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# UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL GROUPS IN RADICALISATION

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## Abstract

*The inability to form psychological profiles of individual members across a variety of extremist groups, as well as the recognition in extremism and terrorism research indicates that no adequate personality profile exists. This requires an analysis of other factors that influence the radicalisation process. By drawing on social identity theory, this paper offers a psycho-social explanation for how people define themselves in relation to their social group, as well as how the intra-group relationships can lead to extreme behaviour and resistance to counter efforts. These groups promote a salient social identity that becomes intrinsic to the self to the extent that members would risk their wellbeing, or that of others, to enhance or maintain their group's cause.*

## Keywords

Radicalisation, Psychology, Social Identity, Ideology

## INTRODUCTION

May (1991) argued the lack of myths in modern society contribute to individuals flocking to groups which can provide meaning and relieve their anxieties. Collective ideologies, according to May (1991), provide a sense of identity, endorse a set of moral values, encourage loyalty to communal groups, and provide meaning to existential issues. Fundamentally, these ideologies function as a lens through which reality is perceived and interpreted (Iannaccone & Berman, 2006). An effective ideology provides security through structure and stability; it simplifies the perceptions of ambiguous environments and provides a framework for a person to interact with the world in a meaningful way. A robust ideology provides security to an individual and can also be bolstered by drawing closer an ideological collective that is perceived as strengthening personal security (Iannaccone & Berman, 2006). A collective ideology provides a dynamic social system characterised by interdependence among members with shared beliefs. This collective environment fosters the social, temporal, attachment and moral aspects of group membership that present the ideology as an undisputed truth (Orsini, 2012). The confidence in which these beliefs are held makes alternative information, inconsistent ideas or changes difficult for members to comprehend (Iannaccone & Berman, 2006). Additionally, strong identification with a group's ideology, as well as associated practices, can promote the belief of ideological and cultural superiority (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010).

Social groups with fundamental ideologies and expressions of high levels of entitativity provide members with a strengthened sense of identity and shared purpose. Entitativity is the degree to which members of a group are perceived as a single coherent social group (Hogg, 2005). The concept of entitativity, as proposed by Campbell (1958), was based on the Gestalt principles of proximity, similarity, organisation, and common fate. As such, social groups are considered to be highly entitative when the following characteristics are observed; internal homogeneity and behavioural consistency, frequent as well as intense interaction between members, significance of membership, clear internal structure, and shared fate and goals (Brewer, 1999; Hamilton, Sherman, & Rogers, 2004; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2004; Hogg, 2005; Spencer-Rodgers, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2007; Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Fiske, 1998). These facets increase in-group cohesiveness as well as resistance towards external threats, and research has shown the perception of a social group's entitativity is important in the processing of group-related information, causal attributions and evaluative judgements (Brewer, Weber, & Carini, 1995; Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999; Hamilton et al., 2004; Lickel et al., 2000; McConnell, Sherman, & Hamilton, 1997; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001; Yzerbyt et al., 1998).

This paper discusses the theoretical aspects of group identification, starting with internalisation of group membership into the self-concept through social identification. The decision to employ a social psychological approach stems from the inability to form a psychological profile of individual members across various groups; as well as the recognition in extremism and terrorism research that no adequate personality profile exists

(Victoroff, 2005). Kruglanski and Fishman's (2009) review of individual, group and organisational factors in terrorism found empirical studies on the Basque ETA, the Italian Red Army Brigades, the German Red Army Faction and various Palestinian groups shared no consistent personality profiles. Additionally, Silke (2003) noted terrorists did not suffer from psychopathological issues, nor shared personality characteristics, but were influenced by external factors. By drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this paper offers a psycho-social explanation for how people define themselves in relation to their social group, as well as how the intra-group relationships can lead to extreme behaviour and resistance to counter efforts. It hopes to shed light on the complexities of group attachment and why, despite governments best efforts, members remain committed to their radical groups.

