



**“The Intersection of Psychology and Terrorism: How Extremists
Use Radicalized Ideology to Exploit Psychological Vulnerabilities”**

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Abstract

Terrorism consists of a broad spectrum of ideologically motivated groups that vary widely in their belief systems. From Neo-Nazis to Islamic extremists, these groups center around a distinct belief system that motivates them to carry out violent acts. The violent plots these organizations carry out are generally looking to achieve a political goal. These organizations consist of individuals who have become radicalized through a political or religious ideology, or a combination of the two. The radicalization process that these group members undergo is part of a complex interaction of psychological and sociological deprivations. Terrorist use radicalized ideology to exploit these vulnerabilities, in order to appeal to the individuals who are suffering from deprivations of fundamental psychological needs.

Radicalized ideology, whether political or religious, preys upon an individual's psychological vulnerabilities, in an attempt to recruit members to a terrorist organization. This radicalized ideology lays the framework to which these organizations construct the goals they seek to accomplish. The use and belief in violence to achieve specific goals is grounded deeply in the ideologies that these groups define themselves by. Robert Taylor, the director of the Executive Master of Science Program within Criminology at the University of Texas at Dallas, defines terrorism as, "The deliberate and unlawful use of threats or actual violence to inculcate fear, intended to intimidate or coerce individuals, groups, or governments to change their political, social, religious or ideological basis" (Taylor, 8). Extreme and radical interpretations of

political and religious ideologies justify the use of violence to accomplish varying goals designated by the terrorist organization. For example, Muslim extremists, such as members of ISIS, believe they are fighting a holy war against Western culture or what is known as jihad: “The association with terrorism represents a distortion of the true Koranic meaning of the term...jihad is supposed to encompass both a struggle against one’s sinful proclivities..and a struggle against injustice...” (Rabil, 1). Muslim extremists radicalize the concept of jihad, in order to provide justification and motivation to use violence against countries that they believe are creating injustices and sin. But why do these ideologies have such a powerful influence on individuals? What motivates a person to come to identify with them in the first place? How are individuals shaped by them so strongly that they use such extreme violence? The power of political and religious ideology has underlying psychological roots, that motivate individuals to conform to them. This essay seeks to illustrate how the radicalization process transforms the deprivation of basic psychological needs into strong identification with extreme ideological beliefs. This evaluation will demonstrate that a motivation to commit acts of extreme terror and violence is rooted in political and religious ideologies that provide fulfillment of specific fundamental human needs within a person, due to intertwining relationships between psychological and sociological factors.

The radicalization process reconstructs specific psychological needs in order for an individual to identify with an ideology that seems to fulfill these fundamental human needs. Bertjan Doosje, a professor at the University of Amsterdam, and his colleagues, developed a model that describes the process of radicalization that any individual in society can go through. Their model is broken down into three phases consisting of a sensitivity phase, a group

membership phase, and an action phase. In each of these stages, the micro, meso and macro level influences are evaluated to provide an in-depth analysis of how individuals become radicalized. Doosje states that:

In the sensitivity phase, an important driving factor at the *micro* level concerns the quest for significance. Feelings of insignificance can be caused by a loss of status, a strong sense of humiliation, or poor career prospects...Radical groups such as ISIS are well-equipped to foster or restore feelings of significance by providing recruits with a sense of belonging, respect, heroism, status and the notion to fight for a holy cause (Doosje, 81).

These intense feelings foster motivation through deprivation. The lack of significance or career prospects creates a negative reaction of powerlessness, which propels an individual to overcome this inadequacy. Radical groups are able to take advantage of this desperate state, because personal significance is directly tied into their ideological beliefs. However, the radicalization process has severe consequences for individuals that go seemingly unnoticed. The result of conversion is a "...complete loss of control over one's choices. Conscience and compassion might have to be set aside, and indeed one's own survival can become a secondary consideration" (Dember, 161). Radicalization represents a paradox of an individual regaining control in their lives, through psychological fulfillment, but unconsciously relinquishing their control due to the guiding principles established by the radicalized ideology. The deprivation of human needs initially drives the individual to become radicalized. However, the ideology eventually drives the individual to commit acts of violence through their identity conversion.

To further understand the complexity of radicalization, this section will explore the idea that political and religious ideologies represent the primary belief systems that contribute to an individual's identification with a terrorist organization. The majority of terrorist organizations fall on the extreme right side of politics. Much of what conservatism represents is a reflection of fear due to societal changes and threats to tradition. In Lazar Stankov's paper, *Psychological Processes Common to Social Conservatism and Terrorism*, he establishes a relationship between specific characteristics of conservatism that overlap with certain psychological aspects of terrorism. Grudges, nastiness, social awareness, and religiosity were all evaluated in terms of how they shaped individuals beliefs and political orientation. He found that "Without Grudge, MEM [Military Extremist Mindset] is incomplete, and Nastiness/Social Dominance...on their own, are unlikely to lead to terrorist activity. Thus, the absence of a strong Grudge within a conservative society is likely to prevent the emergence of complete MEM" (Stankov, 78). The concept of a severe grudge, which is a feeling of resentment towards an individual or organization due to a past harm committed, pushes conservatism to the extreme end. Furthermore, a grudge can be thought of in terms of the occurrence of injustices to members of a society. When an injustice occurs, it creates a drive to seek vengeance against whoever committed the injustice which, overtime, develops into a grudge. Conservative ideology creates susceptibility within the individual to protect traditional values through seeking vengeance. Another way of viewing this is through John Jost and David Amodio's model of political ideology, motivated by social cognitions. They suggest that, "...individuals gravitate toward those ideas and opinions that 'match' or 'resonate' with their own needs, interests, and desires...conservative ideology should be more appealing to individuals who are either

