TIPPING POINT: REJECTING OR EMBRACING VIOLENCE

Photo by Andréa Portilla

Myriad psychological factors and social circumstances contribute to individual choice to commit extremist violence. An understanding of the unique combination of circumstances, motives, and factors that bring people to that point—including gender differences in those factors—is crucial to shaping effective prevention of this violence. Theory, research, and practice are building this understanding. Practitioners and researchers have learned that no one profile or pathway sufficiently explains why people are pushed or pulled into extremist groups, causes, or ideologies. In addition, the relationship that individuals have with a group, cause, or ideology may vary significantly in intensity, length, influence, and significance in their lives, and all these factors may affect whether and how they support, facilitate, or commit extremist violence.

> A woman, 25 years old, volunteered for a suicide mission after her father refused to allow her to marry the man that she desired. The man's family could not raise the dowry that her father demanded, and the father ignored her pleas to waive the sum. Knowing that the chances of getting married at her 'advanced' age were slim, she decided to become a martyr, as 'my life was useless; my life had no use to anyone'.[1]

There are, however, commonalities across individual accounts, intelligence data, and other sources. The reasons individuals may agree to be recruited to extremist groups fall into two overarching categories: one related to identity and another based on opportunism.

In the first category relating to identity, individuals become involved with an extremist group, cause, or ideology when it becomes significant to who they are, how they live their lives, and what they stand for. These individuals may experience strong feelings of:

- injustice and grievance about particular political, religious, or social circumstances and want to change such circumstances[2]

- threats and persecution by other groups (and often want to defend and protect their values, communities, and traditions[3]

- identity seeking—with its associated sense of belonging, purpose, and significance and often in response to feeling confused or conflicted about who they are and how they fit into society[4]

In the second category rooted in opportunism, reasons are based on more superficial, opportunistic, and conventional criminal motives: for example, to make money, for excitement and adventure, to facilitate other criminal enterprises, or to be violent simply for the pleasure of it.[5]

While some individuals may simply engage with such groups, causes, and ideas, others identify with them. Furthermore, personal accounts commonly show that emotions play a central role in an individual's involvement in violence, such as: severe anger, threat, hate, passion, stress/trauma, love, and pride. These distinctions have significant implications for how we understand, intervene, and manage such issues.

GENDER-SPECIFIC FACTORS

Research into the role gender plays in recruitment, growth, and perpetuation of terror and control is in the early stages.[6] Although the underlying reasons for extremist involvement may be the same for men and women, there are also gender-specific factors and circumstances. Individuals may be drawn to extremist groups, causes, and ideologies because of the opportunities they present to establish or reinforce gendered beliefs or identities, for example.

For some women, extremist groups represent opportunities to develop a sense of "sisterhood" to challenge and/or seek freedom from gendered expectations and norms.[7] For example, women are promised that they will be valued as wives supporting a transformative cause, as mothers nurturing new leaders, or, in some cases, as fighters and commanders organizing other women.

For some men, extremist involvement fulfills a desire to project a masculine self-image, resolve gender identity confusion or conflict (especially those who have grown up with absent or weak fathers or male role models), reinforce masculine beliefs, or satisfy other needs considered important to them as men. For example, men have described how involvement allows them to see themselves as heroic soldiers (strong, significant, tough), to protect their communities, and also to provide opportunities for marriage and sexual activity.[8]

MOVING FROM IDEAS TO ACTS OF VIOLENCE

We say the guy in the uniform is a pig, he is not a human being, and we have to tackle him from this point of view. It is wrong to talk to these people at all and the use of guns is allowed.[9]

Some people become interested and involved in extremism but do not support, facilitate, or commit extremist violence. So what makes some step over the threshold while others do not? What reduces or removes their inhibitions to commit violence?

History has shown that people who would not otherwise support or commit violence may do so under certain social and political circumstances. The obvious example is German citizens who during World War II were complicit in acts that they likely would not have engaged in, or indeed may have actively opposed, in a different time and place. Context matters. Therefore, it is important not to overpathologize extremist violence for all individuals in all circumstances.

Some individuals may be willing to commit extremist violence when they feel that they do not have personal responsibility for such actions, when culpability lies with someone else (such as group leaders), or when such acts are encouraged by family, friends, or associates.[10] They may develop attitudes and beliefs that justify, entitle, and glorify violence committed against other out-groups.[11] Such beliefs may include specific ways of thinking—for example, that the ends (political goals) justify the means (violence). Often, reference to scripture and mythology reinforces or informs such thinking, or leaders and fellow group members may sanction it.[12]

Some develop divisive "us and them" perceptions, demarcating a demonized enemy out-group from an angelic in-group, which can provide a basis for abusing or harming those in other groups.[13] In dehumanizing members of out-groups, some may strip away their human qualities and associated worth, sanctity, and dignity so they may abuse and harm them with little remorse.[14] Finally, some individuals appear so identified with their groups, causes, or ideologies that they are willing to sacrifice their former morals, relationships, liberty,

and lives.[15] When they believe there is nothing to lose (and all to gain), they are more prepared to commit violence. A mind-set of dehumanizing the "other" may equally enable individuals to commit sexual violence against women, men, or children on behalf of extremist groups.

