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# ENTITATIVITY AND IDEOLOGY: A GROUNDED THEORY OF DISENGAGEMENT

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## Abstract

*Highly entitative sub-groups with strong ideologies ensure members are committed to the groups cause making disengagement a significant life event. This paper provides an insight into the current study of the psychological and social factors influencing the experience of personal disengagement from HESGIs. Semi-structured interviews were held with former members of one percent motorcycle clubs, fundamental religious groups, a pseudopschotherapeutic cult, political activist groups, and military Special Forces. Using purposive sampling, participants were recruited through informal networks, internet requests and snowballing methods. Data analysis is at the preliminary stages, but through the coding and analysis methods of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory, interesting points have been noted in terms of causes for disillusionment, social distancing, and the self-identity.*

## Keywords

Disengagement; Entitativity; Social identity; Ideology; Grounded theory

## INTRODUCTION

To understand the experience of disengaging from groups that impose changes in individual identities, consideration must be given to the characteristics binding members' to the group's ideology, in particular, to the role of entitativity in the development of an extreme social identity. This study, still being conducted, provides an insight into the experiences of disengagement that is relevant to the security community as it provides knowledge regarding the causes of disillusionment and psychological processes. An understanding in this area provides opportunities to facilitate or prohibit individual disengagement from groups and can identify areas requiring support for those considering leaving.

Highly entitative sub-groups with strong ideologies enmeshing with the social identity of their members to the extent of jeopardising members and non-member's security in defence of the group demand the assimilation of members into prototypes and group norms (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007). The sub-group is more than a mere aggregate of people, but represents a fundamental form of social behaviour that determines life experiences and self-identity. As self-worth becomes vested in the prominence of the group, individuals work to ensure the success of the group, its reputation and to increase exposure. Following social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the projected image of the group is relayed onto members and the direct need to maintain or increase the power and influence of the group can lead to increasingly spectacular and violent acts. As the collective identity becomes salient, there is a loss of individual responsibility and increased attributional errors; thus, enhanced group cohesion causes group objectives to become intrinsic to the personal identity and consequently, success or failure is internalised (Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003)

Group entitativity, the concept of perceiving a group as an entity with an emphasis on Gestalt principles of proximity, similarity, organisation, and common fate, is significant in shaping the social identity of members and the internalisation of group norms through psychological processes (Campbell, 1958; Hogg & Reid, 2006). *Proximity* refers to the social distance between individuals and is conceptualised in terms of social interaction (Bogardus, 1933). Conformity to group norms is a method of reducing social distance as it emphasises interpersonal similarities on domains in which members do not want to differ, either positively or negatively (Akerlof, 1997). *Similarity* is the internal homogeneity and behavioural consistencies which form a collective identity and promote segregation between groups with differing dynamic characteristics (Read, Vanman, & Miller, 1997). In-group homogeneity is stronger when there are no motivational forces existing to distinguish the self from others within the group, thus the process of self-categorisation and deindividuation by a members serves to increase the internal perception of homogeneity and entitativity (Brewer, 1993; Simon, Pantaleo, & Mummendey, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). The successive observation of members moving together represents the *common fate*. Having a common group goal, or a shared threat, significantly influences group processes and

effectiveness by enhancing intra-group solidarity and reducing the likeliness of internal factioning (Brewer, 1999). The *cohesiveness* of a group is observed through multiple measures; shared norms, mutual acceptance, attraction to group and the resistance to disruptive influences. External competition and threats can serve to strengthen group cohesion, improving group performance and intra-group satisfaction. Negatively, elevated cohesion can pressure members into conformity and group think, and raise anxieties when structures change or members leave. Finally, the *organisational structure* (whether formally acknowledged or not) distinguishes highly entitative sub-groups from the basic aggregate of people. The organisation can endorse a recognisable hierarchy and leadership structure, or it may be implicit through the status of individual members. The characteristics of entitativity, in combination with ideological reinforcements, provide members a sense of identity and shared purpose, which when exposed to a perceived threat increases intra-group solidarity and ethnocentrism (Brewer, 1999).

Identification with highly entitative and ideological groups can provide an array of effects on the individual, including; (a) intense and uncompromising identification and allegiance with the group; (b) a belief system prescribing normative group attitudes and behaviours, and an ideological structure to explain and justify group involvement; (c) intolerance of internal dissent and deviation of normative expectations within the group; (d) the promotion of a single uncomplicated version of the ‘truth’; (e) an ‘us versus them’ mentality endorsing ethnocentric thinking and considers out-groups as fundamentally wrong, evil and/or immoral; and (f) a hierarchical internal structure that grants authority and power to group leaders whom members trust to determine the groups purpose and identity (Hogg, 2004, 2005). This ‘blind commitment’ provides sanctuary for the mind by eliminating or reducing the uncertainty about the world or one’s self (Marsella, 2004).