temporarily or chronically high in needs to manage uncertainty and threat...because ‘preserving the status quo allows one to maintain what is familiar and known while rejecting the risky, uncertain prospect of social change’” (Jost and Amodio, 57). Uprooting an established culture in a society creates enormous anxiety and stress within individuals. Conservatism appeals to those individuals that need to hold together traditional culture, as a means to protect their way of life and diminish the injustices created by the individuals who are perceived as destroying the society. Injustices create serious threats to the status quo and displace the traditions established by society. Continued injustices, which foster a grudge, lead certain groups like terrorists to respond with violent actions, because extreme right-wing ideology promotes this intense aggression.

Building on the idea of the impact of ideology, religiosity provides powerful motivations for individuals to conform to terrorist organizations. Religion is a defining feature of a majority of societies, and it is interwoven within almost all aspects of that society. For example, conservative politics is heavily influenced by religious scriptures and beliefs that define family values and cultural norms. Religion acts as a guiding principle to help define life and give meaning to existence:

First, religion is about the substantive notion of ‘the sacred’ and, second, religion serves a unique function in explicating the “ultimate issues in life”. Thus, the shared belief in the existence of God (or gods) and an afterlife as well as less explicitly religious concepts, such as control and life purpose, ought to culminate in a powerful worldview. That worldview not only directs individual and group processes but also might reduce

existential anxiety by fostering the prospect of an *eternal* group membership (Ysseldyk, 62).

The belief in religious scriptures provides a powerful impression of security and certainty in a complex world, by reducing the anxiety of death and a meaningful life. This is accomplished through clear answers on how to live with and interact with other people, along with the promise of an afterlife. The anxiety that stems from a lack of satisfaction of these needs is immense and almost unbearable. Radical groups take advantage of the powerful, comforting ideology of religion, in order to weave religious scriptures into their belief systems as a means to obscure their malicious intentions, and provide justification for the violent behaviors they call for. Another way to understand this concept is illustrated by M. B. Rogers et al., who examines social-psychological factors underlying terrorist violence. She states, "...the 'religious framework' offers the excuse, and the terrorist framework offers the means to carry out the job. Religion might appear to play an elevated role because of the rhetoric used by terrorist groups, but the key factors driving the choice of suicide bombers to be low self-esteem combined with countered grievances" (Rogers, 254). Terrorist organizations prey on psychological vulnerabilities, such as insecurity or insignificance, by using religion to give them meaning and purpose. This justification of violence is crucial, because the distortion of religion is exactly what is used in retaliation for injustices towards political ideologies, notably far-right conservatism. Political and religious ideologies are interwoven with one another, as each provides not only fulfillment of deficient needs, but also justifies the use violence as a means to protect their worldview concepts.

Further examination of the underlying psychological and sociological motivations will provide a deeper understanding of how the exploitations of fundamental needs push individuals to identify with radical ideologies. Psychological, or micro-level, influences stem from vulnerabilities within the individual, such as a need for meaning or identity, and perceptions of injustices. Finding significance in life promotes the belief that actions contribute to a greater purpose. This concept has been studied countless times, to which the findings suggests, "...nearly every human, across cultures, has a deep and profound psychological need to create a sense of personal meaning and significance...this identity can be a complicated, uncertain and anxiety provoking experience. Instead of wrestling with it, some people just gravitate toward an existing, structured set of beliefs and adopt them with little critical thought or personal reflection. The absolutist, black-and-white nature of most extremist ideologies is often attractive to those who feel overwhelmed by the complexity and stress of finding meaning in a complicated world." (Borum, 292). Identity formation is crucial for every person, because it provides a sense of self and understanding of who one is in relation to others. The byproduct of identity formation elicits motivation to give the self purpose. This can be fulfilled through actions that are believed to make a difference in the world, or affect society for the greater good. In addition, perceived injustices help foster inclinations for purpose and meaning, because they violate the individual's moral standings. Injustices are seen as intentional acts, since the idea of a just world is generally accepted by the majority of people. It has been established that there is "...a positive relationship between intensity of anger and perceptions of injustice. This result is consistent with a social interactionist perspective of aggression and violence, which suggests that attributions of blame and injustice lead to expressions of anger that extend beyond the self to the social realm"

(Brown, 1020). By enacting revenge on people or groups who caused injustice, it gives individuals a sense of meaning and significance, that they are doing something bigger than themselves. Terrorist organizations take the combination of these powerful drives within people, along with their already strongly held political and religious beliefs, and twist them together to form an extremist view of changing the world by protecting others against corrupt, evil people.

