

RUNNING HEAD: Dedicated to the Cause

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Dedicated to the Cause: The Role of Identity in Initiating, Sustaining and Diminishing
Violent Extremism.

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ABSTRACT

The threat of terrorism and rise of extremist movements across the globe pose some of the greatest challenges the world currently faces. While there have been serious conceptual and methodological problems within the psychological study of terrorism, the nascent field has advanced, and the evidence, theories and models have developed in their sophistication. The current article explores the role of social or collective identity in instigating, propagating and diminishing engagement in violent extremism. Specifically examining how when a fundamental need to belong is challenged through threats and uncertainty this can lead to the people joining entitative groups which can fuse personal and social identities. These identities can be further amplified through ingroup and outgroup processes leading to involvement in violent extremism. The paper also explores how identity can mediate the stress of this extremist lifestyle and sustain engagement in violence. In order to illustrate these processes, the article draws on interviews with Northern Irish paramilitaries. Finally, the paper explores the role of identity in moderating violent extremism, and provides suggestions of approaches to promote desistance from violent extremism.

KEY WORDS: radicalization, violent extremism, terrorism, social identity, deradicalization, political violence

Dedicated to the Cause: The Role of Identity in Initiating, Sustaining and Diminishing Violent Extremism.

Violent extremism, terrorism and radicalization are some of the central challenges facing the world today (Kruglanski, et al., 2017) and these challenges have become the subject of significant academic and policy interest since the terror attacks of 9/11, and subsequent bombings in Madrid and London (Horgan, 2005). In the last five years the rise and fall of Islamic State (ISIS) and the global terror attacks inspired by this group have renewed policy and research interest in these issues further (Jasko, LaFree & Kruglanski, 2016).

While there are conceptual and methodological weaknesses within terrorism studies, due to the reliance on secondary data, problematic definitions of core concepts, and a predominance of single authored and one-time contributions that have limited the development of the field (Silke, 2001; Horgan, 2003, Victoroff, 2005; Schuurman, 2018). It is also clear that research exploring routes into violent extremism and models of radicalization processes have become more advanced since the surge in interest post 9/11 (see Borum, 2014; Doosje et al., 2016). While efforts to understand how individuals and groups desist and disengage from violent extremism and potentially deradicalize, have been more limited over the last ten years, this field of research has also grown and developed in sophistication (Altier, Boyle, Shortland & Horgan, 2017; Ferguson, Burgess & Hollywood, 2015; Koehler, 2017). One factor that has consistently demonstrated importance for both engagement in and desistance from violent extremism is social identity. Identity has been shown to be valuable in predicting (van Zomeren, Postmes & Spears, 2008), stimulating (van Stekelenburg, Oegema & Klandermans, 2010) and supporting engagement with activist groups (Klandermans, 1984), and the role of identity processes in involvement, engagement and disengagement will be the key focus of this article.

Models of an extremist lifecycle have proposed an ‘arc’ of terrorist involvement (Horgan & Taylor, 2011) with three critical stages, becoming involved, staying engaged and

disengaging from violent extremism; yet research has tended to only focus on involvement and disengagement, and any emphasis on how violent extremists sustain engagement in violent extremism, has been minimal (Horgan, 2017), but is emerging (Ferguson & McAuley, in press).

The research exploring how and why people become involved in violent extremism has moved away from answers based on psychopathology or personality profiles (McAuley, 2016b), to explore antecedent pathways into engaging with clandestine violent groups (Borum, 2014; Horgan, 2005). These pathways involve exo, macro, meso and micro level factors, combining intra-individual processes, community and societal context along with global ideological forces, in order to influence an individual's involvement in violent extremism (Ferguson & Binks, 2015; Ranstorp, 2016; Schmid, 2013).

