, knowledge, value-expressive, and ego-defensive. Importantly, he asserted that the same attitude may serve different functions for different people, that some attitudes may serve a

variety of functions for the same person, and that the strength of these functions tends to differ across people.

Just as attitudes serve important functions for people, research has begun to show that social group identity can also serve a variety of important functions for individuals. Some have taken a “primary” motive approach, where one particular motive is isolated and studied as the basic and most important reason for group identification. Motives that have been proposed include self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), self-verification (Pinel & Swann, 2000; Swann et al., 2004), self-expansion (Wright et al., 2002), uncertainty reduction and closure (Hogg, 2000; Kruglanski et al., 2006), meaning and the management of existential terror (Greenberg et al., 1997), the need to belong (Baumeister et al., 2000; Leary & Baumeister, 1995), and the striving for an optimal balance between inclusion and distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). While all of these motives are important, we feel that this importance may vary across individuals and groups.

Others have attempted to classify certain types of groups according to the common functions they tend to serve (e.g., Aharpour & Brown, 2002; Deaux et al., 1999; Johnson et al., 2006). For example, Deaux and colleagues (1999) generated a variety of possible functions and, based on prior attempts to classify a large number of groups into various “clusters” (Deaux et al., 1995), assessed the functions in several known groups to compare the relative emphasis on each function by type of group. They found that certain groups, on average, tend to be higher on certain functions than groups from other “clusters”. Rather than arguing that one function is primary regardless of the group, these researchers are saying that groups generally differ as to the functions they serve for members. This is akin to arguing that certain attitudes are only held for certain functions. Even though some groups may be more likely to serve certain functions on average, this overlooks the potential for individual variability within most groups in terms of

function(s) served. We feel it is equally important to recognize variability within groups that might help distinguish more adaptive loyalty from defensive forms associated with intergroup hostility.

For the purposes of this project, we developed a conception of the functions of group identity that is more in line with previous work on the functions of attitudes. Individuals may differ in the extent to which their group identity serves any given function, and the same identity can serve different functions for different group members (and multiple functions for any one member). Additionally, with our emphasis on the importance of the “fragile” self to intergroup processes, we also felt it was important to distinguish a function of group identity that would be in line with such goals as superiority, competition, and dominance (i.e., similar to Katz’ original “ego-defensive” function). Certain ways of construing group identity may help a “fragile” individual feel more superior, especially if personal feelings of superiority are constantly threatened or disconfirmed. Thus, an ego-defensive function is quite similar to what has been proposed thus far: the group identity serves as an outlet for threatened goals and beliefs involving relative superiority, and may be turned to in situations when such goals and beliefs are in need of defense or affirmation. Group identity is thus added to the “arsenal” of defensive self-regulatory strategies at the individual’s disposal (Tesser, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

Initial evidence for a defensive function of group identity was provided by Peterson (2008c), who followed supporters of a university football team over the course of the season. He assessed their reasons for following the team (akin to group identity functions) prior to the season and found that those emphasizing more competitive reasons based on dominance and esteem factors were more emotionally reactive (pride, anger, shame) after wins and losses – which support or threaten this function – and also significantly more hostile toward a rival



university. In contrast, those who followed the team for more social and affiliative reasons did not display such reactivity and hostility. This competitive-esteem function of the sports team may have been defensive, as the likelihood of endorsing such group-level motives was significantly related to personal narcissism and entitlement. We attempted to build off of these findings, applying our ideas to more consequential group identities (nation and religion) and related attitudes, and using a more precise tool to assess our proposed identity functions.

### *Tests of the Model*

Based on previous research we developed a scale to measure five broad group functions: verification, certainty-meaning, expansion, belonging-affiliation, and superiority-defense.<sup>2</sup> The Functions of Group Identity Scale is a 26-item scale that presents participants with a list of potential functions that they *perceive* a given group identity may serve. Items were generated *a priori* to represent the five function categories above, though subsequent factor analysis led us to combine most of the verification and certainty-meaning items into a single *verification-certainty* function. Such a pattern is very consistent with Swann's (1983) original conception of self-verification as a means to achieve a sense of certainty and control in one's social world. Examples of items on each subscale include "support for beliefs about myself", "sense of certainty about myself and others" (*verification-certainty* factor); "assistance in the pursuit of personal goals", "gaining perspectives beyond my own" (*expansion* factor); "connections with other people", "inclusion and acceptance" (*belonging-affiliation* factor); and "status in relation to others who are different", "sense of importance" (*superiority-defense* factor). The scale was constructed such that different groups could be substituted in the instructions. All four function subscales demonstrated adequate internal consistency across both groups assessed in the studies below (nation  $\alpha = .87-.93$ ; religion  $\alpha = .83-.93$ ).

