A Meaning-Based Approach to Humility: Relationship Affirmation Reduces Worldview Defense

Daryl R. Van Tongeren
Hope College

Jeffrey D. Green
Virginia Commonwealth University

Timothy L. Hulsey
The University of Tennessee

Cristine H. Legare
The University of Texas at Austin

David G. Bromley
Virginia Commonwealth University

Anne M. Houtman
California State University Bakersfield

Humans are notoriously resistant to changing their longstanding beliefs and often act defensively when they encounter individuals holding divergent beliefs. We introduce a meaning-based approach to humility (e.g., reduced defensiveness) with the claim that the desire for meaning motivates individuals to ardently defend their central beliefs. We propose that affirming meaning prior to encountering attitudinally-dissimilar individuals should reduce defensiveness (e.g., less negative attitudes toward those who challenge their beliefs). Christian undergraduates ($N = 79$) were randomly assigned to a relationship affirmation, self-affirmation, or neutral priming condition, and then received negative feedback from an ostensibly antireligious individual (i.e., outgroup member) after writing an essay explicating their beliefs about an important social or cultural topic. Relationship affirmation reduced defensiveness via more positive ratings of the individual who derogated their beliefs, providing initial evidence for our theoretical approach. Implications for a meaning-based approach to humility are discussed.

"Humility provides everyone, even him who despairs in solitude, with the strongest relationship to his fellow man, and this immediately, though, of course, only in the case of complete and permanent humility."
—Frank Kafka (1883–1924)

People have difficulty engaging in open and productive dialogue with those who hold divergent opinions, which is an enduring social problem that frequently leads to considerable discord and violence. Nations go to war over conflicting political ideologies, religious

communities fiercely defend their beliefs against those who believe differently, and politicians fail to reach bipartisan agreements essential for positive social change. What can be done to reduce defensiveness regarding one's beliefs and instead promote humility?

Drawing from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and balance theory (Heider, 1958), research has repeatedly demonstrated that we tend to favor associating, and get along better, with those who share similar attitudes (e.g., Davis & Rusbult, 2001; Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). Although we typically are comfortable associating with individuals who may have different attitudes toward more benign topics, we are less comfortable associating with those who differ from us on topics central to our identity or about which we care deeply, such as religion and politics (Haidt, 2012). We suspect that particular topics that are central to our sense of identity, such as those that bear on existential concerns of meaning, are more vigorously defended (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Koole, & Solomon, 2010) and perhaps more resistant to change, especially when threats to meaning are salient (Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989).

In an increasingly diverse global community, staunch dogmatism and rigid defensiveness hardly seems like a useful social strategy (Legare & Visala, 2011). Rather, individuals often are required to flexibly navigate these difficult interactions and instead develop a sense of acceptance and tolerance of individuals who hold differing views. Humility may play a key role in this social exchange because it is a reputational characteristic that conveys information about what it might be like to be in a relationship with an individual. For example, humble individuals may be able to better regulate their selfish motivations for the sake of a relationship, similar to a transformation of motivation (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994), which may make humble partners more romantically appealing (Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2013). Research has shown that humility has important implications for one's reputation and social status (Davis et al., 2013). The purpose of our research is to present a meaning-based approach to humility, and provide initial evidence for this theoretical approach as evidenced through the reduction of worldview defense.

Defining Humility

Recent theoretical (Davis et al., 2011) and empirical work (Davis et al., 2013) defines humility as a virtue characterized by the down-regulation of egoistic motives in favor of other-orientedness, as well as an accurate view of oneself. Down-regulating egoistic motives should include forgoing defensiveness when confronted about one's beliefs, and being more other-oriented should translate to being less antagonistic toward the views of others that run counter to one's own views or beliefs. Humility also involves accurate self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, which allows humble individuals to acknowledge and take into account their limitations and inadequacies, especially when confronted by others who believe differently.

