

The Psychological Processes Underlying Political and Ideological Extremism



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This paper offers a discussion of the psychological processes described in the conceptual and empirical literature on political and ideological extremism and a related construct—radicalization.

Radicalization refers to the process in which individuals develop extremist beliefs/ideologies, emotions, and/or behaviors, all of which can justify otherizing and violence as well as promote sacrifice to defend one's self-identified tribe (Trip et al., 2019). In contrast, extremism refers to the resulting ideology or methodology applied to reach the radical objectives.

The literature suggests that “extreme” attitudes and behavior stem from a complex interplay between personality and situations. Extremism reflects at least five psychological functions. Each of these functions reflects low emotional stability (whether dispositional or situationally-induced): (1) as a coping mechanism in response to psychological strain and ambiguity resulting from negative events (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009); (2) as a form of ambiguity reduction during times of political/societal uncertainty (Kruglanski & Van den Bos, 2013); (3) as a form of self-verification in general (Curtis & Curtis, 1993); (4) as a form of self-verification and quest for significance following perceived negative (e.g., perceived dehumanizing) events (Kruglanski et al., 2014, 2018; Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019; Jasko et al., 2016); and (5) as a politically-motivated means to fuse with outgroups (Kunst et al., 2018).

Each of these psychological functions represents the latent construct of coping mechanisms in response to emotional stability. Moreover, consistent with the notion that extremism reflects low openness to experience, extremists tend to manifest simplistic and rigid thinking patterns (Loza, 2007).

Psychological Functions of Extremism

Extremism as a Coping Mechanism in Response to Strain and Ambiguity

Exposure to violence that yields strain may result in extremist views. Individuals exposed to traumatic events feel threatened and vulnerable (e.g., terrorism). Perceptions of threat lead to psychological distress, which invokes “threat buffers.” Political exclusionism is an example of a threat buffer (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009). Indeed, perceived threat is a strong predictor of exclusion and intolerance (Sullivan & Marcus, 1982). Studies indicate that individuals who feel threatened find ways to cope by engaging in hostile attitudes toward outgroups, reducing their power and harming outgroup members (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Pettigrew, 2003).

Advocates of terror management theory (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) have argued that our worldviews serve as buffers against anxiety about inevitable death. Life events that evoke mortality salience (e.g., terrorist attacks) motivate individuals to reaffirm their worldviews and dismiss those that are inconsistent with those views. Consistent with this notion, studies show support for the idea that mortality salience increases intolerance (Greenberg et al., 1990).

The shattered assumptions approach (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) suggests that following traumatic events, people perceive challenges to their assumptions about the world and about themselves. The two assumptions that are most influenced are the assumption of personal invulnerability and the perception of the world as meaningful, predictable, and benign. After experiencing distress, individuals perceive: (1) the world as unpredictable, dangerous, and malevolent, and (2) the self as vulnerable. The resulting distress and view of the world as unpredictable encourages a move toward extremist views because such views are rigid and categorize the world into simple black/white categories—that is, they not only reduce cognitive load but also reduce anxiety from uncertainty and ambiguity. Because extreme

narratives describe circumstances in definitive black-and-white ways, extremism reduces ambiguity—that is, extremist narratives provide the certainty sought by individuals who are struggling with ambiguity about their significance (Hogg, Kruglanski, & Van den Bos, 2013).

Extremism as a Coping Mechanism in Response to Ambiguity

Periods of societal instability and uncertainty tend to spur sociopolitical and ideological extremism (e.g., the Great Depression during the 1930's). When individuals feel uncertain about their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, they look for similar others to make comparisons that confirm their attitudes (social comparison theory; Festinger, 1954). This discourages open-mindedness and encourages simplistic, black/white ideologies (Baron, Crawley, & Paulina, 2003; Lambert, Burroughs, & Nguyen, 1999). Rigid political views help provide structure and meaning to a complex social environment. As a result, individuals can see the world as more predictable and understandable (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006).

It is important to note that both left- and right-wing supporters support discrimination of those who share different ideologies (Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013). Affiliates of far-right political perspectives tend to look down upon immigrants, African Americans, Hispanics, and members of the LGBTQA community, whereas affiliates of the far-left orientation tend to look down upon businesspeople, Christians, bankers, and, more recently, members of the Boomer generation.

Studies indicate that “liberals and conservatives express similar levels of intolerance toward ideologically dissimilar groups” (Brandt et al., 2014, p. 27). While individuals with extreme political views may disagree on specific issues, they tend to exhibit similar psychological processes—processes that differentiate them from individuals who occupy the moderate political space.