While there is not enough space in one article to deal with all the antecedent factors that prompt involvement in extremism in any meaningful detail; they commonly include holding perceptions of an injustice or discrimination (Piazza, 2006), friendship and/or kinship ties to extremist group (Bond, 2014; Sageman, 2004), a supportive community context (Burgess, Ferguson & Hollywood, 2007), advantages through being a group member (financial, status, sexual, etc.; Horgan, 2005), desire for revenge (Crenshaw, 2003), a quest for significance (Kruglanski, et al. , 2014), and age and gender associations (Silke, 2003).

While research focusing on the desistence stage in the arc of terrorism, is more limited (Ferguson, 2016; Marsden, 2016) it generally follows a similar multidimensional exploration of the routes out of clandestine armed extremist groups and similarly, the 'push' and 'pull' factors which can facilitate disengagement for the individual militant (Altier, Thoroughgood & Horgan, 2014). These factors include incarceration (Ferguson, 2016), burn out and changes in family dynamics (see Altier, et al., 2014; Bjorgo, 2009), disillusionment with group ideology (Windisch, Ligon & Simi, 2017), or current dynamics or direction (van

der Heide & Huurman, 2016), the fear of being caught (Altier, Boyle, Shortland, & Horgan, 2017), or merely that former militants come to regard such violence as counterproductive to their cause. While some of these radicalizing and deradicalizing push and pull factors have received volumes of support, such as a perceived grievance or injustice (Jensen, et al. 2016) others such as a need for a quest for significance have received less to date (Jasko, et al. 2016).

Research demonstrates that once individuals become active members their identities can be strengthened (McAuley, Tonge & Shirlow, 2008; McAuley, 2011; Vestergren, Drury & Hammar Chiriak, 2016) as their personal identities become fused with the group identity. (Swann, Jetten, Gomez & Whitehouse, 2012). This increased identity fusion is a result of extremists cutting themselves off from external contact and becoming increasingly bound to the group aims and norms (della Porta, 1995). While research exploring disengagement and deradicalization processes also demonstrate the importance of identity in fuelling disengagement from violence (Ferguson, 2016; Ferguson, et al., 2015; Ferguson, McDaid & McAuley, 2018; Raets, 2017).

This current article will focus on reviewing the important role identity plays in instigating, sustaining and diminishing involvement in violent extremism. In addition to reviewing and examining the empirical and theoretical knowledge, the article will also draw on research from Northern Ireland to contextualize the theory. Northern Ireland suffered from 30 years of sustained political conflict from the late 1960's until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The conflict involved three protagonist groups; republican paramilitary groups (predominantly Catholic, seeking to achieve a united island of Ireland through violent means); loyalist paramilitary groups (predominantly Protestant, committed to maintaining unity with Britain), and the British State (represented by the British Army, and the local security forces).

Quotes from members of clandestine loyalist and republican paramilitary groups will be integrated into the article to illustrate and contextualize the role of identity within the experiences of violent militants. The quotes presented are taken from interviews from members and former members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), Ulster Defence Association (UDA), and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)¹. The majority of the interviewees were also ex-prisoners having served sentences for scheduled offences relating to their activities as violent extremists, these offences range from murder and manslaughter through armed robbery, serious assaults to a range of explosives and firearm offences.

The Role of Identity in Involvement in Violent Extremism

Regardless of context, humans have a fundamental need to create a sense of belonging, meaning and control over their lives, and challenges to this sense of self and one's identity have the capacity to create significant distress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Caprara & Vecchione, 2017). An essential component of our sense of 'who we are' is related to those social groups with which we identify, indeed our beliefs, attitudes and affiliations are often largely a product of the groups we belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 1986). Social identity theory consistently demonstrates that group members are focused on maintaining positive intergroup distinctiveness and will go to extraordinary lengths to maintain their belief that their group is superior to the 'other' (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Even engaging in antisocial behaviour that risks their own safety for the prestige of the group (Hogg, Kruglanski & van den Bos, 2013).