## **SOCIAL GROUP IDENTIFICATION**

Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, and Moffitt (2007) define social groups as three or more people who share the same social identity, and through group identification and interaction experience a sense of belonging. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains group membership and intergroup relations based on self-categorisation, social comparison and the construction of the self-concept in terms of in-group defining properties (Boros, 2008; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued groups provide people with a source of pride and self-esteem, as well as a social identity that provides a sense of belonging in the world. To maintain, or increase, the self-image, members attempt to enhance the status of their group while holding prejudicial beliefs towards out-groups. This leads to the exaggerated differences between groups, increased perceived homogeneity in the members of the out-group, stereotyping and attribution biases. Tajfel and Turner (1979) concluded people develop an 'us and them' perspective as a consequence of this social categorisation, which can lead to antagonism between groups.

At the basic level, the social identity of a person refers to the aspect of the self-concept that is derived from membership within personally significant social groups, which includes the internalisation of group characteristics (Livingstone & Haslam, 2008; Onorato & Turner, 2004; Sharma & Sharma, 2010). The self-concept is the mental representations organising an individual's perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of his or herself as an object which is influenced by social interactions (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Reed II, 2002). The awareness of, and identification with, different social groups regulate behaviours, and membership provides individuals with a meaning for who he or she is (Stets & Burke, 2000; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). As such, social identity theory emphasises one's identification with a particular social group as meaningful to the self and establishes a representation of the self-concept in accordance with group identity. This is relevant to understanding radicalisation as it is the experience of including the social identity as part of the self-concept that is expected to occur during recruitment.

### **Self and Social-categorisation**

Identifying with social groups is normal human behaviour as the individual's social identity is forged by the knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category, or group of individuals, who identify themselves as members of the same social category (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Stets & Burke, 2000; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Others belonging to the same social group and displaying similar characteristics become the in-group, while those who differ in characteristics central to the collective identity are categorised as the out-group. By distinguishing between those who form the in-group and those outside the social group, the individual engages in self-categorisation and social comparison (Stets & Burke, 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Self-categorisation involves recognising group prototypes that define how people will, and ought to, behave as well as interact with each other (Turner et al., 1987). By identifying with the group, the member's self-concept incorporates the associated value connotations and emotional significance derived from membership (Brannan, Esler, & Anders Strindberg, 2001; Turner, 1999). Brannan et al.'s study found the manipulation of participants' identity influenced their perspectives to national stereotypes. Participants who were in the salient social identity category displayed an increase in favourable views of the in-group as well as shared group stereotypes that influenced judgements and perspectives. The emphasis of social categorisation was shown to influence attachment and the need for a positive perspective towards the in-group.

The identity achieved through categorisation into social groups and roles is not fixed, but is subject to shifts back and forth between individual and varying social identities. In certain contexts one identity may be more salient and, hence, more readily activated than others (Kinnvall, 2004). When a certain social identity becomes salient there is an increase in commitment leading to that identity's domination over other aspects of the

person's life (Stets & Burke, 2000). Groups which promote a salient identity, where group norms has to take precedence in their members' lives, take priority over other areas such as employment, social obligations and family.

The categorisation of the self and others allows the individual to become part of, and belong to, the 'in-group'. Identifying with the in-group enforces group norms and encourages conformity in cognitive processes such as perceptions, inferences, feelings, behaviour and interpersonal interactions (Erikson, 1962; Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds, & Turner, 1999; Hogg et al., 2007). The constant criticism of specific behaviours can instil habitual patterns of decision making and the repeated disapproval of behaviours deviating from group standards further strengthens behavioural controls, as well as reaffirms cultural norms (Erikson, 1962). Thus, rather than acting as unique individuals, members act in accordance with the social and collective stereotypes which they perceive to be representative of their social group (Hogg & Turner, 1987; Turner et al., 1987).

