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# Review: Disillusionment with Radical Social Groups

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## Review: Disillusionment with Radical Social Groups

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### Abstract

*Disengagement from radical social groups is a complex process initiated by the experience of a crisis, or disillusionment causing a re-evaluation of involvement. This paper provides a review of the experiences that hinder group involvement and increases the likelihood of disengagement. Utilising the categorisation by Klandersman (2005) and Demant et al. (2008a), the factors are discussed under the themes of normative, affective, and continuance. Normative factors rely on the ideological premise to ensure membership is viewed as a moral obligation, while the affective factors incorporate the social and organisational aspects facilitating emotional attachment to the group, and continuance factors are those influencing the cost and benefits of group involvement. Commitment to radical social groups becomes vulnerable when the material, psychological and communal benefits of membership are outweighed by the resources required for association and the inability to achieve desirable outcomes.*

### Keywords

Disengagement; Disillusionment; Extremism; Radical social groups

## INTRODUCTION

Research on the defection from religious groups, cults, gangs and criminal organisations indicate similar contributing factors to disengagement despite differing ideologies (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Fink & Hearne, 2008). The operational definition of disengagement within this paper is characterised by Fink and Hearne (2008), and Bjørge and Horgan (2009) as a behavioural change resulting in the exit from a radical social group (characterised as secular and cohesiveness, ethnocentric, totalitarian and with a propensity for violence), notwithstanding any cognitive shifts, or deradicalisation. Models of disengagement by Skonovd (1979, April) and Ebaugh (1988) emphasise how members experience a crisis or disillusionment causing doubts to arise and the re-evaluation of membership (Fink & Hearne, 2008; Mellis, 2007; Mushtaq, 2009; Wright, 1987). This cognitive opening begins the psychological process for possible disengagement by allowing alternative viewpoints and lifestyles to be considered. As a break down in the insulation from the outside world occurs, disengagement can be accelerated when combined with social and economic support, education and counselling. As the initiating stage of the process, it is imperative to the study of disengagement to identify the reasons for disillusionment caused by the incongruence between the individual's expectations and the reality of membership, whereby the discrepancies between the two do not align forcing membership to be viewed as less meaningful (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Dechesne, Janssen, & Van Knippenberg, 2000; Demant, Slootman, Buijs, & Tillie, 2008b). For some, the disillusionment gradually builds until the desire to disengage exists, for others, there can be a singular catalytic event prompting a more abrupt psychological disengagement. The aim of this paper is to identify and review the contributing factors towards disillusionment with radical social groups in the literature.

## CATEGORISING THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF DISENGAGEMENT

The process of disengagement is inherently complex and multi-layered, influenced by an amalgamation of issues and personal factors compounding on the individual. Bjørge (2002, June; 2005, 2009) discusses the causes of disengagement in terms of 'push' and 'pull' factors; that is, negative social forces which make membership unattractive, and factors attracting the person to a more rewarding alternative. The effects of push factors can be difficult to predict as negative sanctions can lead members to disengage or have the converse effect by increasing the group's solidarity and cohesiveness (Bjørge, 2005). Demant et al. (2009) noted influences causing individuals to defect involved complex psychological processes rarely operating in isolation, allowing both push and pull factors to co-exist, and the difficulties in effectively measuring each factor. Building on Bjørge's foundation, Klandermans (2005) and Demant et al. (2008a, 2008b) compartmentalise individual disengagement factors into three components – normative, affective, and continuance ( see Table 1.). These categorisations coincide with previous literature (Allen & Meyer, 1990) focusing on the psychological states of organisational commitment where all categories are influential in the decision to disengage, and its ensuing success. In short, strong affective commitment allows

members to stay because they want to, strong continuance commitment encourages members to stay because they need to, and strong normative commitment causes members to stay because they feel they ought to (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

Table 1  
Normative, Affective and Continuance Factors Contributing to Disengagement

Normative:	Affective:	Continuance:
Ideology is no longer appealing	Disappointment in movement	Cost of membership
Change in individual's viewpoint	Frustration with group dynamics	Longing for ordinary life
Desired future is not achievable	Disloyalty between members	Negative social sanctions
Rejection of means to achieve goals	Mutual competition, contempt and distrust between members	Competing social relationships
	Failing leadership	