As mentioned, feelings of perceived injustice, humiliation, threat and fear are well-supported antecedent factors (Jensen, et al., 2016), and when these experiences are perceived

¹ For details of the sampling and methods involved in collecting and analysing these interviews, along with the complexities of dealing with data from across ideologically apposed groups see Ferguson & McAuley (2019).

as a result of group level discrimination (e.g., ethnic or religious discrimination), rather than the result of interpersonal factors, they are likely to provoke a collective response (Smyth & Ortiz, 2002; Walker & Mann, 1987). Group level interpretations of the injustices, or threats that the paramilitaries faced in Northern Ireland were key in pushing them to react to these experiences through a violent collective response. This process is articulated by an individual who became a member of the UVF:

What drove ourselves was defending our country. We seen our communities under attack. Quite simply we were a community of five hundred houses surrounded by I don't know how many thousand Catholic houses...They were sending bullets through businesses doors, intimidation, out and out intimidation...You were defending your home, defending your family, your friends, that's what drove us more than anything. (Male, UVF, Mid-Ulster).

It is clear that the sense of threat is viewed at the group level, and while the Ulster Protestant/unionist ethno-political community he aims to defend, is socially imagined, it is populated by his kith and kin and perceived as a real entity (McAuley, 2016a). The group has entitativity, the members are perceived to share a common fate, and are endowed with the same fixed and unchanging attributes, determined by the essence of the group (Yzerbyt, Judd & Corneille, 2004). Experiences of discrimination and injustice can contribute to this self-essentialization, which can facilitate collective action and enhance these feelings of similarity and groupness in the threatened group (Wagner, Holtz & Kashima, 2009).

These processes are often complemented by increases in outgroup bias, xenophobia, and as witnessed in the quote above, engagement in violent extremist reactions (Hogg, et al., 2013). These processes are universal and have been witnessed in other contexts beyond

Ireland, for example, among Muslim extremists and ring-wing extremists in debates around banning minarets in Switzerland, (Holtz, Wagner & Sartawi, 2015) and have a role to play in accelerating bias, intergroup competition and ratcheting up hostility, as the actions and reactions of each group threaten the essentialized identities of the other group yet further.

Hogg (2004; 2014; 2016) further explores the role of essentialized identities and entitativity in stimulating engagement with extremist groups through *uncertainty-identity theory*. He proposes that feeling uncertain about the world and one's place in it can be unsettling or aversive. To counteract these feelings people are motivated to define themselves through self-categorization and identify with highly consensual, distinctive and clearly defined prototypes of highly entitative groups. These feelings (Hogg, 2004) are the force behind the yearning for fundamentalist, ethnic revivalist, and populist nationalist groups that provide a more certain sense of self in an uncertain post-modern world. This mechanism of uncertainty reduction centres around the assimilation of the self to the group prototype to reduce uncertainty around the self on behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions. Therefore, this self-categorization can lead to depersonalization and the ingroup prototype becoming central to the person's identity. Hogg and Adelman (2013) also argue that this prototype can take on the properties of an autocratic leader, and uncertainty can increase support and trust for these autocratic exemplars or strong leaders whose image represents the movement, group or nation.

As the social identity research discussed above testifies, and Borum (2014) concisely argues, while people tend to see radicalization as an ideological process, in reality, it is social process. It is this sense of belonging, affiliation and connectedness that begins the journey that leads to ideology. In other words, it is not ideological zeal, which drives the individual into the arms of an extremist group, but the affinity with the group that drives the individual to the ideology.

While much discussion is around the role of the internet, propaganda and social media in motivating individuals to join extremist groups, it is important to remember that most people do not join groups as lone individuals, but do so through social and family networks. As the quote below from the UDA militant indicates, these entitative groups are very real, and populated with uncertain people who share proximity, similarity and are bound to a common fate:

The reason I joined the UDA was, more or less, because my friends were in it, and that's as simple as I can get, it was mostly peer pressure. Plus, I was looking to defend my own area against republicans and that's the way I seen it at the time. I joined the UDA because I saw people in the area so frightened that they couldn't even go out at night without republicans coming to the area. So I joined the UDA to protect that area. (Male, UDA, Belfast).