### **Disengagement**

Disengagement processes vary according to contexts and different kinds of movements as each group has its own complexities and nuances, and consequently counter initiatives need to be informed by the context of the group (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009; Fink & Hearne, 2008). However, Bjørge and Horgan (2009) argue disengagement from groups of diverging ideologies, such as terrorist groups, religious ‘cults’, racist groups, and criminal youth gangs, share similar factors and processes despite their varying beliefs and backgrounds. While political and ideological frameworks may vary between groups, social and psychological processes may be comparable with members moving through stages of disillusionment, review and reflection, disengagement, and development of the ex-identity (Ebaugh, 1988; Rabasa, Pettyjohn, Ghez, & Boucek, 2010; Skonovd, 1981; Wright, 1987). The influence of high entitativity and fundamental ideologies ensures any consideration towards leaving induces socio-psychological strain and practical consequences.

The nature of these groups resists disengagement through encouraging salient collective identities. Taylor (1988, p. 168) describes the concept ‘spiralling of commitment’ in his study of religious fundamentalism, where previous investments and organisational pressures entrap the individual into maintaining membership despite doubts. The barriers enforcing group commitment consist of three fundamental elements; (1) the group’s ability to ensure 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. These socialisation mechanisms employed attempt to reduce the impact and occurrence of interruptions, and pose barriers preventing members from departing the group. However despite the psycho-social commitments to the groups, most members will eventually disengage.

This allegiance can be subjected to interruptions causing prior socialisation to be impaired, such as invalidating experiences or perceptions causing disillusionment and initiating dissonance (Harris, 2010, December). These interruptions can negatively impact on the processes endorsing the group’s ideology and level of commitment; thus losing their influence on the individual and increasing the likelihood of disengagement. This research, still currently in progress, aims to explore these interruptions and processes in the decision to, and act of, personally disengage with a highly entitative, ideological social group.

### **Research Objectives**

The research incorporates the analysis of individuals who self-categorise as ex-members whose self identity was previously enmeshed with highly entitative and ideological social groups, for the purpose of exploring the personal and social factors in the disengagement process. While the following sub-groups possess high levels of entitativity and historically have shown security threats to both members and non-members for the goals and protection of the group, the list is not exhaustive; (1) criminal organisations, (2) religious groups with a radical or extremist interpretation, (3) left-wing extremist groups (4) right-wing extremist groups (5) military Special Forces. While a full analysis of these groups is beyond the limits of this paper, each group has considerable levels of entitativity and provides members with an ideology that can become intrinsic to the social identity.

The groups selected for this study display self-categorisation in terms of imposed boundaries between themselves and the mainstream and strong connections between members, and perceived homogeneity providing members with a sense of shared purpose. The socio-psychological processes of group identification and disengagement with these sub-groups are the primary focus of this study. This research will:

1. Identify the psychological and sociological factors of disengagement from the target groups,
2. Compare the psychological and sociological factors of disengagement between individuals of varying ideologies and context variables,
3. Determine whether dominant psychological and sociological factors are observed in the disengagement between participants, and
4. Construct a model for the disengagement from highly entitative and ideological social groups

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participant recruitment**

Recruitment required identifying former members of sub-groups, through a systematic approach of incorporated snowballing, chain referrals and purposive sampling, who were willing to share their experiences and participate in the study. The snowballing technique allowed participants initially chosen for the study to act as informants to source other potential participants. Much like snowball sampling, chain referral sampling utilises referrals from participants; however, it also extends past the one social network by employing multiple networks (Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003). Methods of recruitment included personal and professional networks, online forums, newsletters, requests to high profile former members, formal requests to support organisations and developing relationships within the target group's informal milieu. The issues relating to the representation of the sample were not of concern as the intention was to explore personal experiences using descriptive data rather than quantitative measures, and interviews will continue until a point of satiation has occurred.

Difficulties arose with the recruitment methods as many members of these groups engaged in psychological defensiveness or became suspicious of the researchers intent. For example, an issue with the use of internet forums was the paranoia that the researcher was a spy trying to ensure that ex-members did not talk to outsiders about what goes on in the group, or was collecting information in order to black-mail ex-members into submission. Another example includes a former member of a one percent motorcycle club (commonly referred within the media as Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs) who sort approval from other ex-members was informed it would be "on his head" if he choose to participate. Additionally, there was concern for the well being of their former group should law enforcement use the information of sub-cultural rituals to remove the boundaries binding the groups.

At the time of this paper submission, the research included 20 interviews of former members fitting the criteria of the study; including eight from fundamentalist religious organisations (FR), one from a left wing political organisation (LW), one from a pseudo-psychotherapeutic cult (PPC), four from one percent motorcycle clubs (1%MC), and six drawn from the Australian, United Kingdom, and Israel Special Forces (SF).