## **NORMATIVE**

The normative factors rely on the ideological premise of the group to maintain commitment and ensure membership is viewed as a moral obligation (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Klandermans, 1997). The ideology provides a constructed model of beliefs, aims and ideas to direct one's goals, expectations and actions. It offers a set of ideals, principles or symbols to explain how society should function, and for distinct radical social groups, combines a collectively defined grievance, with a clear definition of those responsible – producing an 'us against them' mentality and fostering moral outrage (Klandermans, 1997). As an alternative ideology, the adopted beliefs can instigate collective action for the intent to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing power system to uphold ideological values (Dechesne et al., 2000; Demant et al., 2008a).

The alignment between individual and group ideologies is positively correlated with normative attachment, and corresponding disengagement is an indication of failings in the group's ideology that makes membership and world-view unattractive (Demant et al., 2008b). When no longer provided with a satisfying world-view, meaning to the existing order, a desirable future or a means to achieve this future, the member has an increased susceptibility to alternative options (Demant et al., 2008a). While the changes to the individual's perception and acceptance of the group's ideological basis can lead to the rejection of radical views, it is more common for the changes in belief and value systems to occur after disengaging from the group (Horgan, 2005).

### **Lose faith in ideology**

The experience of self-doubt in aspects of the ideology can motivate the individual to view one's beliefs, and what the group is fighting for, as morally or politically wrong (Horgan, 2005). A failure to provide meaning or response to the member's concerns causes further doubts in the relevance of the group, as can the perceived lack of success in achieving the ideologically stated goals. When the individual's needs and motives no longer coincide with what the ideology is able to provide, the individual is more likely to disengage and deradicalise, or seek out an alternative group more suited to the individual's needs (Demant et al., 2008b). A study of three separate radical movements by Demant et al. (2008a) unveiled causes for the loss of faith in group ideologies; the changes in interpretation by the consensus, inconsistencies between aims and ideals between members, and the inability to implement a politically acceptable ideology that is radical enough for extreme members. As the movement evolves into a political influence, the radical ideological beliefs previously imposed on members may be compromised to appeal to a greater audience and gain greater community support. As a consequence, the member may find the ideological impetus for radical acts no longer exists, or may view the group as 'selling out' and seek an alternative radical group to engage with (Noricks, 2009).

Rommelspacher (2006) argues interactions that disrupt the group's world-view, and provide alternative explanations perceived as justifiable, can have a significant influence on the member's disengagement process. This cognitive disruption can also be caused by interactions with others who do not comply with the ideology or conform to existing stereotypes. The result of the inconsistencies between ideology and personal experience can alter the view of society (or the segment of the community) as the enemy. For example, Johnny Clarry, the ex-Grand Imperial Wizard of the

Ku Klux Klan refers to the meetings with African-American Reverend Wade Watts, where his expectations of the 'enemy' were shattered, "and then when Reverend Wade Watts was being kind to me - and he outsmarted me in that debate, I started realising that maybe not all white people were superior to black people" (Denton & Jacoby, 2005, September 5). Despite attempts to demonise Watts, Clarry notes the conflict in his expectations and experiences acted as a trigger to questioning his beliefs. This was also supported by Garfinkel's (2007) study where ethnocentric beliefs were challenged by compassion from the despised out-group, conflicting with their endorsed stereotypes. Although, as conveyed by Garfinkel (2007), this disruption only occurs if the recipient has the humility and courage to accept previously held beliefs may be flawed.

The self doubt in the group's ideology can lead to questioning the validity of the group and if it is unable to address these concerns through dialogue or attempts to address the grievance, the member is at risk of disengaging. However, while normative factors may be perceived as deficient, interactions can be maintained due to affective and continuance factors, as discovered by Photiadis' (1965) study of Mormon commitment and conformity. Participation on a social level provided greater influence on commitment and conformity to group norms, independent of ideological differences. Thus, despite doubts in the ideological basis for the group, disengagement can be significantly inhibited by social and lifestyle benefits of commitment.