One of the most appealing aspects of terrorist organizations is the idea of group membership that creates a sense of belonging. Humans are social beings who, evolutionarily speaking, survive off the interdependence of groups. Group membership is an essential feature of a person's life because it provides security, increases self-esteem, and contributes to identity construction. However, "...deprivation of belongingness should lead to a variety of affiliative behaviors and cause various undesirable effects, including decrements in health, happiness, and adjustment...loss of social bonds causes emotional distress...people who do not have adequate supportive relationships experience greater stress than those who do" (Baumeister, 508). Social exclusion and rejection can lead an individual to develop a mentality that life is meaningless, through which self-esteem is greatly decreased. This reduction of self-esteem causes a person to feel worthless, and generates a severe hole in a person's self concept to which their identity is built on. Radical groups exploit this by promising group membership and establishing security with other members, both combined working to restore meaning and rebuild identity. Professor Tyler Stillman from Florida State University states that, "...humans get most of what they need to survive from their social group rather than directly from the natural environment...the human strategy for survival depends on belonging...social exclusion...could threaten people at such a basic level that it would impair their sense of meaningful existence" (Stillman, 250). Social

bonds between individuals act as reinforcers to self-esteem, because they build a person's confidence and provide the support needed in hard times. Where loneliness works to break down identity, social groups complete individual identity through the security needed in order to discover meaning and significance. Therefore, it is not the radical ideology itself, that drives individuals to become involved in terrorism but rather, the concept of group membership and the bolstering of one's self-esteem through involvement with the group. The ideology only takes precedent when the bonds with other group members are formed. It is only through the formation of these bonds and the identification of the characteristics within a group, that the meaning involved in the ideology begins to shape and define the person, to the extent they take the violent actions called for.

While psychological vulnerabilities mainly contribute to identification with radical ideology, an alternative perspective illustrates that cultural factors are just as significant. Societies have cultures that transcend through time, in which norms and values have been constructed. These cultures have created what sociologists call a collective memory; "a memory or memories shared or recollected by a group, as a community or culture" (dictionary.com). Stephen Vertigans, a Professor of Sociology at the Robert Gordon University in Scotland, posts a theory about the importance of understanding habits as a means of influencing behavior, and how these habits are part of a broader collective memory that has roots from generations passed. He argues that by analyzing historical processes, one will gain a deeper understanding of social life and the influence it has on individuals: "Violent pasts are, of course, hardly unusual. Aggressive struggles over discourse, resources and power feature throughout history and across societies..." (Vertigans, 49). Cultural norms and values provide a framework of standards for

individuals to live by and come to formulate their identity. These habits create the foundations to which society is built upon, and both directly and indirectly influence individuals' everyday lives. Disruption to social life threatens the security of people in a society. The degree of these threats can precipitate violent reactions, as a means to protect the society. However, terrorism is not seen in all societies, under these circumstances. The use of terrorism to defend social life is brought about by the attributions these groups make to determine who is responsible.

Attributions determine how groups and individuals create explanations about the causes of events, and who or what is responsible for them: "The way people make attributions is pertinent to how they develop grievances, ascribe blame, and evaluate those regarded as responsible for negative events. It is not unusual for people to 'default' to attributing positive outcomes to themselves and negative outcomes to others" (Borum, 295). In instances where serious threats to societal life occur, the way in which group members attribute blame has a direct effect on the responses enacted. Identification of another group or person causing the negative events will forge motivations to retaliate against them, in order to stop further disruption. Sociological perspectives evaluate societal level factors that contribute to the creation of vulnerabilities within the psychological make-up of people.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated a small portion of the underlying psychological factors that contribute to individuals identifying with radical ideology. There are many more influences such as social identity theory, self-concepts, and personal biases, that all play a role. These influences work together to produce a vulnerable person who falls victim to extremism. The term victim should be viewed lightly; not every terrorist member can be considered victimized. Human cognition is incredibly complex; there is no one specific way in

which a person becomes radicalized. With this in mind, it is important to understand that any person in any environment can fall prey to radicalization. The belief that there is a stereotypical “terrorist” is completely false. Understanding the perspectives of the individuals who believe they are fighting for a justified cause, will lead to further knowledge of how and why these extremist groups come to be. Acts of terrorism have devastating emotional and physical tolls on not only the people directly involved in them, but also national policy decisions, stereotype activations, and economic functioning. It is for these reasons that simply labeling terrorists as individuals with mental defects is destructive in successfully intervening with them. Effective intervention techniques still need more development and research, but understanding the complexity of these individuals must be kept in mind in order to produce practical actions. Further research needs to be conducted on the history of terrorist organizations, and the influence of other countries’ policy decisions, that contribute to the rise of terrorist organizations. Sufficient empirical research must be conducted, in order to put an end to the use of violence in the name of radical ideology.

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