Does the pursuit of meaning explain the initiation, escalation, and disengagement of violent extremists?

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have uncovered an array of conditions, characteristics, and cognitions that can ignite, escalate, or reverse the radicalization of individuals. Because a multitude of events and circumstances determine the likelihood that people gravitate to violent extremism, practitioners cannot readily ascertain which individuals are most susceptible to this pathway. This paper explicates and explores a theory, derived from the meaning maintenance model and the socio-emotional selectivity theory, that integrates previous insights into a cohesive framework. According to this theory, to foster meaning in life, individuals are motivated to cultivate four conditions: a just and supportive environment, unambiguous standards, enduring values, and extensive capabilities. Violent extremism offers some individuals the opportunity to cultivate these conditions temporarily, galvanizing radicalization. Yet this pursuit can also impede these conditions, provoking the motivation to disengage from this endeavor. We presented a case study that illustrates this premise. In short, the motivations that can attract people to violent extremism can also promote disengagement as well.

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Over the last few decades, and especially since 2001, researchers have explored the conditions, characteristics, and cognitions of individuals who embark on the pathway to radicalization (e.g., Victoroff, 2005). This research has uncovered a raft of telling insights. For example, researchers have shown how perceptions of injustice (Azzam, 2007), the evolution of ideologies (Borum, 2011; Loza, 2007), the pursuit of meaning (McBride, 2011), and the need to seek adventure (Cottee & Hayward, 2011) may all converge to ignite radicalization.

As these insights proliferate, however, one problem may unfold: a decline in parsimony. To illustrate, as research has underscored, many events and circumstances—such as state repression (Ashour, 2009)—can both inspire and deter violent extremism. Which of these events or experiences will shape the decisions of individuals, and how these events or experiences may interact with each other, cannot be established definitively. The capacity of practitioners to predict which individuals will contemplate, pursue, and disengage from the pathway of radicalization may stall.

To override this problem, a theory that integrates these antecedents of both radicalization and disengagement into a unified framework may be helpful. This paper explicates and evaluates a theory that could achieve this goal. This theory is derived from the meaning maintenance model (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), the notion of psychological discontinuity (Ersner-Hershfield, Garton, Ballard, Samanez-Larkin, & Knutson, 2009), and the socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995). According to this theory, individuals experience the profound need to align their activities now to their future aspirations. When this need to impeded, four motives are primed, such as the motive of individuals to perceive their social environment as just and predictable (Randles, Proulx, & Heine, 2010). This papers shows how these motives can initiate and escalate radicalization as well as foster disengagement from violent extremism.

1. Pathways to violent extremism

Over many decades, researchers have attempted to characterize the cardinal features of violent extremists (Victoroff, 2005)—defined as individuals who espouse an ideology that both condemns mainstream society and incites violence. The working assumption that violent extremists are afflicted with some psychopathology, such as schizophrenia or antisocial personality disorder, has been widely refuted (Crenshaw, 1981; Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003; for an alternative perspective, see Pearlstein, 1991).

Indeed, many violent extremists had seemed to live respectable and stable lives. Siddique Kahn, one of the suicide bombers in London 2005, was a respected youth worker. Major Nidal Hassan, who killed 13 people at Ford Hood, was an army psychiatrist. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, a prime suspect of the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, was described as "a nice guy" by former classmates (Goode, 2013).

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Rather than uncover the static characteristics of violent extremists, during the mid 2000s, many researchers began to conceptualize radicalization as a dynamic transformation from an unremarkable vulnerability to a willingness, or even thirst, to perpetrate violence (e.g., Taylor & Horgan, 2006). Some of these models assumed that radicalization entails between three (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010) and six (Moghaddam, 2005) stages that individuals traverse in sequence.

To illustrate, the New York Police Department characterized the radicalization pathway of Muslim violent extremists. According to this model, delineated by Silber and Bhatt (2007), individuals do not initially espouse an extremist ideology or entertain violent intentions. But then, in response to crises and frustrations, they may contemplate the teachings of Salafi Islam. Next, if individuals become fully immersed in these teachings or inspired by a charismatic leader, they may embrace violence to protect Islam. Finally, after further participation, they may adopt the assumption that armed jihad is a religious obligation.

Most of these models assume that social networks and collective identities expedite this transformation. Many features of social environments, such as conformity to leaders (Ahlfinger & Esser, 2001), devolution of responsibility to the collective (Beck, 2002), and intergroup biases (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008), can facilitate radicalization.

Indeed, rather than characterize the transformation of individuals, Reicher et al. (2008) characterized the transformation of terrorist movements or collectives. Specifically, according to this model, individuals first conceptualize themselves as members of a collective, unified by a shared set of beliefs, values, and norms. Second, they begin to exclude anyone who does not share these characteristics, affording respect and rights to members only. Third, they begin to perceive these excluded constituencies as rivals or threats to the status or identity of their collective. Fourth, they perceive these rivals as inherently immoral, but their own collective as quintessentially virtuous. Finally, because of these depictions, they feel compelled to eradicate these rivals—a pursuit they conceptualize as moral and even mandatory.