### **Frustration at lack of success**

Socialisation into radical groups requires a high level of commitment and enforces a collective identity where group ideology and goals are fused with the individual's identity (Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003). As a consequence, the inability to distinguish between goals means success or failure is taken personally with emotional reactions of shame and guilt. Failed radical attempts at altering the status quo, and the realisation that despite the personal sacrifice of group commitment and acting in the most extreme, the desired goal is no closer, produces a demotivating effect and uncertainty regarding the group's radical actions (Demant et al., 2008a; Fink & Hearne, 2008). Failure at achieving ideological success generates a diminished sense of urgency and the realisation that initial aspirations associated with membership are removed from day-to-day responsibilities of the adopted role. When the individual determines their investment has been quite substantial, yet the goal remains a distant realisation, the probability of defection is heightened (Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Horgan, 2005; Wright, 1987).

The effects of failure have been measured in mainstream contexts with Snyder, Lassegard and Ford's (1986) study of successful and unsuccessful university groups. Participants led to believe they had failed a task displayed less interest in participating in future group activities and were less inclined to self-identify with the group, while the opposite effect occurred for successful groups. The social distance between the individual and group failure serves as a strategy to avoid negative evaluation and protects self-esteem. However, De Cremer and van Dijk's (2002) found when negative feedback on group performance was provided, only those with salient personal identities (as opposed to salient collective identities) would reduce contribution to the group, proposing group failure is only precursor to disengagement for individuals without a salient group identity. When distancing is observed by core members, the attempts to restore the self identity at the expense of the collective is viewed as a lack of commitment and disloyalty (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). At this point, members with salient personal identities, and behave with greater self-interest, are more likely to be rejected and/or expelled by group members with greater salient collective identities (Branscombe et al., 1999).

### **Rejection of violence**

Arguably, the most common reason for leaving radical social groups is the personal or indirect experiences of violence due to extremist ideologies and hatred (Fink & Hearne, 2008; Horgan, 2005; Noricks, 2009). The underlying reasons for rejecting violence can be of an ideological, strategic or organisational nature (Demant et al., 2008a). The ideological rejection of violence includes the individual's attitudes and morals surrounding violence, such as violence is inherently bad or creates undesired animosity. Strategically, violence is no longer seen as a successful method to achieving desired outcomes, and finally, the influence of violence on the organisation, such as in-group violence causing fragmentation within the movement. These violent stresses can lead to the rejection of violence and the rejection of the social group, causing disillusionment and an increase propensity for disengagement. While disengaging does not determine the violent behaviours of the individual, the rejection of violent means to achieve ideological aims is considered part of the deradicalisation process.

Husain (2007) details the horror experienced with the death of an innocent life and the realisation of the violent situation he had helped create. The halaqah endorsed the belief the life of a kafir is inconsequential in accomplishing Muslim dominance and Husain experienced anxiety over the method of violence. Rommelspacher's (2006; as cited in Demant et al., 2008a) study into German right-wing extremists found confrontation with violence caused some of

the movement's members to rethink involvement because of the view 'it was taken too far'. Supporting the experience of violence as a precipitating factor to disengagement includes the analysis of the Moluccan and squatter's movements (Demant et al., 2008a), and gangs in America (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996), whereby the personal confrontation with violence contributed considerably to the decline of group membership. Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) interviews with ex-members from St Louis' street gangs found experiences of violence, directly or indirectly, to be a consistent reason for disengagement, with the period immediately after the violent confrontation being the most susceptible for cognitive shifts. However, intervention must be swift to prevent the solidarity imposed by the gang's interpretation of the violence as favourable.

## **AFFECTIVE**

The affective factors are the social and organisational aspects facilitating or impeding emotional attachment to the group, and are central to an individual's propensity to maintain affiliations even when ideological differences are present. This affective attachment incorporates psychological investment to the group, emotional attachment to the group's goals and values, as well as the individual's role (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Feeling competent and comfortable in a role within the group is arguably the strongest antecedent to emotional attachment.