We then used the Functions of Group Identity Scale in two survey studies that differed only in the group identity assessed and the outgroups that were targeted. Using online surveys, students ( $N = 297$  in Study 1,  $N = 210$  in Study 2) first completed several questionnaires on various personal constructs, including self-esteem, narcissism, competitiveness, need for closure, and need to belong. Then, in a separate survey completed some days later, these participants completed several more questionnaires about their group identity, perceived identity functions, and attitudes toward three outgroups relevant to that particular identity. For national identity (Study 1), the assigned outgroups were Canadians, Iranians, and illegal immigrants. In addition to the general identity questions, participants completed assessments of their nationalism vs. patriotism (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Schatz et al., 1999). For religious identity (Study 2), the assigned outgroups were Catholics, Muslims, and “homosexuals”. Similarly, in addition to the general identity questions, participants completed assessments of their degree of fundamentalism (e.g., Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Batson & Ventis, 1982; Peterson, 2008b). For each outgroup in both studies, we also assessed perceptions of threat, competition, and uncertainty, in order to determine a) if certain goals, functions, and identity distinctions were more susceptible to such threats, and b) the role that these factors may play in stimulating outgroup hostility.

The main purpose of these two studies was to gather a large amount of data in relation to two important identities, and begin to test the relationships proposed in the functional model. Thus, it was hypothesized that narcissism (mostly due to an overriding concern with relative superiority and competition) would connect to both the national and religious group through a defensive function that allows such individuals to use the group for their own superiority. It was further hypothesized that such an orientation to one's groups would leave the narcissist

vulnerable to threat in the intergroup arena, encouraging hostile and negative attitudes in defense of the fragile self-concept (personal and collective). On the other hand, it was not expected that narcissists would pursue group identities for more affiliative reasons involving connections to other people, though this type of function was predicted to be the most adaptive for intergroup relations. We present the results of each study separately, focusing on the hypotheses above and the connection between personal and collective fragility in each. We will then briefly discuss the similarities and differences in results between the two groups.

## NATIONAL IDENTITY AND INTERGROUP ATTITUDES (STUDY 1)

### *Narcissism, Competitiveness, and National Identity Functions*

As previous research has shown, narcissism was significantly related to competitiveness ( $r = .42$ ). In most of the relationships that we looked at, narcissism and competitiveness predicted very similar outcomes in relation to group identity and intergroup attitudes, often with competitiveness being the stronger predictor. Additionally, in many cases, controlling for competitiveness significantly reduced narcissism's associations with the outcomes of interest. Thus, narcissists' concern with relative superiority and competition appears to account for much of the relationship between narcissism and both the "fragile" national identity elements and hostile attitudes toward relevant outgroups. Also consistent with prior research, narcissism was moderately correlated with self-esteem ( $r = .35$ ).<sup>3</sup>

Given that narcissism was associated with the personal goal of superiority, we next examined the relations between narcissism and the four group identity functions outlined by regressing all functions simultaneously on narcissism. Only the function of superiority-defense independently predicted narcissism ( $\beta = .28$ ). Self-esteem did not relate independently to any of the identity functions. In addition to the functions, we also examined narcissism's relationship

with nationalism and patriotism. Replicating previous research (e.g., Peterson, 2008a; Peterson, White, & Rhodewalt, 2008b), narcissism was a significant independent predictor of the defensive group identity (nationalism,  $\beta = .24$ ), but not the secure group identity (patriotism,  $\beta = .08$ ). On the other hand, self-esteem was significantly related to patriotism ( $\beta = .12$ ), but not nationalism ( $\beta = -.02$ ). Thus, our representation of a fragile personal self (narcissism) appears to connect to multiple aspects of a fragile national identity (superiority-defense identity function, nationalism) as hypothesized in the functional self-regulatory model.