2. The causes of escalation

To apply these models effectively, researchers need to appreciate the conditions and characteristics of people that may stimulate each shift or transformation. Taylor and Horgan (2006) argued that a diversity of social, political, economic, family, and life events or circumstances may culminate in disaffection or marginalization, ultimately igniting the radicalization pathway. Arguably, many of these events or circumstances can be divided into four constellations. The first column of Table 1 outlines these constellations.

First, many violent extremists feel that either they or their community are victims of flagrant injustice (e.g., Azzam, 2007; Victoroff et al., 2010). Individuals who embrace a jihadist perspective, for example, often allude to the aggression of Western governments towards Muslims or the reluctance of these governments to alleviate Muslim suffering (Change Institute, 2008). Similarly, as Sageman (2008) underscored, a sense of moral outrage towards Western governments often galvanized the attraction of individuals towards neojihadism.

Second, many violent extremists are inclined to gravitate towards polarizing ideologies — ideologies in which every action, choice, or person is deemed to be either inherently good or inherently evil. To illustrate, as Post (1998) argued, many terrorists demonstrate a tendency called splitting. They perceive some communities, usually the collectives to which they belong, as devoid of shortcomings. In contrast, they perceive other communities as entirely undesirable. They do not accept that individuals or collectives can demonstrate a mixture of desirable and undesirable qualities. Over time, this assumption can escalate into the belief that all of these opponents are contemptuous, galvanizing violence.

Third, many violent extremists experience a profound need to pursue and achieve a lasting, meaningful goal—a goal that will be cherished indefinitely. This need is reminiscent of symbolic immortality, a notion that is integral to the theory of terror management (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). To illustrate, Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, and Orehek (2009) showed that suicide bombers often attribute their missions to a quest or pursuit of personal significance. Likewise, Slootman and Tillie (2006) showed that 12 radical young Muslims, residing in Amsterdam and associated peripherally with the Hofstad group, were primarily motivated by a need to seek meaning in their lives.

Finally, at least some violent extremists, according to novelty seeking theory, are motivated by the craving to seek adventure and excitement (for a discussion, see Silke, 2008). They feel inspired and thrilled by the possibility of darting through the streets with an AK47 or attending classes in bomb making (Cottee & Hayward, 2011; Jenkins, 2010).

In short, the pursuit of justice, polarizing ideologies, lasting achievements, or exciting adventures may incite the radicalization of individuals. Nevertheless, research has not clarified the circumstances in which these pursuits are likely to escalate into violent extremism. Perceptions of injustice, for example, do not evoke unfavorable attitudes or behaviours in all individuals (e.g., Brockner, De Cremer, van den Bos, & Chen, 2005).

The meaning maintenance model (Heine et al., 2006), especially when complemented by the notion of psychological discontinuity (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009), explains the source of these pursuits to seek justice, polarizing ideologies, lasting achievements, and exciting adventures. This model, therefore, might offer some insight into the circumstances in which these pursuits could expedite the escalation of violent extremism

3. The meaning maintenance model

According to the meaning maintenance model, individual's experience a profound need to perceive their life as meaningful and coherent (Proulx & Heine, 2006, 2008, 2009). For example, they want to feel that all their activities now are congruent, rather than incompatible, with their future aspirations. To fulfil this desire, they like to assume their identity now—their values, goals, roles, and interests, for example—will align with their identity in the future (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009).

According to proponents of this model, whenever four conditions are fulfilled, individuals tend to perceive their life as meaningful (Proulx & Heine, 2006). Conversely, if one of these conditions is threatened, this sense of meaning dissipates. The second column in Table 1 enumerates these four conditions.

To override the ensuing unease, individuals strive to inflate the degree to which these conditions seem to be fulfilled. That is, they bias their attention, memory, or appraisals to information that reinforces

Table 1
The four conditions that foster meaning—as well as the impediments to these conditions and biases that reinforce these conditions and inspire violent extremism.

Constellation of circumstances that ignite radicalization	The conditions that foster meaning	The biases that reinstate meaning	Mechanisms that transfer biases into violent extremism
Perceived injustice	A just and supportive community	The belief that society is just	The pursuit of revenge
Polarizing ideologies	Unambiguous standards and duties	Need for closure	Contempt towards other communities
The pursuit of lasting achievements	Stable values over time	Inflated stability of values	Aggressive defence of worldviews
The pursuit of novelty and adventure	Extensive capabilities and experiences	Exaggerated power and capabilities	Receptivity to risk