Extremism as a Form of Self-Verification in General

According to Syle (2007), extremism reflects: (1) a belief that one's group has a definitive moral authority; (2) a belief that one's group is correct; therefore, its beliefs can neither be challenged nor altered; and (3) a belief that one's group is threatened by, if not under attack, by other groups. These beliefs—that one's group is not just logically correct, but morally correct—create the sense that group membership is a moral issue and that disbelievers or infidels are immoral, justifying hostile treatment of the infidels (Sande, Goethals, Ferrari, & Worth, 1989). Because believers see their group as the absolute moral authority, they perceive any disagreement as reflecting opposition to the group. Nuance and complexity are at a distant shore; it is a matter of right and wrong, and the others are in the wrong (Haslam & Turner, 1995).

Individuals with immature or unsettled identities typically manifest non-trivial emotional strain. Many of those motivated to join extremist groups typically have profoundly unresolved identity issues (Curtis & Curtis, 1993). Hence, they gravitate toward groups that allow them to create positive images of themselves. The overall objectives of the group are less relevant than the extent to which the group provides feelings of belonging and self-importance (Ezekiel, 1995; 2002). Individuals who perceive themselves as not being validated by their previous or current social groups are attracted to extremist groups because they meet their needs for positive self-regard. Hence, these individuals manifest a willingness to embrace the group's belief system in order to experience a badly-needed sense of belonging.

Extremism as a Form of Self-Verification in Response to Perceived Negative Events

Kruglanski's work (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2013; Kruglanski et al., 2014) suggests that extremism is a result of distress and a motivational imbalance—the tendency to emphasize the importance of one need at the expense of others. In other words, a condition for extremism is a motivational imbalance where, temporarily or over a longer

period of time, a specific need becomes more important over other needs. As a result, behaviors that they may have previously considered as outside the bounds of socially appropriate behavior become acceptable. In other words, they become liberated from constraints and consider incivility reasonable and permissible.

In discussing their significance-quest theory, Kruglanski and his colleagues have also emphasized the need for personal significance as a dominant need that leads to extremism and, at times, violence. This need encompasses the need to have a meaning in life, to have respect, to matter, to be seen as competent—to be somebody. This is a universal, human motivation sometimes referred to as the need for esteem, achievement, or meaning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fiske, 2010; Higgins, 2012; Maslow, 1943). This need is particularly strong when individuals feel an urge to restore their significance after experiencing negative, stressful, or traumatic circumstances. Experiences that humiliate, dehumanize, or otherwise hurt individuals are likely to result in a loss of perceived significance, particularly among individuals low in emotional stability. The loss of significance can stem from a wide variety of sources, including health, family, work, economic, discrimination, harassment, and/or political conditions. Such circumstances yield feelings of helplessness and insignificance. In response, individuals may gravitate towards extremism because it serves as a mechanism through which they can restore their significance and once again feel socially valued (Pedahzur, 2005). Similarly, individuals may perceive a significance loss for a group with which they identify and that may encourage them to engage in extremism to restore their groups' significance. In short, individuals might become radicalized due to their quest for significance because they are trying to restore their perceptions of self-significance after experiences of mistreatment (Kruglanski et al., 2014, 2019).

The model of individual radicalization involves: (1) the motivational element (the quest for personal significance), (2) the social process (group dynamics) which is the way in

which the individual comes in contact with the ideology, (3) an ideology that guides the way in which they will regain significance, (4) identification of terrorism/violence or behavior otherwise outside the bounds of normally socially accepted behavior as the means to achieve significance, and (5) a shift in commitment to the goal of significance and away from other goals that are incompatible with the extreme behavior.

It is important to note that not everyone who experiences significance loss is likely to express radical attitudes or behaviors. How do individuals restore their significance? The answer is that, to a large extent, the ideology toward which the individual happens to gravitate provides the direction.

Those advocating violence-justifying ideology typically includes these three features: (1) belong to a group that holds a grievance; (2) a different entity or group is perceived as responsible for the group's grievance, and (3) the perception of a means (e.g., calling out and physical violence) to restore the honor "robbed" by the perceived injustice. Leaders of such groups leverage grievance rhetoric to justify and encourage hostile behavior against their targets; they also emphasize that the enemy's tendency to harm their in-group is fixed (i.e., not malleable) and is a reflection of the target's nature (Dweck & Ehlinger, 2006).

Note that the quest for significance can likely be satisfied by any extreme activity for what might be seen as a worthy cause (Vollhardt, 2009). Commitment to goals affirms individuals' identity and reaffirms for them that their lives matter (George & Park, 2016; Steele, 1988). Individuals are willing to make large sacrifices to restore their sense of significance. As noted by Kruglanski et al. (2018, p. 112):

When the quest for significance is activated, to the point of dominating other concerns, various forms of extreme behaviors become more appealing when they offer a route toward earning significance. Those specific extremisms are

spelled out in a narrative subscribed to by members of a network in which one is embedded.

Notably, a loss of significance does not predict one's engagement in violent extremism on its own (Kruglanski et al., 2013, 2014). There also needs to be the presence of an ideology which suggests that violence is an effective way to restore one's significance.