A positive correlation exists between affective attachment to the collective and the identification and involvement, and conversely, disappointment with intra-group interactions can weaken commitment and willingness to participate (Demant et al., 2008a; Klandermans, 1997). The failure in organisational capacity results in the group's inability to fulfil social and cultural functions or utilise sufficient new sources (Demant et al., 2008a). Affective commitment is subjected to dual processes; whereby reduction influences the member's perspective and highlights perceived deficiencies in normative and continuance spheres, or the reduction may be a consequence of an existing deficit.

### **Failing group interaction**

Radical social groups adopt various organisational structures; from fixed, hierarchal organisations with authoritarian leaders, to fluid and decentralised networks, yet all are susceptible to negative organisational factors which influence both maintenance and disengagement with intra-group relationships. Whether formally recognised or not, each member is assigned status where leaders are viewed as 'exemplary', and ethically and morally consistent with the group's ideals and goals, and group members who do not uphold the prototypical characteristics are viewed as less worthy, causing internal conflict (Demant et al., 2008a). Internal conflicts such as power plays, competition between members and disloyalty can dishearten members, and rejection or receiving negative feedback from the collective can cause personal uncertainty regarding acceptance (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Branscombe et al., 1999; Demant et al., 2008a; Horgan, 2005). The antagonism within members can produce paranoia and, in terms of radical groups, fears of infiltration from rival groups or authorities. The mutual competition, contempt and distrust can cause disillusionment as the individual does not achieve the level of security expected when joining (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009).

Rejection from the group can be perceived as a threat of expulsion, the removal of membership status, or the unwillingness of the group to accept the individual as a prototypical member of the group (Branscombe et al., 1999). The strength of identification with the group will determine the individual's reaction. Members low in identification may disidentify in anticipation of further rejection, maintaining self-esteem by attaching a positive emotional response to their non-prototypical identity and applying a self-categorisation into a group interpreted as a 'better match'. Those high in identification are more likely to experience low self-esteem as they continue to admire prototypical members and view themselves unfavourably (Branscombe et al., 1999). The interpretation of rejection from the social group renders disengagement and intervention more practical for members with low identification.

### **Failing leadership**

Jacob's (1987) interviews with voluntary religious defectors emphasised four sources for disillusionment with the leader; physical abuse, psychological abuse, emotional rejection, and spiritual betrayal. The study indicated psychological abuse and emotional rejection were the predominant causes of disillusionment, with rejection derived from unfulfilled expectations of the spiritual god or the affective relationship between leader and follower. The spiritual betrayal is linked to the leader not fulfilling expectations of a moral and pious lifestyle. As leaders are representative of the prototypical member or presented as the 'hero' for members to admire, inconsistencies between leaders and group ideals, or the message propagated can lead to the interpretation of the ideology and methods to achieve goals as insincere (Demant et al., 2008a; Rommelspacher, 2006; Wright, 1987). The double standards in lifestyle

regulations between leaders and members can lead to resentment and cause doubts in the sacrifices required to achieve group goals (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009).

Members can also become disillusioned by the inability of leaders to provide sufficient direction and focus, or adapt to changing circumstances and inspire members (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Demant et al., 2008a; Fink & Hearne, 2008). A lack of leadership and political influence structurally can cause member's to doubt the group's capability to achieve societal change (Demant et al., 2008a). While this may be a reason for departing the social group, it can also cause members to seek out another, more radical, social group.

## **CONTINUANCE**

Continuance commitment is the awareness of consequences and personal costs associated with leaving, and are linked to the practical life circumstances making membership attractive or unattractive (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Klandermans, 1997). Two factors influence the strength of continuance commitment: the degree of investment to the role and group, and the perceived lack of viable alternatives. The individual interprets a profit associated with maintaining participation, and a cost associated with leaving, thus, any changes to the social identity are viewed with the knowledge of negative consequences and penalties (Becker, 1960; Demant, Wagenaar, & van Donselaar, 2009; Klandermans, 1997). Demant et al. (2008a) proposes continuance factors only play a supporting role, providing extra motivation to the normative and affective factors of disengagement. Only when practical life circumstances become prominent and provide a negative variant, such as outside pressure and stigmatisation, does it have a direct role in disengagement.