Thus, for the purpose of the current study, we operationally define humility as reduced defensiveness when one's beliefs are challenged. Although humility may be expressed in various ways (e.g., sharing credit or praise, increased self-awareness about negative traits), we focused on a behavioral indicator that likely has real-world implications. Furthermore, given some of the drawbacks of self-reports of humility (Davis et al., 2011), we chose to examine behavior. Toward that end, we focused on defensiveness as an indicator of humility.

The Role of Meaning

Humans are inveterate meaning-makers who desire to understand themselves and their place in the universe. We strive to make meaning of our existence, including addressing concerns regarding the certainty of death and the meaning of life (see Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Yalom, 1980). Failure to come to terms with the meaning of human existence can create great existential anxiety (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). Because meaning systems provide answers to core existential questions (Legare, Evans, Rosengren, & Harris, 2012) and provide existential security, individuals hold strong beliefs regarding their veracity, and strong opinions about those who disagree with them.

Meaning systems are constellations of beliefs that address existential concerns and provide answers for the nature of humanity and the universe (see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004). To the degree that individuals can find suitable answers for their existential concerns, they experience existential security. Existential security is a hallmark of well-being, in which people feel comfortable having come to terms with the certainties of human existence, such the fact that everyone eventually will die or that there are many conflicting meaning systems (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003; Solomon et al., 2004). Meaning systems tend to answer these pressing questions and provide existential security (e.g., Van Tongeren, McIntosh, Raad, & Pae, 2013).

A perceived lack of existential security often leads to defensive processes oriented at reestablishing psychological equanimity (see Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009, for a review). These defensive processes include derogating members of outgroups and defending one's own cultural worldview (Solomon et al., 2004). For instance, individuals demonstrate prejudice against atheists, and this prejudice is driven by distrust (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011). Similarly, many scientists express anti-theistic views that may lead to biased perceptions of or discriminatory behavior toward theists. Considerable research (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2010; Solomon et al., 2004) suggests that interacting with individuals who hold divergent beliefs may elicit negative interpersonal consequences and defensiveness.

A Meaning-Based Approach to Humility

The motivation for meaning is primary (Heine et al., 2006), often less than fully conscious (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010), and hard to turn off (Baumeister, 1991). Meaning is a central feature of social life (Baumeister, 1991) and often is achieved by finding life lessons or benefits from significant life events (particularly tragic events), and feeling attached to something greater than one's own existence (Park, 2010). Because meaning is a fundamental social motivation (Heine et al., 2006), threats to meaning evoke compensatory responses aimed at regaining meaning and restoring psychological equanimity (Proulx & Heine, 2008). Individuals regain meaning by reaffirming cherished beliefs and values (e.g., reporting greater religiosity or spirituality), as well as bolstering sources of meaning (e.g., asserting greater purpose in life). It is possible that just as a self-esteem boost can temporarily dampen the motive to protect and enhance self-esteem (Green, Sedikides, & Gregg, 2008), a meaning boost may quell the normally active meaning motive that may elicit defensiveness. Indeed, the need to feel that life has meaning is so strong that threats to meaning need not even be consciously detected in order to elicit defensive responses. Nonconscious threats to meaning also evoke strategic reaffirmation of various domains of meaning, including religious beliefs, symbolic immortality, and certainty (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010). In addition, threats to meaning, such as the threat of mortality (Pyszczynski et al., 2003), typically evoke harsher reactions toward individuals holding different central (e.g., religious or political) beliefs (Greenberg et al., 1990).

Defensive reactions, which run counter to humility, appear to be the default response when cherished beliefs are challenged. We propose that this defensiveness is motivated, in part, by the desire for meaning. Because people view their lives as meaningful (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010) and significant (Pyszczynski et al., 2004), defensive reactions protect their cherished beliefs by disregarding disconfirming information and derogating dissimilar others. Having a sense of certainty regarding one's beliefs provides meaning.