While the psychological processes underlying extremism are relatively consistent across people, the manner in which individuals "act out" their extremism are varied and often reflect opportunity and social identity. Extreme forms of feminism are likely a manifestation of this. It reflects the motivation to show that women are important, are equal to men, and are to receive an equal amount of respect. Similarly, Muslim immigrants in Europe may experience significance loss as a result of general disrespect of their identity and Islamophobia (Kruglanski, Crenshaw, Post, & Victoroff, 2008; Sageman, 2004). This significance loss may encourage them to express extremist views and restore their significance. "Holding others accountable" might be another form of this. When individuals perceive themselves as having been mistreated, they typically experience powerlessness, a reduction in their esteem, and humiliation. Such mistreatment reduces their perceived significance as an individual. "Holding people accountable" allows them to restore their sense of power and sense of significance by sanctioning/attacking other parties. The sanction may exceed what is normally considered appropriate social, civil behavior. However, the rationale is that the "offending" party "deserves it."

In some cases, the quest for significance does not result from one negative experience, rather it results from treatment over time. The extreme behavior might be stimulated by the belief that they or their self-identified group have been humiliated, discriminated against, oppressed, marginalized, abused, attacked, or harassed over time (e.g., Islamophobia and misogyny).

In summary, a quest for significance is activated by: (1) a loss of significance or humiliation, (2) an anticipated significance loss, and (3) an opportunity for an enhancement in significance. Findings (e.g., Volhardt, 2009) are consistent with the notion that radical views and sacrifice appeal to individuals on the quest for significance, as they reinforce social values and provide the opportunity to be committed to a cause from which they derive personal significance.

Politically Motivated Fusion with Out-Groups

Individuals are willing to put their well-being and safety at risk on behalf of another group to which they do not belong; similarly, they may also choose to join an intragroup conflict in which they were not initially involved (Kunst et al., 2018). For example, during the Spanish Civil War against Generalissimo Francisco Franco, over 30,000 volunteers from the United States and Europe joined the cause. During the Kurdish defense against ISIS invasion, hundreds of fighters from elsewhere merged with Kurdish fighters. More recently, the “wall of mothers” joined with Black Lives Matter protesters in Portland in response to local and federal law enforcement intervention.

When individuals share a sense of “oneness” with a self-identified in-group, they are not unlikely to engage in extreme behavior on behalf of that group. Scholars refer to this as a fusion process. Fusion occurs when an overlap exists between one’s social and personal selves, such that the individual feels that he or she has become a member of the group; that is, he or she has become one with the other group, even though he or she has not previously been part of the group. People are more likely to fuse with another group when they believe that the group is being marginalized in a way that is inconsistent with one’s core ideological belief systems.

According to the theory of identity fusion (Kunst et al., 2018), extreme group-focused behavior occurs when individuals perceive themselves as being “one” or fused with another

group; as a result, they see membership in this group as central to their core identity. This occurs even if the group was not previously part of their core identity.

This identity positions individuals to be willing to fight and even die on behalf of the group. This is likely one way revolutionary resistance movements gain support from individuals. Note that this is distinct from solidarity. While solidarity refers to a commitment to another group, identity fusion involves the belief that one is “immersed” or “one” with another group; the boundaries between the groups are permeable.

Individuals who experience identity fusion typically do so based on a political cause or ideology, sometimes yielding extreme solidarity behaviors. This often takes the form of extreme behavior against members of an outgroup known to mistreat members of their group or their group as a whole, particularly when that other group is seen as behaving inconsistent with their political ideology.

Simplistic and Rigid Thinking Patterns

As noted by Loza (2007), radicalized individuals, extremists, and members of terrorist groups display oversimplified ways of thinking. Accordingly, they perceive the world to be divided into right or wrong—good or evil. Moreover, their perspectives rest on a foundation of attacking or rejecting the viewpoints of other groups. Indeed, they believe that, under all circumstances, they are absolutely and morally right (Ahmed, 1993). Researchers have argued that the simplistic and rigid belief structures result from: (1) social, political cultural, religious, and economic conditions (Ardila, 2002; Mazarr, 2004); (2) experienced insult as well as pain from frustration (McCauley, 2002); (3) general dissatisfaction with their personal lives (e.g., marriage problems and job instability; Orbach, 2001); and (4) grievances stemming from perceived marginalization, injustice, or oppression (Hudson, 1999).

Radicalized individuals often employ the notion of the “just world” to justify mistreating others—the victims deserve what they get. In so doing, they often externalize the

blame to others. They rationalize their hostile acts, denying responsibility and sometimes even going so far as to explicitly state that they did not cause the harm (Loza & Clements, 1991).