## **Maturation**

Some radical social groups tend to consist of young participants and furthermore, Weinberg (2008) argues the longer the organisation exists, the younger the recruits become. In comparison to the founding generation, Weinberg (2008) suggests youthful members are less ideologically or religiously sophisticated, lack an understanding of the long term purposes of the organisation, and are typically 'looking for action'. While street gangs and racist groups can reflect this analysis, Weinberg's (2008) argument conflicts with Sageman (2004, 2005) and Horgan's (2008) study of terrorism with the average age of Jihadis to be 26, and 25 for al-Qaeda – well past adolescence. The opposite is also true for one percent motorcycle clubs as Veno (2003) asserts the average age in the 1980's was approximately 25 years old, but demographic changes has seen the average age rise to the late 30's.

Despite older cohorts, the effects of aging within a radical lifestyle are still influential in the practicality of group involvement. Veno (2003) notes as members of the one percent motorcycle clubs age, participating in group activities becomes increasingly difficult; for example the inability to handle the cultural symbol Harley-Davidsons, opting for trikes or cars, or the inability to endorse 'hard living' lifestyle of alcohol and partying. The isolation of the groups from institutions can result in members avoiding medical treatment, and in the case of one percent motorcycle clubs, years of harmful lifestyle choices can lead to medical conditions preventing further involvement in group events and celebrations (Veno, 2003).

In consideration of youthful recruits, there are many advantageous – and disadvantages – to drawing on this demographic. An advantage is their ability to devote themselves in terms of time and resources to the movement due to the lack of restraints from familial or employment responsibilities (Demant et al., 2008a; Silke, 2003). There is also the idealistic notion of having the ability to change the world and possess the energy to pursue group tasks (Gendron, 2006). However, the problem faced by the group is maintaining this level of dedication as the youth develop into more adult roles and identities. The importance of membership wanes as they no longer have the same need for excitement, have less energy or crave a more subdued lifestyle (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Demant et al., 2008a; Horgan, 2005). Not only is the maturation of an individual member influential on the group, but members typically outgrow the movement and leave as an aggregate. For the group to exist after the members disengage, it needs to recruit and replace with a younger cohort, posing more concerns regarding the attractiveness to a younger generation.

## **Competing social relationships**

The realisation that further radicalisation will require the permanent severance of interpersonal connections can frighten members from furthering their involvement, particularly those with previous connections to society (Demant et al., 2008a). However, those from minority groups are expected to experience a different process as the connection to society is not felt as strongly as those from the majority (Demant et al., 2008a). It is more likely the lack of

connection contributed to the first step in the radicalisation process for minorities, while it acts as the final barrier to radicalisation for the majority. These social groups meet members' social and affective needs, and in some cases can serve in place of primary or quasi-primary groups; for example, as a surrogate family (Wright, 1987). However, when disillusioned with the group, external relationships increase in influence and place strain on the resources the individual commits to the group. When associated with external people the radical trusts and respects, the interaction can operate in opposition to the group and intervention can be initiated through ideological dialogue (Demant et al., 2008a). The respect for these individuals increases the openness to alternative opinions and world-views and encourages doubts and questioning of the group's ideology (Demant et al., 2008a).

Social groups are aware of the strain dyadic relationships can place on members' time and resources, and frequently there are formal and informal regulations restricting two-person intimacy, or the world-view endorses attitudes to counter the dyadic formation. For example, encouraging celibacy or sexual pluralism, or the attitude of the opposite sex as inferior and a threat to group stability (Wright, 1987). Failure to do so can threaten membership in various ways, such as one member of the dyad wants to leave and persuades the other, or as the relationship intensifies greater emotional investments is placed in the dyadic relationship at the expense of other existing relationships. Increased interaction with non-members can cause normative ambiguity due to the lack of reciprocity over shared beliefs and the affirming of peaceful behaviours (Garfinkel, 2007). Family and partners are a source of support and provide a sounding board for concerns and emphasise the plausibility of alternative and socially acceptable options (Fink & Hearne, 2008). The establishment of a family external to the group also places demands on member to adopt new responsibilities for both the spouse and children, Horgan and Bjørge (2009) argue this is one of the strongest motivations for the defection from radical social groups.