Research studies with Islamic militants and foreign fighters who travelled to Syria to join the ISIS caliphate mirror these sentiments (Bakker, 2006; Bond, 2014; Lindekilde, Bertelsen & Stohl, 2016; Sageman, 2004) demonstrating that social relational networks of friends and family facilitated mobilization to these extremist groups. Indeed, Sageman (2004) argues that social bonds are critical and radicalization is more related to who you know, and the strength of ingroup bonds, than the depth of ideological appeal.

It must be remembered that family and social networks can push and pull in different directions, and the same conditions that attract anxiously uncertain or threatened people to extremist groups can be manipulated to pull people towards resilient groups, which in turn, can guide people away from extremism towards more pro-social activities (Doosje, et al., 2016; Hogg, 2004). Therefore, countermeasures to protect against radicalization can harness

these antecedent factors to protect uncertain or fearful people from engaging with extremists by providing pro-social essentialist and entitative alternative groups. Likewise, Lüders, Jones, Fritsche and Agroskin (2016) suggest that using prototypical role models to deliver pro-social resilient messages via the mass media could help those vulnerable to threat and uncertainty from shifting towards extremist or populist outlooks.

Sustaining Involvement: Small Group Processes and Identity Fusion

Being in a radicalized extremist group involves an individual joining a closed clandestine group, and the literature points to the importance of small group dynamics in this radicalization process (Bakker, 2006; Sageman, 2004). Within the context of the small group, as the individual's involvement deepens and strengthens, they tend to become more isolated while having more intense social interactions within a small group of likeminded activists (Silke, 2008). As demonstrated with Islamic extremists (Bakker 2006; Sageman, 2004), and witnessed within Northern Irish paramilitary groups (Ferguson & McAuley, 2019) there is a risky shift as the members' identify with, and adopt the beliefs and behaviours of the prototypes. They become more isolated and compliant to group consensus, and the normalization of violent anti-social behaviour (della Porta, 1995). A UVF volunteer describes the impact of these processes on identity:

I was twenty-one, my lifestyle was about football, fishing. I'd just got married, and had a young daughter. But having put all that together, the pull or pressure, or the culture of what we were under at that time, that all became secondary to me, because I'd sold myself out completely to the organisation. I believed that was my most important role in my life at the time. You know, my work was there too, but the organization quickly and very easily took over every aspect of me completely. Probably the reason being, I wanted to dedicate myself to it...until your caught,

imprisoned, or some of your friends are killed...you genuinely believed it was for God and Ulster, I was sold completely. (Male, UVF, North Antrim).

As witnessed above, involvement with the radicalized group can lead to the ingroup identity becoming an all-encompassing aspect of the radicalizing group member's identity to the detriment of other social and personal identities, such as in the case above, being a father or a husband. This is a spiralling process, as the militant becomes more bound to the group and engaged in violence, they become more isolated from the wider community. Being an active militant also increases feelings of empowerment, efficacy, and sense of purpose while decreasing moral ambiguity. Being a member also increases the sense of comradeship, further amplifying the sense of collective identity (Ferguson & McAuley, in press).

These processes also fuel moral disengagement (Bandura, 2004) and the hardening of dehumanizing perceptions of the oppositional outgroup, which justify engagement in ideologically motivated violence (Grossman, 1995). These small groups can also be used to fuel further radicalization through engagement with ideological or political education, as seen in Northern Irish prisons (Ferguson, et al., 2015; Ferguson, 2016), through engagement in virtual interactions and propaganda via the internet and social media (Holtz, et al., 2015) or through radicalizing conversations between the likeminded group members (Thomas, McGarty & Louis, 2014).