### **Interviews**

As this study explores the personal experiences of disengagement, it is essential the methodology is not constrained by pre-existing constructs and allows participants to describe the phenomenon in the most accurate, veridical manner possible. The semi-structured interviewing as a qualitative methodology provides detailed narratives, emphasising discovery, description and meaning rather than quantitative features of prediction, control and measurement (Appleton, 1995; Polit & Hungker, 2004). By using open ended questions, participants are encouraged to develop their responses beyond the restrictive and pre-emptive responses of quantitative methods, thus providing a wealth of information. While the researcher must assume the information from the participant is an accurate, it is influenced by perceptions and the willingness to disclose personal details. The interpretation of events and experiences are subjective and influenced by cognitive processes designed to protect the self-identity, and while this is a limitation in the use of qualitative methodologies and must be taken into account in the analytical process, it does not discredit the value of the research.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to facilitate in-depth dialogue exploring the participant's perceptions of the causes, processes and experiences of disengaging with a target group. The interview schedule was designed specifically for this study and asked participants to provide background information of their initial engagement with the club and duration of membership before describing in detail their experiences of

disengaging from their corresponding social groups. The remaining interview was conducted in a conversational manner to allow the participant to expand on their experience while limiting researcher bias. On average, interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour.

Once participants were identified and had agreed to participate in the study a medium was selected from face-to-face interviews, skype or phone, depending on the location of the interviewee. Rapport was established through informal dialogue at the beginning along with discussion regarding the aims of the study. Participants were informed about how the interview was structured and that there was no intent to cause discomfort and all answers are voluntary. During this introduction into the interview process, the researcher also informed members of the confidentiality of the study and the possible risks associated with disclosing criminality. All participants appeared comfortable with the level of confidentiality and allowed the interview to be recorded.

Some participants disclosed being nervous at the thought of disclosing details of their group involvement and experience; however, admitted after the interview that it “wasn’t as scary as I thought” (Participant 1%01). Some participants were also very aware of the information they were revealing and made deliberate efforts not to refer to names of the group engaging in criminal behaviour. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were thanked and casual conversations ensued.

Interviews were audio recorded on a digital voice recorder with permission and then destroyed after transcription to protect the interviewees’ identities. Field notes were also employed for both recorded and non-recorded interviews. All transcripts and data are stored according to Edith Cowan University ethics requirements.

### **Ethics**

Given the sensitive nature of the study and the backgrounds of the participants, it is essential identities are kept confidential. During transcribing, all individual and group names, and places disclosed in the interview are assigned pseudonyms to protect both the interviewee and their connections. In addition, audio recordings are deleted after transcription to eliminate the voice evidence of the participant’s involvement in the study, or traces of identities or events referred to within the interview. While this has implications for reliability and the availability to refer back to recordings, it was deemed in the best interests of the participants.

There is also the issue of the Australian Crime Commission’s extraordinary powers of coercive hearings should the interview be of significant benefit to an on-going investigation into organised crime groups, an issue of concern for interviewing former one percent motorcycle club members. The legal risks to participants influenced the construction of the interview method and instrument. Prior to the interview, participants are provided with an information letter that covers the confidentiality and the implications of discussing criminal behaviours. Participants were also reminded the interview process is voluntary and they do not have to answer any questions which may cause discomfort or they deem dangerous. Their participation can be withdrawn at any point of the study should they decide upon reflection that the information was too sensitive.

While it was unlikely participants would discuss criminal activities in great depth, the researcher emphasised that research-participant confidentiality does not extend to certain crimes and the researcher is obliged to disclose some events to the police. The interview schedule does not include any questions directly relating to criminality; if there was over-disclosure regarding criminality the intention was to remind the interviewee of the risks, or in extreme cases, terminate the interview. This has not occurred throughout the interview process .

### **Data Analysis**

Utilising Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) grounded theory analysis methodology of coding and memoing, the data collection, coding and analysis will form an integrated and detailed set of variables and hypotheses about the conditions, processes and experiences of disengaging. The first stage of the analysis required going through the transcripts and notes, acknowledging every phrase, sentence and paragraph, focussing on the participant’s meanings and utilising the literal data. Hyener (1985) emphasised this stage as the development of the general meaning, irrespective to the research question, and noting any ambiguities in the unit of meanings discovered. Afterwards, phrasing the research question towards these meanings to explore if what has been said responds to, or clarifies, the subject. The relevant meanings are clustered into categories through rigorous examining each unit in terms of its context. The clustering relies on careful intuition and description, drawing on perceptions of natural affinities and gestalt principles (Osborne, 1994). This stage of analysis is the most at risk of interpretative bias as it draws on the judgements and skills of the researcher, therefore to enhance the validity of the analysis data triangulation is performed in consultation with external reviewers and existing professional literature.