The reduction of insulation from the outside world can have negative implications for group relationships acting as vehicles of meaning and values. By disrupting the meaningful interactions between a member and the group, the dependent socialisation and commitment processes are interrupted (Wright, 1987). This provides a stimulus for altering discredited perceptions of the larger society by removing group boundaries; therefore, minimising group distinctions and undermining the importance of belonging to a unique social group. While it is proposed members will seek affirming reactions from external social relationships when group relations no longer fulfil affective needs, contextual factors of memberships need to be acknowledged, particularly, the argument of only members who join the social group to fulfil social requirements are likely to drift to external relations if their needs are not met, and in contrast, movements successful in meeting members affective requirements will cause members to leave for reasons independent to unfulfilled affective needs (Wright, 1987).

## **External pressures and stigmatisation**

Involvement with radical social groups and associated activities can cause emotional strain and be detrimental to relationships and future opportunities. Those operating in a clandestine manner and experiencing threats of violence or punitive actions by enemies or authorities can find themselves longing for a 'normal' life; including lifestyle factors unavailable while maintaining membership, such as marriage and beginning a family, and/or developing a career, or living without fear (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Fink & Hearne, 2008; Horgan, 2005). While some members perceive the notion of a normal way-of-life to be dull, the experiences of stigmatisation, social isolation and the consumption by intense hatred can exhaust the individual leading to a break down or exhaustion.

A radical social identity can produce negative repercussions in other social contexts and influence the perception and treatment from others outside the radical milieu. The individual identity that exists externally can be disregarded in social situations where the expectation is to be assessed on individual characteristics or merits; such as employment interviews (Branscombe et al., 1999). The stigmatisation may produce feelings of discrimination and disappointment when the individual deems their radical identity as irrelevant or illegitimate to the context. The lack of opportunities due to negative relationships with the community can increase dependency on the organisation, or may cause the evaluation of the costs associated with maintaining the radical identity. For those encountering low identification with their social group, this discrimination can emphasise intergroup heterogeneity and/or further disillusionment with their membership (Branscombe et al., 1999).

## **BARRIERS TO DISENGAGEMENT**

The decision to leave the radical collective behind is as significant and complex as joining with several factors impeding the process. Devoting significant amounts of time and resources to the collective can result in the perception of withdrawal as a personal failure. Taylor (1988, p. 168) refers to this as the concept 'spiralling of commitment' in radical groups, where previous investments and organisational pressures entrap the individual into

remaining despite doubts. The barriers enforcing group commitment consist of three fundamental elements; (1) ensuring the member's behaviour requires socio-psychological investments, (2) decisions reinforcing this investment are advocated as the only feasible option, and (3) any efforts to avoid the investment only serve to consolidate the entrapment of the member (Taylor, 1988). These barriers are designed to ensure the dominance of the radical ideology, the individual's social dependence on the group and instil practical lifestyle barriers that make withdrawal unattractive. Demant et al. (2008a) identifies examples of barriers in radical groups as the costs involved in disengaging, fear of reprisals from the group, the loss of reputation and protection, and the marginal position following disengagement. Disengaging from any social group can have negative repercussions in terms of the loss of identity and community; however, the radical groups can produce additional and more severe consequences that need to be considered by the individual.

## **SUMMARY**

Social groups are a significant component in human interaction and the investment of time and resources, as well as the emotional attachment, make departing a painful experience. The nature of radical social groups ensures members are socially and psychologically invested and utilise socialisation practices to prevent withdrawal. As a consequence, disengaging can have negative repercussions for the self-identity and well-being of the ex-member. The aforementioned contributing factors to disillusionment in themselves may not be valid, solitary reasons for disengaging; however, produce significant rationalising effects on the initial phase of doubt and help to overcome socialisation barriers. Commitment is likely to wane when material, psychological and communal benefits of membership are outweighed by the resources required for association and the inability to achieve desirable outcomes.

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