These processes of increasing attachment and identification within these entitative essentialist groups of extremists share similarities to the predictions from *identity fusion theory* (Swann, et al., 2012) and the *devoted actor model* (Atran, Sheikh & Gomez, 2014). Swann and colleagues (2012) expect identity fusion to occur when group members experience visceral feelings of oneness with their group until the point where the personal and social selves fuse together into one unique identity. These fused group members form

kin-like bonds with one another and are devoted to the collective group, which, in turn, encourages the move to endorse antisocial pro-group behaviours like fighting and die for their country (Gómez, Morales, Hart, Vazquez & Swann, 2011; Swann, et al., 2009), or to become combatants on behalf of the group (Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester & Swann, 2014).

The devoted actor model, shares much similarity to identity fusion conceptions, but Atran, et al. (2014) argue that while having a fused identity is critical to understanding why some people would be willing to sacrifice themselves for their group, other factors need to be considered. Atran and colleagues (Atran, et al., 2014; Atran, Seikh & Gómez, 2014a) suggest that in addition to being fused, the militant needs to also be unconditionally committed to the group's sacred or core values. Related to the wider identity research discussed above and the role of kinship and friendship ties in facilitating people joining armed groups (Ferguson & McAuley, in press; Sageman, 2014) or traveling overseas to fight (Bond, 2014). Both the devoted actor model and identity fusion theory highlight the importance of kin-like bonds to small groups of comrades in pushing people to engage in violence and self-sacrifice on behalf of their group.

Whether you are a Libyan revolutionary, an Irish republican paramilitary, an ISIS foreign fighter, or a Kurd in a People's Protection Unit, sustaining a life as an insurgent or counter-insurgent is difficult, demanding, stressful and traumatic. Research has overwhelmingly demonstrated that engaging in organized killing can have negative physical and psychological costs (Grossman, 1996). An indication of the stress and trauma an extremist has to endure can be seen in the testimony from this INLA volunteer:

I [initially] joined the IRA at a very early age and I've paid a very high price for it.

I've done a total of 18 years in prison and I lost almost all youth, not to mention the

trauma that my family went through, in relation to when I was in prison. I came from a big family, four or five sisters. They suffered greatly financially, psychologically because of my being in prison. The other thing about myself would be I would be very much – I don't know how to describe it like, very much, militant in the face of authority and I got in all sorts of trouble when I was in prison with the authorities. At one stage I ended up on hunger strike when I was [X] years of age and I spent [X] days on hunger strike. And that was very physically demanding and it took me months to recover from physically. I was very conscious of the psychological impact that that was having on my family. So that type of thing. Again, whilst in prison, I think people handle it in different ways. It wasn't big problem for me as such, even though there was conflict and beatings and long periods in solitary confinement and protests and hunger strikes. (Male, INLA, West Tyrone).

While research on the impact of participation in killing amongst violent extremists is limited (Ferguson & McAuley, 2019), studies with regular and irregular military forces consistently demonstrate problematic mental health, alcohol and substance misuse, poor relationship health, readjustment problems, and both increased anger and aggression among post-combat soldiers (Cabrera, Adler & Bliese, 2016; Cigrang et al., 2014; Keyes, Hatzenbuehlet, Grant & Hasin, 2012; Russell, et al., 2014). Social identity is key to understanding how people deal with and make sense of the stress created by conflict (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). Group membership can mediate the experience of stress (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam & Alexander, 2012; Muldoon, Schmid & Downes, 2009) and having a strong identity can moderate post-traumatic stress and psychological well-being (Muldoon & Downes, 2007; Muldoon & Wilson, 2001).

Trauma is not experienced nor appraised in the same way by everyone who shared in the experience, and differences in the subjective appraisal of experiencing and perpetrating violence are often linked to group identity and the role and position of the identity in the wider conflict (Muldoon, Lowe & Schmid, 2016). This process is vividly illustrated by the Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rates in conflict zones, which are consistently significantly lower than the number of incidents of violence witnessed by the population (Muldoon et al., 2016). Evidence from a host of political conflicts has consistently demonstrated that a person's social identification is pivotal in buffering the impact of political violence on mental health (Ankri, Baker & Shalev, 2010; Basoglu et al., 1997; Bartal, 2007; Cairns, 1996; Kelman, 1999). Therefore, this amplification or fusion of identity amongst groups of violent extremists would offer protection from the stress they encounter or create for themselves through their violence, sustaining the militants in their extremist career (Ferguson & McAuley, in press).