Coding allows the researcher to break down data, conceptualise it in various ways and the reconstruct it to develop theories. There are three major types of coding presented by Strauss and Corbin (1990); open, axial and

selective. These coding measures do not necessarily take place in order, but rather the researcher can move between the different coding approaches several times in a single coding session. Open coding is the process of breaking down the data for the purposes of examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorisation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). This requires taking apart each observation, sentence, paragraph, event, idea, or anything that represents a phenomenon through asking questions about its nature and engaging in comparisons with other incidents. These become concepts that are labelled and described, and through analysis are grouped into categories with recognised properties and dimensions that determine the relationships between categories and sub-categories. While open coding breaks down the data, axial coding allows the reconstruction of information by establishing the connections between categories. The categories and their properties are systematically related to each other in the selective coding process. This serves to validate the relationships and refine categories for the purpose of determining the central phenomenon. Through validating these relationships against the data, the research should conclude with a substantive theory – under A conditions, B happens; whereas when C happens, D happens.

Throughout the research process memoing is employed to further enhance abstract thinking and the formulation of the theory. In addition, they provide storage for the analytical ideas developed throughout data analysis that can be sorted according to need. The memos include notes made during the coding phase of analysis (coding notes), the inductive and deductive thinking of categories (theoretical notes), and the notes relating to research development and enactment (operational notes). These memos were stored in an electronic journal and helped to establish rigor through an audit trail.

### **Preliminary findings**

At this stage of the study the rich narratives describing the personal experiences of disengaging are at the preliminary stage of analysis, yet interesting points are noted and differences have been identified between the military Special Forces and the remaining groups. Common reasons for disillusionment revolved around the relationship factors, particularly with leaders or dyadic relationships. Ex SF participants reported more lifestyle factors, such as burning out, physical ailments or the strengthening of external relationships. Initial observations identified social psychological techniques of distancing, anticipatory socialisation, and the experiences of role conflict. Participants acknowledge the experience as a significant and difficult point in their lives; however, those within the SF did not express discontent with their organisation in an explicitly negative manner.

A possible reason for SF participants expressing more positive disengagement experiences includes the organisational support in anticipatory socialisation. For many of the SF participants, time away from the main group was allocated to the members as a chance to either refresh, recover from surgery, or paid leave prior to formally exiting; allowing opportunities to develop new skills or travel provided social distance allowing transition and adaption for new roles, and for some, this resulted in cognitive shifts.

I don't even think about the other side for a moment, you know not even for a second. Immediately it was, opened a door that let me think more and more about it. It's problematic because in the first place you lose proportion because you were very organised and then suddenly, hey it's totally different. (Israeli SF\_1)

Consistent with Ebaugh's (1988) role exit approach, the increases in social distance and new salient social roles impacts the cognitive adherence to normative beliefs and behaviours in all individuals. When two social identities collide individuals begin evaluating their involvement "...and that was when the signs started kicking in. You know like. Is this really working for me? Is this really what you want?" (1%MC\_4). The review of the conflicting roles allows individuals to actively seek information confirming or discrediting their concerns and determine how significant the social identity is before preparing to adopt new roles that justify their personal identity and afford self esteem (Ebaugh, 1988).

Religious and cult participants admit to negative self-identities while experiencing challenges to world views and existing beliefs, compounding on the experience of disengaging. The cognitive dissonance caused by the conflict in prescribed norms and psychological changes creates a complex environment for some individuals with doubts in their own cognitions.

I was so attached to the cult because I thought "why am I the only one not happy here? Why am I the only one leaving? Why don't they see what I see?" and it was so confusing because everyone else wanted to stay there (PPC\_1).

Segregated from the mainstream, some HESGI perpetuate myths regarding leaving the group, for example some gangs emphasise the only way to leave is to die and religious groups propagate apostates become 'lost in the world' and lead a failed life of crime and drugs. While these stories can be reality they tend to occur in the

minority, yet FR and 1%MC participants continue to endorse these myths post-membership and assign any inconsistencies to 'being lucky' or 'being smarter'. These participants actively engaged in both anticipatory socialisation and contemplated alternative continuance arrangements, such as employment or accommodation, prior to physically disengaging with their sub-group, preparing for the mental and physical transition.

Emphasised within the interviews is the significance of planning the exit and preparing for life outside the group, ranging from lifestyle factors such as income and accommodation, to normative behaviours and support networks. While still in the early stages of data analysis, the research suggests differences in the disillusionment and exiting aspects of disengagement exists between Special Forces participants and the remaining groups, yet the cognitive transitions and re-organisations share similarities. The discourse provides rich insights that can be harnessed for the purposes of facilitating or prohibiting disengagement from groups of interest and provide support for individuals. Further analysis should provide a grounded theory identifying the conditions in which the socio-psychological experiences of disengagement will vary and impact on the individual's identity.

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