#### *Narcissism and Intergroup Attitudes*

We assessed hostile attitudes toward several groups (Canadians, Iranians, and illegal immigrants) and also asked participants to rate how threatening they perceived the group to be and how uncertain that group makes them feel. Unless otherwise noted, the patterns were generally similar across the three outgroups. Thus, for the sake of brevity, we report below on general outgroup hostility (as well as perceived threat and uncertainty), based on a composite score of hostile attitudes toward each of the groups.

Narcissism independently predicted hostility toward all three outgroups ( $\beta = .17$ ). On the other hand, self-esteem tended to encourage more positive attitudes toward the other groups ( $\beta = -.16$ ). Narcissists also tended to perceive more threat ( $\beta = .14$ ) and uncertainty ( $\beta = .13$ ) in the intergroup context relative to their national identity, while self-esteem was negatively related to uncertainty ( $\beta = -.15$ ) and unrelated to perceived threat. Thus, narcissists perceive more threat and uncertainty from other groups, and they defend against these threats by derogating these groups. To fully test this idea, we also conducted a mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) to see if perceived threat and uncertainty accounted for a significant portion of the relationship between narcissism and outgroup hostility. Only perceived threat was a significant partial

mediator of this relationship (Sobel  $z = 2.23$ ,  $p < .05$ ; Sobel, 1982), with threat significantly predicting hostility ( $\beta = .45$ ) and narcissism's relationship significantly decreasing ( $\beta = .10$ ).

#### *National Identity Functions and Intergroup Attitudes*

Next, we tested the independent relationships of the national identity functions with intergroup hostility, as well as perceived threat and uncertainty from these groups (controlling for sex and political ideology). The superiority-defense function was consistently related to hostility toward the outgroups ( $\beta = .32$ ), as was the verification-certainty function ( $\beta = .24$ ). On the other hand, the belonging-affiliation function tended to promote more positive attitudes toward national outgroups ( $\beta = -.25$ ) relative to the other three functions. The expansion function was not related to intergroup hostility.

Additionally, the superiority-defense function was related to both general perceived threat ( $\beta = .26$ ) and general uncertainty ( $\beta = .22$ ) from outgroups. Verification-certainty independently predicted greater uncertainty in general ( $\beta = .35$ ), while belonging-affiliation predicted less uncertainty in general ( $\beta = -.28$ ). Testing for mediation, general perceived threat ( $\beta = .48$ ) was a significant partial mediator of the relationship between superiority-defense and intergroup hostility (Sobel  $z = 3.12$ ,  $p < .01$ ; superiority-defense  $\beta = .19$ ), and general uncertainty ( $\beta = .30$ ) was a significant partial mediator of the verification-certainty and hostility relationship (Sobel  $z = 2.23$ ,  $p < .01$ ; verification-certainty  $\beta = .13$ ). Thus, similar to narcissism, those who tend to base their national identity on a defensive superiority relative to the other functions also tend to display more hostility toward outgroups, and this can be seen in part as a defense against the perceived threat they are vulnerable to with such concerns. Further, consistent with the patterns displayed by the superiority-defense function (and verification-certainty), nationalism strongly predicted intergroup hostility ( $\beta = .64$ ), perceived threat ( $\beta = .44$ ), and uncertainty ( $\beta =$

.41). Consistent with the pattern of the belonging-affiliation function (and self-esteem), patriotism was negatively related to intergroup hostility ( $\beta = -.25$ ) and uncertainty ( $\beta = -.17$ ).

#### *Mediating Role of the Superiority-Defensive Function*

Finally, we attempted to connect the fragile personal and collective selves together by demonstrating that the tendency to endorse the superiority-defense identity function on the part of narcissists accounted for a significant portion of the subsequent relationships with nationalism, perceived threat, and intergroup hostility. In this way, we demonstrate in part that pursuing narcissistic goals involving relative superiority through the national group identity (by way of related identity functions) promotes a fragile national identity that is vulnerable to threat from outgroups and is defended against through hostile and derogatory attitudes.