Disengagement, Deradicalization and Defusing Amplified Identities

While the decision to leave a clandestine group, that has been the focus of such intensive identification and attachment, must be difficult to come to and the routes out are highly individualized (Horgan, 2006), in the end most extremists' leave or the extremist group comes to an end one way or another (Bjorgo, 2013; Bjorgo & Horgan, 2009). However, as Swann, et. al.'s (2012) *principle of irrevocability* attests, once people become fused with and devoted to the group they tend to remain fused. Additionally, as the process of amplifying their group identity involved them becoming isolated from outside influences, they have reduced the availability of routes out (Swann et al., 2009). Even when the members can defuse their identities, the process will be emotionally difficult and involve the restructuring of the self and the meaning of past actions (Swann et al., 2012). In light of the research

presented above on the implication's identity can have for mental health, this process of de-fusion could create very challenging conditions for psychological well-being.

This reluctance or inability to voluntarily weaken, or de-fuse an identity centred on sacred values, religious, political or ethno-nationalist ideologies suggests that attempting to create strategies to deradicalize violent extremists would be difficult and unlikely to be successful (Ferguson, 2016). Indeed, deradicalization is probably unnecessary if the aim is to create the conditions for militants to simply desist from violence (Horgan & Taylor, 2011). It is clear from research with Northern Irish militant groups (Ferguson, et al., 2015; Ferguson, 2016; Ferguson et al., 2018; Shirlow, Tonge, McAuley & McGlynn, 2010), that the militant activist identity was not diminished amongst paramilitaries who had disengaged from politically motivated violence and moved into conflict transformation and community work. Rather, as with other social movements, their strong sustained identification was actually key to their involvement in both these violent and peaceful aspects of their activism (Huddy, 2001; Klandermans, 2002; Louis, Amiot, Thomas & Blackwood, 2016). This enduring activist identity, attachment to sacred values and the importance of these in the continuity of activism from violent to peaceful are illustrated by this former republican paramilitary, now involved in a political organization:

I don't think our core values and principles have changed. I think how we deliver them, how we've developed them has changed...we've never been a political group that shies away from getting involved in whatever field of struggle we have to get involved in. And it's the same now...So you've got to keep your core values and, as I say, our baseline is class struggle and we're not compromising on class issues. So that's our line in the sand. (Male, IRSP, Belfast).

Based on this theory and evidence it would seem that an extremist identity cannot be fully erased, either by the extremists, or those who know them as an extremist. However, the process of desisting from violent extremism is essentially a process of finding alternative identities and groups to attach to and identify with (Barelle, 2015). Therefore, moderation of the singular fused extremist identity, to allow space for the development of personal identities to re-establish is a necessary step in this process. Yet while this process will be challenging for the extremist, Handcock (2013) has demonstrated that the Northern Irish peace process led to a reduction in threat perception, which in turn allowed a reduction in the salience of ethno-political or national identities, giving people space to explore other identities within their identity hierarchy. It must also be remembered, that the extremist's identity is embedded within their wider collective or community identity, where it originated, and even post-engagement they will still be integrated into this wider group, or at least some sympathetic sub-sections of the community will understand and empathize with their past extremism. These strong bonds to the wider community which initiated their engagement in pro-group antisocial behaviour could also support future pro-group prosocial behaviour (Ferguson et al., 2018).