Overview of Research and Hypotheses

We posit that affirming meaning (in a way that does not have to draw specifically from beliefs that might be challenged by others) may reduce defensiveness by assuaging the psychological self-defense system. This in turn may create more favorable interactions between individuals holding divergent worldviews (see Schmeichel, & Martens, 2005; Rothschild Abdollahi, & Pyszczynski, 2009). Though our default response may be defensiveness, which might be heightened when meaning is threatened (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997), we may be more open under certain circumstances: reaffirming one domain of meaning, especially prior to a threat, may reduce the need to employ these defenses in the service of procuring meaning. To the degree that people feel meaningful prior to engaging with dissimilar others, they should be less likely to activate biases or outgroup derogation in service of meaning-restoration. Thus, we examine the role of affirming various domains of meaning in reducing defensiveness.

We hypothesized that affirming meaning prior to a threat will reduce the derogation of those who attack cherished beliefs. Heine et al. (2006) and others (e.g., Baumeister, 1991) have proposed that meaning arises from various sources, such self-esteem, certainty, symbolic immortality, and interpersonal relationships. We explored the effects of two types of meaning affirmation—self-affirmation (recalling and affirming cherished aspects of oneself; cf. Schmeichel & Martens, 2005) and relationship affirmation (recalling and affirming valuable relationships in one's life)—on worldview defense. More specifically, we hypothesized that affirming meaning would reduce cultural worldview defense.

Method

Participants

Participants were 88 undergraduates enrolled at a small, private, Midwestern liberal arts college. Data from seven participants were dropped because they (a) either had prior knowledge of the study, or (b) failed to follow instructions. Furthermore, we chose to focus

on individuals who reported a Christian religious affiliation (so that an anti-religion essay writer would be considered an outgroup member by all participants), which excluded an additional two participants who were not religious. Thus, our final sample consisted of 79 Christian undergraduate students (52 females, 27 males), ranging in age from 18–21 ($M = 18.87$, $SD = .82$).

Materials and Procedure

We conducted the study under the guise of a project on attitudes, opinions, and interactions. Participants arrived in groups of 2–4 and were told that they would be completing tasks individually, as well as with an interaction partner. Participants first were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: self-affirmation (i.e., writing about the most important aspect of their self-concept), relationship affirmation (i.e., writing about their three most important relationships), or neutral prime (i.e., writing about one's plan for next week). Participants in each condition spent 5–10 minutes on their writing task. Following this, all participants were instructed to write an essay about a personally-valued social or cultural issue (on which they also spent 5–10 minutes). This was designed to allow participants to express a central belief about which they felt strongly and would likely defend if challenged. They were then told that they would be exchanging essays with an interaction partner, whom they did not know.[1] They were told that they would be reading and providing feedback on one another's essay.

Following this, all participants read an essay from their supposed interaction partner about how religion is useless, illusory, and harmful. (The essay was adapted from items of the Religious Attitudes Inventory; adapted from Ausubel & Schnoopt, 1957, and Foy, Lowe, Hildman, & Jacobs, 1976). Thus, we conceptualized their interaction partner, the essay writer, as an outgroup member, because all participants in this study were Christian and were significantly above the midpoint (i.e., 4) on self-rated religiousness/spirituality ($M = 4.92$ out of 7-point scale; one-sample $t(78) = 6.70$, $p < .001$). Next, to sufficiently threaten their sense of meaning, participants received feedback about their essay from their interaction partner (which was

also predetermined), indicating that the participant had composed a biased, illogical, immature, and poorly written essay. Moreover, the numerical rating sheet accompanying the feedback indicated that the purported interaction partner thought the participant had low academic aptitude (a 3 out of a 1–9 scale) and was a poor writer (a 2 out of a 1–9 scale).

Finally, participants were instructed to provide feedback on their partner's essay and were given a feedback sheet to evaluate their interaction partner, including rating the partner on two items (on a 9-point scale): "the essay author has high academic aptitude," and "the essay author is an excellent writer." These two items were strongly correlated ($r = .73$, $p < .001$) and were summed to create a composite author rating. Previous research has shown that following a threat, individuals engage in worldview defense that includes derogating those who challenge their worldview (see Arndt, Cook, & Routledge, 2004). Thus, this rating served as our measure of cultural worldview defense.