First, we conducted a mediation analysis predicting nationalism by including all four identity functions in the analysis along with narcissism, self-esteem, and the other controls. The superiority-defense function ( $\beta = .33$ ) emerged here as a significant partial mediator, along with verification-certainty ( $\beta = .30$ ). The narcissism-nationalism relationship remained marginally significant ( $\beta = .10$ ), but was significantly diminished (Sobel  $z$ 's  $> 2.55$ ,  $p$ 's  $< .01$ ). Next, a similar analysis was conducted predicting general perceived threat. Once again, the superiority-defense function ( $\beta = .24$ ) emerged as a significant mediator, reducing narcissism's relationship to close to zero ( $\beta = .04$ ; Sobel  $z = 1.85$ ,  $p = .06$ ). Finally, the mediation analysis was carried out for general intergroup hostility. As predicted by the model, superiority-defense ( $\beta = .27$ ) emerged as a significant mediator of the narcissist's hostility, with the latter relationship reduced to a level below significance ( $\beta = .10$ ; Sobel  $z = 2.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

In summary, as predicted by our model, narcissism was related to nationalism, perceived threat in the intergroup context, and hostile intergroup attitudes, and much of this was accounted

for by such individuals' tendency to pursue personal goals involving relative superiority through their national identity. Certainty concerns also encouraged nationalism and intergroup hostility, though not to the extent of superiority. In contrast, personal self-esteem (independent of narcissism) and collective orientations involving affiliative concerns and patriotism appeared to be more adaptive in the intergroup context. We next attempted to see how these patterns would replicate within a religious group identity.

### RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND INTERGROUP ATTITUDES (STUDY 2)

All participants in Study 2 reported a religious affiliation of some kind (all identified to a certain extent with a religious group). The vast majority of the sample (70%) reported affiliation with the dominant religion of Utah, the Latter-Day Saints ("Mormons").

#### *Narcissism, Competitiveness, and Religious Identity Functions*

Once again, narcissism displayed a fairly strong relationship with competitiveness ( $r = .32$ ). As in the national group, most of the relationships we looked at showed similar patterns for both narcissism and competitiveness, and competitiveness carried the variance between narcissism and the identity and intergroup outcomes in some cases. As expected, narcissism and self-esteem were again highly correlated ( $r = .32$ ). The same controls were used as in the first study (see endnote 3).

Consistent with the national identity patterns in Study 1, narcissism primarily predicted higher levels on the superiority-defense function of religious identity ( $\beta = .24$ ), though was not related to any of the other three identity functions. Self-esteem was significantly related to the belonging-affiliation function ( $\beta = .16$ ). Surprisingly, narcissism was not related to religious fundamentalism. Thus, while narcissists within religious groups also pursue superiority goals through this identity, this does not manifest itself in a fundamentalist orientation.<sup>4</sup>

*Narcissism and Intergroup Attitudes*

Intergroup hostility, along with perceived threat and uncertainty, were assessed in the same manner as in Study 1, though in relation to different outgroups (Catholics, Muslims, and “homosexuals”). Again, unless otherwise noted, the patterns were relatively consistent across the three groups, and we report relationships using a general composite of the three ratings.

Narcissism once again independently predicted hostility toward all three outgroups ( $\beta = .17$ ), while self-esteem encouraged more positive attitudes ( $\beta = -.23$ ). Unlike Study 1, however, narcissism was not related to greater perceived threat or uncertainty in the intergroup context related to religious identity (nor was self-esteem). Thus, narcissists are more hostile toward outgroups relevant to their religious identity, but this does not appear to be the result of perceived threat or uncertainty in the self.

*Religious Identity Functions and Intergroup Attitudes*

The superiority-defense function of religious identity was also consistently related to hostility toward the three groups we assessed ( $\beta = .41$ ). On the other hand, the verification-certainty function tended to promote more positive attitudes toward religious outgroups ( $\beta = -.33$ ) relative to the other three functions, as did the belonging-affiliation function ( $\beta = -.18$ ). The expansion function was once again unrelated to intergroup hostility.

Additionally, the superiority-defense function predicted both general perceived threat ( $\beta = .27$ ) and general uncertainty ( $\beta = .31$ ) from the other groups. The verification-certainty function, however, independently predicted less perceived threat ( $\beta = -.25$ ) and uncertainty ( $\beta = -.37$ ). General uncertainty ( $\beta = .27$ ) also partially mediated the relationship between superiority-defense and intergroup hostility (Sobel  $z = 3.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ; superiority-defense  $\beta = .33$ ). Thus, as we saw above with national identity, those who tend to base their religious identity on a



defensive superiority relative to the other functions also tend to display more hostility toward outgroups, which in this context can be seen in part as a defense against personal uncertainty.

This is further evidence that group identities constructed in such a way tend to be fragile.