However, for many extremists their choices to engage in or support others to engage in violence find little widespread societal support. For example, examine the attitudes in the media towards returning foreign fighters from Syria, or wives of foreign fighters, such as the so called 'jihadi bride' Shamima Begum. Even in Northern Ireland, where loyalist and republican armed groups had at least a substantial minority of their respective communities supporting their actions (Hayes & McAllister, 2005) in the post-conflict space they faced stigma from across society (Shirlow, 2014). Social identities can provide a framework for making sense of adversity, this meaning making will only assist positive reinterpretation,

when there is a good fit between the identity and the traumatic experience (Muldoon et al., 2009).

As these processes are shaped by the social and political conditions, when the socio-political context alters identities based on positive assumptions, such as ‘freedom fighter’, or ‘community vanguard’ can become devalued identities, such as ‘terrorist’ or ‘perpetrator’. This will then change the meaning of past experience based on those identities. These changes should, in turn, have consequences for the interpretation of stress and resulting psychological well-being (Ferguson, Muldoon & McKeown, 2014). Whether social identities are a resource, or an obstacle, to individual resilience in the face of traumatic experiences therefore, depends heavily on the socio-political context (Muldoon & Lowe, 2012). Therefore, while these extremist identities were once protective and helped sustain radical activism, they can become negative and stigmatizing and reducing this stigma may offer avenues out of extremism.

Discussion

While radicalization, deradicalization and disengagement are poorly defined and problematic assumptions (Clubb, 2015; Schurrman, 2018), research into both these aspects of the arc of terrorism have developed dramatically. However, while these processes of radicalization and deradicalization tend to be viewed as ideologically driven, they are best understood as identity driven with ideology providing the glue that binds extremists together and fastens them to the group (Borum, 2014). Indeed, many of the push and pull factors (e.g., perceptions of injustice or discrimination, disillusionment with group ideology) which foster engagement in, and disengagement from violent extremism are inherently related to identity, as the cognitions and behaviours related to these factors have to be understood through the lens provided by the salient identity.

Given the paucity of evidence-based counter extremism interventions and the lack of effective evaluation of current intervention programmes (Cherney, 2020; Feddes & Gallucci, 2015) it is difficult to gauge what aspects of interventions actually work. However, basing interventions on long standing and well validated theories, such as social identity approaches, should offer a profitable avenue for exploration. For example, when creating intervention strategies consideration needs to be given to the subjective groups within the individual, instead of focusing on individuals within or attracted to extremist groups. Focusing on removing, or destroying, the ‘bad apples’ within the group will in all likelihood increase the perception of threat among the group, creating the potential for increased social competition, which may lead to people risking their own safety and freedom for their threatened group (Hogg, et al., 2013). Once these aggrieved groups become reified, and small likeminded bands bond together through kin-like attachments, they can take a risky shift towards radical and violent actions (Atran et al, 2014). Indeed, research on the relationship between health and identity suggests that taking this route could actually be a ‘healthy’ course of action. (Muldoon et al., 2016). However, it must be remembered that these processes of attraction, reification and fusion can also be harnessed to counter engagement with violent groups by promoting resilient pro-social groups (Doosje, et al., 2016; Hogg, 2004) and through the use of prototypical pro-social role models (Lüders, et al., 2016)

Once fused groups are formed and begin to politically or ideologically radicalize, they are difficult to dismantle (Swann et al., 2012). Yet, while this is the case, identity is still a key to the demise of extremism. Rather than trying to dismantle or reprogramme ideology and challenge extremist identity head on, interventions should support the extremist with opportunities to develop pro-social identities through access to prosocial activities and groups. For example, through support for the re-establishment of more family, education or employment-based identities, which may moderate, if not remove, the more militant activist

identity. This will also allow the disengaged or disengaging militant to develop other secure attachments free from humiliation and stigma. Indeed, Cherney's (2018) assessment of an Australian prison-based intervention demonstrates the importance of these pro-social supports in the disengagement and reintegration of terrorist prisoners. Finally, it must be remembered that desistance and disengagement are not final, they do not have an endpoint, they are a process, and when the conditions that people face change, the cycle can reset and begin again.

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