Results

We predicted that meaning affirmation would reduce cultural worldview defense (as indicated by higher author ratings) compared to those in the neutral condition. There was a significant main effect for priming condition on author rating, $F(2, 76) = 4.14$, $p = .020$ (see Figure 1). Post-hoc analyses (with Tukey adjustments) revealed that participants in the relationship affirmation condition rated the essay author ($M = 5.98$, $SD = 1.39$) significantly more favorably ($p = .017$) than those in the neutral condition ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.14$); however, the self-affirmation ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.38$) condition did not significantly vary from the neutral ($p = .13$) or relationship affirmation ($p = .61$) conditions. These results suggest that affirming relationships may buffer individuals from a meaning threat (i.e., receiving harsh criticism on their cherished essay) and decrease cultural worldview defense, such as outgroup member derogation.

Discussion

The findings presented here provide initial evidence, albeit indirect, for our meaning-based approach to humility. Specifically, we found that following a threat from an outgroup member (and future interaction partner), in which an ostensible outgroup member with divergent views criticized the opinions and values of a participant, those who had affirmed valuable relationships in their own life prior to the threat were less likely to respond defensively, as evidenced by more positive ratings of the outgroup member. Put

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[1]To increase the believability of the study, participants signed up in groups of four. In the event that fewer than four participants signed-up for a study session, a confederate was present during the initial parts of the study session to act as a plausible stranger.

FIGURE 1

Participants in the Relationship Affirmation Condition Reported More Favorable Author Ratings (Lower Cultural Worldview Defense) Than Those in the Neutral Condition
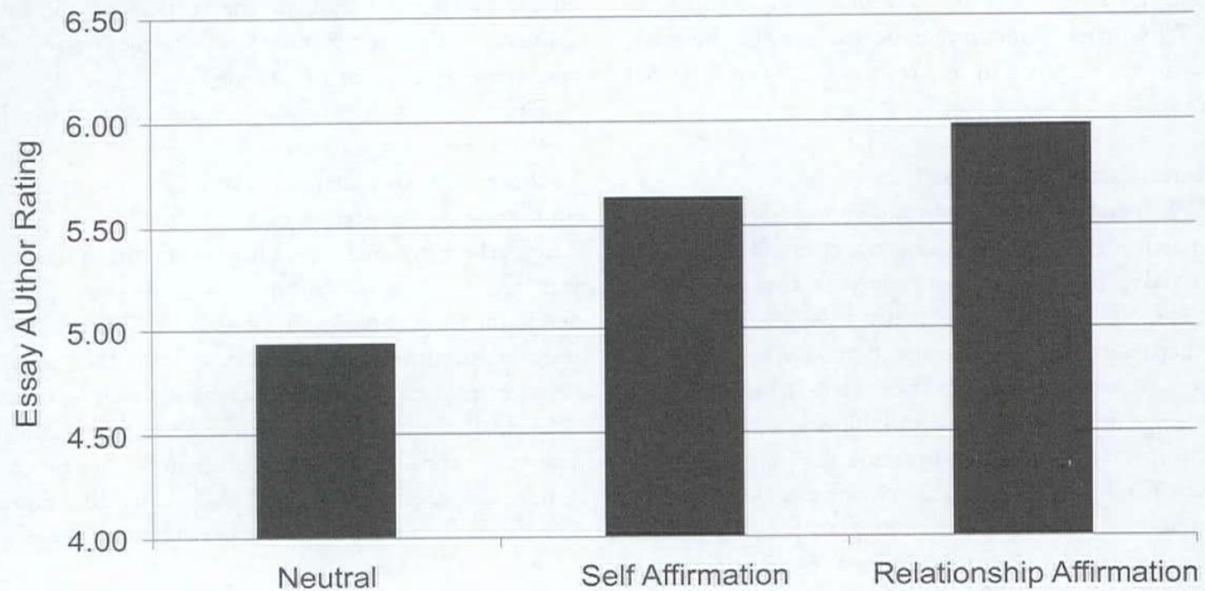
differently, the existentially-protective nature of being reminded of important relationships reduced the sting of having one's cherished views derogated, which led to a more favorable ratings of someone holding antagonistic views. This initial evidence suggests that relationship affirmation may be one way of cultivating more humble and prosocial interactions.