#### *Mediating Role of the Superiority-Defensive Function*

As in Study 1, we attempted to connect the fragile personal self represented by narcissism to fragile religious identity by way of superiority-defense functions and the use of hostile intergroup attitudes. Unlike Study 1, narcissism was not related to defensive identity orientation (fundamentalism in this case), nor was it related to perceived threat or uncertainty in the intergroup context. Thus, we proceeded to test the model's mediation predictions in relation to intergroup hostility. As predicted by the model, superiority-defense ( $\beta = .38$ ) once again emerged as a significant mediator of narcissistic intergroup hostility, reducing this effect to a level below significance ( $\beta = .09$ ; Sobel  $z = 2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

To recap, the results were not quite as straightforward for the functional self-regulatory model within religious identity. Narcissism was related to hostile intergroup attitudes, and much of this again was accounted for by a tendency to pursue personal goals involving relative superiority through the religious identity. But, narcissism was not related to religious fundamentalism, and showed very weak if any relationship with perceived threat or uncertainty from the outgroups chosen for assessment.

### DISCUSSION: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN HOW THE MODEL APPLIES TO NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

These two initial studies provided general support for the idea that a) group identity can be differentiated according to the functions it serves for the individual, with important implications for intergroup relations, and b) goals that may leave the self fragile at the individual

and interpersonal level may also connect to similarly defensive functions at the level of collective identity. These defensive collective identities, in turn, leave the individual vulnerable to threat and uncertainty in the intergroup context that may be dealt with through intergroup hostility. Several of the important patterns of relationships predicted by the model were consistent across both the national and religious identity, though there were some important exceptions and differences between groups as well.

Although narcissism displayed low to moderate correlations with intergroup hostility in both groups, and narcissists endorsed the superiority-defense function of both collective identities, only in the national group was narcissistic intergroup hostility mediated by a strong defensive identity (nationalism versus religious fundamentalism). Such an orientation to the group left the narcissist vulnerable to perceived threat and/or uncertainty from other groups. This cycle of threat and defense (through hostility in this case) is characteristic of the fragile self, as outlined in the model we discussed earlier.

Looking more closely at the identity functions in both groups, there were clear differences in the relative importance of each function (see Table 1). Religious participants tended to identify more with their group than the national participants, and this was also supported by the fact that all functions apart from superiority-defense were higher in this group. The superiority-defense function was the least prevalent function, consistent with our conceptualization of it as an “optional” function. But, apart from the general levels of each function, there also appeared to be similarities and differences in how the functions operated in relation to our constructs of interest (Table 2). In terms of similarities, the superiority-defense function was clearly the most toxic and maladaptive across both groups – it related consistently to personal narcissism, did not add anything to general group identification but rather encouraged

more nationalistic/fundamentalist types of attachment, related to greater threat and uncertainty, and predicted higher levels of intergroup hostility. In contrast, the belonging-affiliation identity function appeared to be a consistently more adaptive and “secure” orientation to the group identity – it generally related to self-esteem, patriotism, general religious identification, an absence of uncertainty and perceived threat from other groups, and more tolerant attitudes toward others outside of one’s group. The most interesting results, however, may be seen in the role of certainty concerns between the two groups. Here, we find very different patterns, with verification-certainty appearing to be very important and adaptive for religious identity, while functioning more in line with superiority-defense in relation to national identity. What we may see here is that the religious group is a more effective outlet for certainty concerns than the national group, and those who turn to the national group for certainty may be forced to look to other strategies (including outgroup derogation) to establish the certainty they seek.

It is thus important to recognize the unique properties of each group, while also searching for a general process that may be occurring across groups. At this point, it does appear that superiority concerns are consistently toxic to intergroup relations, while concerns for affiliation and connectedness are more adaptive in the pursuit of group identity. While the former tends to encourage looking outward with a more comparative and competitive eye, the latter seems to encourage a more internal focus within one’s own group. Interestingly, this is not inconsistent with conceptualizations of narcissism and secure self-esteem in the interpersonal sphere (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt & Peterson, in press), and is supported by prior research that attempted to look at motivations behind group identity (Peterson, 2008c).