The notion central to social identity theory is that social comparisons between groups relevant to one's social identity produce pressures for intergroup differentiation with the objective of enhancing self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It argues individuals are motivated to self-categorise and evaluate themselves and their group favourably; subsequently, the superiority to comparison groups provides a positive distinctiveness from out-groups and informs the self-concept (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Kinnvall, 2004; Schmitt, Branscombe, Silvia, Garcia, & Spears, 2006; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The emphasis on similarities and differences between groups occur for all the attitudes, beliefs and values, focal concerns, behavioural norms and stylistic properties correlated with the in-group (Hewstone 1990; Pettigrew, 1979; Stets & Burke, 2000). From this, attribution biases are made regarding the out-groups behaviour; consistent with ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979), the tendency is to make dispositional attributions to negative out-group behaviours. Self-esteem is enhanced when the individual evaluates the characteristics of the in-group in a positive manner while judging the out-group negatively; therefore, the social comparison between groups and the accentuation of in-group similarities and differences between members and outsiders result in positive outcomes for the individual (Hogg, 2005).

Social identity theory proposes the perceived differentiation of in and out-groups is a result of categorisation, fostering an 'us and them' mentality, that may lead to negative attitudes and animosity towards the 'other' (Griffiths & Nesdale, 2006; Onorato & Turner, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Pratkanis, Probasco, & Leve, 1992), as well as enhancing self-esteem through in-group favouritism (Houston & Andreopoulou, 2003). This can be seen, for example, through the self-made distinction of civilians and soldiers, Hells Angels M.C. and Bandidos M.C., as well as believers and non-believers.

In-group identification and intergroup discrimination occur to a greater extent when categorisation transpires during times of uncertainty – irrespective of how the uncertainty is caused. Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson's (2010) study explored the relationship between uncertainty in a person's self-concept and radicalism. Hogg et al. manipulated university students' self-uncertainty and provided exposure to moderate or radical student advocacy groups via a video. The findings indicated that participants initially identified more strongly with the moderate group; however, when exposed to high self-uncertainty there was a significant increase in identification with the radical group. Studies (Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Hogg, 2000; Hogg et al., 2007) that explored uncertainty reduction through (1) inducing uncertainty, (2) manipulating the strength of categorisation, and (3) manipulating in-group properties, found self-reported group identification and intergroup discrimination increased when people were manipulated into uncertainty. Group identification and intergroup discrimination were considered strongest when the focus of uncertainty was related to the social self; that is, uncertainty relating to the individual's social world and their place in it (Hogg, 2000; Hogg et al., 2007). From this perspective, groups exposed to violent conflict, or perceived oppression through social policies, can experience greater uncertainty that reinforces group identification, which raises issues for punitive law enforcement efforts.

While self-categorisation is important to the psyche, the extreme of self-categorisation can lead to ethnocentric attitudes and the dehumanisation of the 'other' (Bizumic, & Duckitt, 2012; Perreault, & Bourhis, 1999). This involves perceiving the out-group(s) as insignificant and culturally inferior, as well as less deserving of basic human rights, which can justify the use of violence (Stagner, 1977). The superiority of the in-group is a key feature of those who use violent means to further their goals, and the out-group can be specific sub-groups or society as a whole. The 'one percent' motorcycle clubs provide an example of conflict between sub-groups. For example, the conflict between the Comancheros and Bandidos motorcycle clubs culminated in the 1984 Milperra massacre, and the rivalry between the Finks (who have now merged with the United States based Mongols M.C.) and the Coffin Cheaters M.C. over the defection, and subsequent recruitment, of former Sergeant-At-Arms Troy Mercanti (Cox, 2011; Stephenson, 2007). Other groups have much broader distinctions; for example, religious groups that impose restrictions on interactions with non-believers, which encompasses all those outside of the group.

Through the lack of recognition of their individuality, members engage in the depersonalisation and deindividuation of the self and come to think of themselves in terms of group values and expectations (Cliff, 2006). Theories of deindividuation argue the psychological state of reduced self-evaluation and decreased evaluation apprehension are related to anti-normative and disinhibited behaviours (Postmes & Spears, 1998). As the social group's identity becomes the salient identity for the individual, the group provides the necessary justification for actions without felt responsibility by the individual (Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003). Therefore, if the group presents violent or alienating action as required and justified, then the individual will embrace this view; guilt or remorse are not experienced by the individual if the social group does or endorse such emotions.