This is the first work, to our knowledge, to demonstrate positive interpersonal outcomes of affirming one's relationship, such as mitigated worldview defense, and it provides insights into how to reduce defensiveness through meaning affirmation via relationships. Participants in the self-affirmation condition failed to significantly reduce defensiveness relative to participants in the control group, in contrast to prior research (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005). However, we are hesitant to make too much of a null finding, particularly because the mean was in the predicted direction. We encourage future research to further explore the role of various meaning affirmations in reducing defensiveness.

Much prior work has emphasized the importance of self-affirmation in reducing defensiveness (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005; Steele, 1988), and some work has examined how close positive relationships may make individuals more open to potentially threatening

information (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005). Our findings suggest that relationship affirmation may be another way to curtail defensive reactions following a threat. Affirming relationships prior to a threat appears to innoculate individuals from the negative effects of critique from an outgroup member. This work aligns with prior work emphasizing the existential function of close relationships (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002; Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003), especially as they relate to virtues (Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Worthington, & Reid, in press).

These results fit with other initial evidence of our meaning-based approach to virtues, including humility. For example, threats to meaning evoke strategic compensation of domains of meaning, such as self-rated religiousness (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010), and religious beliefs can be a source of meaning in life (Van Tongeren, Hook, et al., 2013). However, meaning affirmation increases tolerance and reduces existential anxiety, suggesting that affirming a cherished meaning system (i.e., priming religion for the intrinsically religious) may be a way of reducing the tension between individuals holding divergent worldviews (Van Tongeren, McIntosh, et al., 2013). Together, these findings suggest that threats to meaning under-

mine one's sense of security and may elicit bolstering of central values and defense of one's cherished worldview, whereas affirming (various aspects of) meaning may reduce defensiveness and increase openness to alternative viewpoints and increase favorability of those that hold them.

Broadly, this work suggests that one way of building humility and facilitating interactions between individuals holding divergent views may be to affirm one's general sense of meaning (different from the source or domain of meaning under threat or scrutiny) prior to a threat. This builds on theoretical work suggesting that domains of meaning are substitutable (Heine et al., 2006), and provides additional evidence for the buffering effect of preemptively bolstering meaning. Drawing meaning from other areas of life, such as relationships, can reduce the negative reactions following such an interaction. Moreover, one way to reduce tension between (ostensibly) competing worldviews is to affirm alternate domains of meaning.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although promising, these findings are simply a first step. Our work had some limitations. First, in order to establish a consistently threatening situation by using an anti-religion essay, all participants were Christian. We encourage future research to explore how meaning affirmation and defense operate in other religious and non-religious populations. Related to this, we encourage future research to investigate if there are any differences in defending non-religious versus religious meaning systems. Second, this work could be expanded methodologically, such as exploring how these processes unfold over time (i.e., longitudinally), or identifying additional domains of meaning that might buffer one from threat (e.g., symbolic immortality, such as considering one's children or accomplishments that will remain after death), though we suspect that particular domains (e.g., certainty) may work in the opposite fashion and *increase* defensiveness (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010). To be sure, careful work in this area is needed. Finally, we failed to replicate previous research demonstrating the efficacy of self-affirmation in reducing worldview defense (Schmeichel & Martens, 2005), perhaps because of a small sample size. Alternatively, it is possible that focusing on oneself, rather than relationships, is not as effective in eliciting humble responses, such as reduced defensiveness. It is also possible that the relational nature of the affirmation may have more strongly shielded individuals from the relatively relational threat, so that different dependent measures might have yielded a different pattern of results.

We also acknowledge that our operationalization of humility (i.e., reduced defensiveness) is not without debate, and we encourage additional ways of conceputalizing and measuring humility (e.g., willingness to talk with those holding different views, how accurately people recall a threatening message, listening to and responding to criticism) as ways of advancing the field and fully capturing the rich and complex nature of this construct. Because of the potential limiations of self-report measures of humility (Davis et al., 2011), we chose to focus on defensiveness as a behavioral indications of lower humility. It is also possible that rather than indicating a lack of humility, reaffirming one's beliefs may signal to other group members that one is loyal and committed to a group's values. However, this reaffirmation and defense may accompany outgroup derogation, aggression toward those who challenge those beliefs, and a reduced openness to new ideas (see Greenberg et al., 1990), which may not be an optimal social strategy in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. We believe that identifying humility-relevant behaviors that are theoretically sound is a fruitful way to advance research on humility.