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the approach to group identity presented here is consistent with other recent attempts to move beyond a focus on degree of identification to a more fine-grained analysis of the process behind identification with groups. What is unique here is our application of models of the personal self, goals, and interpersonal self-regulation to inform this process. In other words, we believe that a focus on personal goals and a more “bottom-up” process can be fruitful to understanding intergroup hostility alongside more predominant paradigms that focus more on how the group influences the individual in a more “top-down” process (e.g., Hogg, 2008; Turner et al., 1994). Using past research and models on narcissism and the fragile personal self, we have provided some initial evidence that personal “fragility” and defensiveness can also encourage collective “fragility” and defensiveness, through the pursuit of common goals in each domain. We recognize that this only accounts for a small part of the phenomenon of interest, and that a more “top-down” approach can help explain other parts where this may be found lacking.

Returning to the quote from the beginning, we are not sure whether we have captured what Obama was describing in relation to people “clinging” to religion and intergroup antipathy in reaction to personal frustration. But, we do feel that certain ways of constructing the self-concept and pursuing goals interpersonally may encourage intergroup hostility when such goals are also pursued in relation to a group identity, especially if threatened. Clearly, more targeted experimental and survey work is needed to test the predictions offered here.

## ENDNOTES

1. The basic idea of groups serving defensive functions, especially for narcissists, is not new to clinical and psychodynamic theorizing (Freud, 1914). For example, one of the main criteria for judgment of narcissistic personality disorder in the *DSM-IV-TR* (APA, 2000) states that the individual “believes that he or she is ‘special’ and unique and can only be understood by, or associate with, other special or high-status people or institutions”. The implication is that some narcissists may be motivated to join high-status groups or construe and justify groups they already belong to as superior and unique, consistent with the model being proposed here. Thus, the potential for certain individuals to perceive a group as serving an ego-defensive, superiority-promoting function may be the key connection between the “fragile” personal self with narcissistic goals and “fragile” types of group identity related to outgroup hostility (e.g., Brewer, 1999; Eidelson & Eidelson, 2003). Such a function should be highly related to outgroup prejudice, discrimination, and other forms of intergroup hostility, as well as to defensive identities such as nationalism (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989) and religious fundamentalism (e.g., Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992).
2. Although an infinite number of specific functions can be delineated (e.g., Aharpour & Brown, 2002; Deaux et al., 1999), it may help to focus on primary motives that have already been identified, with the important qualification that groups can serve different functions depending on the individual’s personal goals and motives.
3. As is customary with research on narcissism (e.g., Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), all effects reported below for narcissism control for this adaptive self-esteem element (with any reported self-esteem effects also free of the maladaptive narcissism element). Additional factors that were

controlled for in the analyses included sex, political ideology (Jost et al., 2003), need for closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), and need to belong (Leary et al., 2003).

4. Part of this finding may have to do with the idea that religious fundamentalism has as much (or more) to do with a defensive certainty as superiority (e.g., Peterson, 2008b). Additionally, the predominant religious group in the sample (Mormons) tends to be somewhat more fundamentalist in their identity than those in the sample with other affiliations. This may have diminished any relationship with narcissism that may be found in general.

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**Table 1.** Average levels on the identity functions and overall identification in the Study 1 and Study 2 groups.

	VC	X	B	SD	Group ID
National Group	3.26 (1.37)	3.77 (1.19)	3.73 (1.36)	2.92 (1.37)	4.08 (0.87)
Religious Group	4.69 (1.19)	4.51 (1.23)	4.68 (1.18)	2.71 (1.30)	4.81 (0.90)

Note: VC = verification-certainty, X = expansion, B = belonging-affiliation, SD = superiority-defense

**Table 2.** Comparison of independent effects of identity functions on narcissism, self-esteem, intergroup perceptions, and hostility in the national vs. religious groups.

	SD-N	SD-R	B-N	B-R	VC-N	VC-R
Narcissism	.28**	.25**	.06	.15	.09	.02
Self-Esteem	.00	-.01	.12	.10	.06	-.01
Group Identification	.02	-.17**	.40**	.08	.15	.75**
Nationalism/Fundamentalism	.36**	.17**	-.08	-.28**	.35**	.55**
General Perceived Threat	.26**	.27**	.05	.02	.07	-.25*
General Uncertainty	.22**	.31**	-.28*	.01	.35**	-.37**
General Intergroup Hostility	.31**	.41**	-.25*	-.18	.24*	-.33**

\*\*p < .01 \*p < .05

Note: SD = superiority-defense, B = belonging-affiliation, VC = verification-certainty; N = nation, R = religion