Suggestions for Future Research

Given the potential negative impact of radicalized individuals to the mission readiness of military units, a program of research investigating options for the prevention and response of extremist behavior would be of utility. The simplistic and rigid thinking patterns of radicalized individuals combined with the psychological functions of radicalized or extremist thinking are such that non-trivial efforts will be required to identify effective approaches for stemming their effects in the DoD. Accordingly, research specific to the DoD is needed to identify interventions likely to be successful.

We recommend several ongoing programs of research. Identification of the prevalence of behaviors reflecting the presence of radicalized DoD personnel may be the first step. Such work can likely be accomplished in a variety of ways, including the DEOCS survey and qualitative investigation on-site by equal opportunity advisors. This research can establish the extent to which radicalization and extremism are currently problems in the DoD. Similarly, investigations of conditions that are ripe for radicalizing personnel may provide for algorithms to identify the extent to which such behavior will be a problem in the future. Given the extent to which there is polarization on political issues in the United States, it does not seem to be an exaggeration to assume that extremist behavior on the part of DoD personnel could become increasingly problematic. The results of some elections have been more of a bitter pill to swallow for advocates of the losing candidate than other elections. When the hostility between the bases of each party is as high as it is now, the foundation for extremism on the part of the losing party may be firm. Hence, efforts to investigate these issues may require a sense of urgency.

Another program of needed research would be to investigate initiation and subsequent socialization practices (beyond current ones) that will minimize extremist behavior. People typically form attitudes about their organization in the very first days and weeks of their membership. Senior leadership often espouses a set of values, but first-line supervisors often set the record straight in terms of what's really important. When these things are not in alignment, new members of the organization typically take their cues from the behaviors of their first-line supervisor and their peers. Along with formal, initial training programs, it is important to recognize that the informal influences of organizational culture set the stage for communicating the values that are truly important in the organization. When those initiation rites and related early experiences create cohesion and an environment in which individuals can functionally meet their identity needs, their significance needs, and their belonging needs, extremism may remain at a distant shore. Similarly, when leaders and peers communicate messages of inclusion—ones that stress the importance of embracing one's peers as critical to the mission—extremist behaviors against fellow DoD personnel may be unlikely. This largely may be a function of individuals realizing that they are in the same tribe and have functional interdependencies that are required for mission success and personal well-being. Because it is unlikely that screening efforts will ever be sufficiently rigorous to prevent insecure, isolated, emotionally unstable personnel from joining the Armed Forces, research is needed to identify situational solutions that can be applied for existing personnel. For example, it is likely that research will identify socially constructive ways that meet the need for significance for these individuals.

Of course, attention to these issues and funding for initiatives to prevent and respond to extremist behavior are likely to remain low if the effects of the expression of extremist ideologies within military units on mission readiness is not clearly documented. Therefore, intensive research is needed to identify the extent to which and the nature of which

radicalization and extremism directly impact mission readiness and unit performance.

Included in this is the impact on individuals in terms of emotional, cognitive, and physical strain. That is, extremism likely affects not only the targeted individuals and groups, but also many, if not most, of the members of a unit.

At the front end, work is needed to identify additional techniques to screen out radicalized individuals. Undoubtedly, recruiters pay non-trivial attention to cues that might indicate that a recruit may have been radicalized or predisposed to become radicalized. In cases of the former, it may be that recruits have been trained to act “normal” during the recruitment process by members of their ideological in-group. Hence recruiters probably need increasingly sophisticated tools to help them identify such individuals. Similarly, it is likely that additional work is needed to identify recruits that may be predisposed or particularly vulnerable to become radicalized.

In situations of harassment, discrimination, and assault, DoD personnel are sometimes dissuaded from reporting the events that transpired. Furthermore, they are sometimes unaware of how to deal with the perpetrators at the moment of encounter and/or report the incident(s) to authorities. Similarly, some individuals in leadership positions are uncertain about when and how to handle such reports when they are received, particularly when they are in a command characterized by high levels of organizational politics. Hence, research on reporting mechanisms that establish best practices for reporting, for handling reporting, and for dealing with incidents at the time they occur is needed.

What are effective techniques for command prevention of and response to the expression of extremist behaviors? Answers to this question are not only relevant to the senior officer, but also all supervisory personnel in the command as well as equal opportunity advisors reporting directly to the senior officer. In summary, additional work is needed,

specifically in the DoD, to address these kinds of issues. Once answers are apparent, pilot studies can be conducted to test the effectiveness of implementation.

It is likely that work environments that foster extremism are close cousins of the hostile work environments that feature high levels of harassment, abuse, discrimination, and assault. Still, the antecedents of extremism are somewhat unique and, therefore, require specific attention. It is likely that this research would yield suggestions for tactics and strategies to be employed by equal opportunity advisors, recruiters, all levels of leaders in the DoD, as well as the non-supervisory personnel who are affected by peers who behave in extremist fashion.

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