We encourage future research to more thoroughly examine the role of self-affirmation in promoting humility and reducing defensiveness, as well as how virtues that facilitate interpersonal interactions, such as humility, may play a role in the reduction of defensiveness and the promotion of intergroup interactions. Insofar as individuals' desire for meaning has been (temporarily) satisfied, they should be less defensive and more open to viewpoints that might otherwise challenge their worldview. Furthermore, this work supports a relational feature of humility (see Davis et al., 2011). Future research should compare, for example, individuals dispositionally high versus low in humility and how they react to meaning threats and affirmations. Attempts to manipulate a humble mindset experimentally also would more directly investigate some of these hypotheses regarding humility.

Conclusion

Humility plays an integral role in promoting interactions among individuals who hold divergent, or competing, worldviews. One key determinant of whether individuals engage others with openness or defensiveness is meaning. Although the natural response to challenges to one's worldview is to fiercely defend one's beliefs, understanding the role of meaning in providing

existential security may help reduce negative attitudes toward those who are different and may facilitate more open dialogue. Given the increasing diversity of modern societies and thus the variety of viewpoints with which we come into contact, efforts should be made to identify and cultivate those features that will reduce tension and promote openness toward those are different from us. We suspect that meaning is a key factor that is deserving of future empirical attention.

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Author Information

VAN TONGEREN, DARYL R. PhD. *Address*: Department of Psychology, Hope College, Schaap Science Center, 35 East 12th Street, Holland, MI 49423-3605. *Email*: vantongeren@hope.edu. *Title*: Assistant Professor of Psychology. *Degrees*: BA (Psychology) Colorado Christian University; MA (Experimental Psychology) University of Colorado, Colorado Springs; PhD (Social Psychology) Virginia Commonwealth University. *Specializations*: social psychological approaches to meaning, religion, and virtues.

GREEN, JEFFREY D. PhD. *Address:* Virginia Commonwealth University, 806 W Franklin St, Richmond, VA 23284. *Title:* Associate Professor of Psychology. *Email:* jdgreen@vcu.edu. *Degrees:* BA (Psychology) Dartmouth College; MA & PhD (Psychology) University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

HULSEY, TIMOTHY L. PhD. *Title:* Associate Provost, Honors and Scholars Programs. *Address:* 130 Howard Baker Center, 1640 Cumberland Ave., Knoxville, TN 37996-3340. *Email:* thulsey@utk.edu. *Degrees:* BA (Psychology) Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi; MA (Clinical Psychology) Trinity University; PhD (Clinical Psychology) University of Tennessee.

LEGARE, CRISTINE H. PhD. *Title:* Assistant Professor of Psychology. *Address:* The University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station #A8000, Austin, Texas 78712-0187. *Email:* legare@psy.utexas.edu. *Degrees:* BA (Human Development) & BA (Cultural Studies) University of California, San Diego; MA & PhD (Developmental Psychology) University of Michigan. *Specializations:* cognitive development, cultural learning, and cognitive evolution.

BROMLEY, DAVID G. PhD. *Title:* Professor, Religious Studies and Sociology. *Address:* Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2021. *Email:* dbromley@vcu.edu. *Degrees:* BA (Colby College); MA & PhD (Sociology) Duke University. *Specialization:* sociology of religion.

HOUTMAN, ANNE M. D.Phil. *Title:* Professor of Biology and Dean of the School of Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Engineering. *Address:* California State University Bakersfield, 9001 Stockdale Highway Bakersfield, CA 93311. *Email:* ahoutman@csub.edu. *Degrees:* BA (Anthropology) Pomona College; MA (Anthropology) UCLA; D.Phil. (Zoology) Oxford University.