Bandura's (1990) discussion of moral disengagement in terrorism and support for lethal means by the military proposed that the collective approach to violent acts diffuses the sense of responsibility for such attacks. McAlister, Bandura, and Owen (2006) also found support for military intervention was bolstered when individual responsibility was diffused when blame was ascribed to other members, through the act of simply following orders, or the distortion of the cause and effect relationship. In support of this, Cliff's (2006) thesis on disinhibition and terrorism argues under conditions where the member is not individuated within the group, there is likelihood for a reduction of inner constraints against certain behaviours and an increase in the overt expressions of group values and attitudes. In hostile groups, it is likely that deindividuation will facilitate increased aggression.

These social groups consider themselves distinct from mainstream society with clear boundaries. The group's cohesiveness, and the deindividuation of the self and others, can lead to the viewing of those in the out-group as prototypes that reflect their group membership rather than individuals (Stahelski, 2004). Sidanius and Pratto's (1999) book on social hierarchies argued that individuals who are sensitive to group boundaries and intergroup differences are more likely to discriminate in order to achieve or maintain group superiority. The distinction between the in-group and out-group allows for negative stereotyping, ethnocentrism and dehumanisation of out-group members. Ethnocentrism is described as holding an attitude of one's own cultural background as superior when compared to others' unfamiliar cultural characteristics, which are assumed to be immoral and inferior (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). As positive characteristics are attributed to the in-group (and those in the out-group are attributed with negative characteristics), ethnocentrism can have a positive effect on in-group identity and self-esteem (Tajfel, 1978) as well as justify the use of aggression against out-groups.

The in-group and out-group distinctions increase the cohesiveness between group members by encouraging the disinhibition of personal attitudes through conformity (Cliff, 2006). The submerging of individuals' identities within the group enables the concept of 'group think', whereby in cohesive social groups group-think tends to be demonstrated to an extreme degree (Tsintsadze-Maass & Maass, 2014). Indicators of group think include excessive risk taking and optimism, the assumption the group is of high moral character and invulnerable, illusions of unanimity, stereotyping, as well as the lack of tolerance for those in the out-group and those questioning the group's ideology (Cliff, 2006; Janis, 1982; Post, 1990). As a result of group think, groups are more susceptible to flawed decision making symptoms; such as the incomplete analysis of alternative options and foresight over the consequences of their preferred solution (Janis, 1982; Turner et al., 1992).

Perceived threats to the in-group's interests and survival can increase the group's cohesiveness, which can lead to a lack of empathy and increased animus to out-groups. The cohesive nature of the groups ensures they are highly resistant to disruptive influences, whereby pressures from law enforcement and the mainstream community can strengthen the collective identity. The shared threat, and commonality in outcomes or fate, can include battles against outsiders; as such, winning or losing in conflict can unite the group through the shared experience (Bjørge & Horgan, 2009). Victories provide members with shared pride, and losses can produce a shared hatred and bitterness against the common enemy. Having a common group goal, or sharing a threat, is a significant variable that influences group processes and effectiveness by enhancing intra-group solidarity, as well as reducing the likelihood of internal factions forming (Brewer, 1999). Consequently, clearly defined ideological goals, as well as military and law enforcement efforts, can further consolidate the group and enhance members' commitment.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Entitative social groups with strong ideological premises are more likely to encourage a salient group identity in a member that influences other self-aspects, due to the level of affective commitment required and the imposed social norms. These groups emphasise their distinctiveness and impose boundaries between themselves and the mainstream, which enhance the strong connections between members and fosters the 'us and them' mentality. The cohesive nature of the groups ensures they are highly resistant to disruptive influences, whereby external pressures can further consolidate the collective identity.

These groups promote a salient social identity that becomes intrinsic to the self to the extent that members would risk their wellbeing, or that of others, to enhance or maintain the group's cause. It is the centrality of this social identity and the significance of group membership to the self-concept that make membership a complex phenomenon psychologically. Aligning the personal identity with the group requires a multi-faceted reformation of the self-concept, which can overlap other areas of members' lives. The significance of this psychological reformation needs further attention in the radicalisation field and needs to be acknowledged in the counter efforts used to target radical group members.

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