Many people also commit violent extremism out of fear, coercion, desperation, and mental fragility. There is growing understanding about how individuals, especially children, may become involved through such circumstances and about how exposure to extremist violence, mental illness, and subsequent involvement in violence interrelate.[16] Post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety caused by exposure to violent extremism have been associated with involvement in subsequent violent extremism, including suicide bombings.[17] Thus a person's initial reasons for committing extremist violence may not be the same as the reasons for subsequent violence.

Witnessing, committing, or being victims of extremist violence, and severe violence generally may influence a person's future willingness to be violent. Adverse childhood trauma may hinder a child's development, but research also shows that the right interventions can help heal and disrupt harmful outcomes.[18] This relationship between early experience and future violent acts needs to be better understood so that more effective intervention efforts can be crafted.

Similarly, the role that gender beliefs, identity, expectations, norms, and needs contribute to a willingness to commit extremist violence also needs to be better understood. For example, how do beliefs about how men or women should be or act affect their willingness to be tough, dispassionate, or unsympathetic toward those from other groups? The diversity of circumstances that may facilitate extremist violence must inform attempts to prevent it.

Photo by Jonathan Daroca

WHAT MAKES AN INTERVENTION EFFECTIVE?

Whilst Maajid Nawaz—former leader of Hizb al-Tahrir—was serving time in an Egyptian prison, Amnesty International accepted him as a "prisoner of conscience," pressing the Egyptian government to release him from custody. Viewing the West as the enemy, he was shocked that Amnesty would be willing to support him, and he admits that this "opened my heart to the fact that the 'enemy' went out on a limb to defend me, making me realize that there were good non-Muslims." This was one of the factors that led him to re-evaluate his belief system, and it was the turning point in the process that led to his public renunciation of Hizb al-Tahrir.[19]

Preliminary findings and observations about effective interventions to prevent extremist violence are critically important, since robust outcome data remain limited, generally of poor quality, and in most cases inadequate.[20] Even information about the theory, methodology, and delivery of such programs internationally remains sparse and limited. Nonetheless, there are emerging promising practices about the features and components of interventions that appear effective:[21]

- Effective intervention programs not only address factors and circumstances that contribute to extremist violence but also those that contribute to desistance from violence.

- There are psychological and social circumstances that may encourage individuals to disengage and desist: for example, becoming disillusioned with a group or its leaders, coming to realize ideologies are flawed, changing personal circumstances and priorities, and experiencing conflict in personal values, beliefs, and actions.[22] Everyday events may trigger an individual's questioning, reexamination, and doubts about their involvement.

Facilitating these circumstances through interventions may play a crucial role in preventing extremist violence. However, disillusionment is rarely a straightforward process, as it often brings real or feared repercussions—threats to life, stigmatization, exclusion, and emotional disturbance, including feelings of fear, grief, and trauma. To be effective, interventions need to be sensitive to these repercussions.

Photo by J. Stimp

Both Al Qaeda and ISIS draw support from individuals along personal, non-ideological lines— whether it be a youth seeking to make money to pay for his dowry or a fighter joining to defend his community from external threats. Preventing individuals from supporting these groups for what they provide, not their message, means focusing on the needs within the very communities within which al Qaeda and ISIS recruit.

—Katherine Zimmerman
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PREVENTION

Can a better understanding of the factors that lead individuals to desist and disengage from extremist groups, as well as the personal repercussions for such decisions, be used to prevent initial interest and involvement? It is a question worth further study and application. For example, perhaps the factors that enable people to discredit ideologies and establish prosocial identities can be brought to bear before individuals seek out or join extremist groups.

Effective interventions prevent people from becoming or remaining engaged (or identified) with groups, causes, or ideologies; prevent them from being prepared to commit extremist violence; and reduce the likelihood they will be capable of committing violence, especially acts of terrorism.

Those seeking to prevent extremist violence should adopt a holistic approach, incorporating psychological, social, theological, and practical components whenever appropriate and feasible. A thorough assessment should guide design of the intervention. More specifically, interventions must be tailored to individuals' personal and social circumstances—gender, culture, religion, and mental well-being. They should include clear, specific goals and objectives such as these: [23]

- facilitate opportunities and activities to help individuals develop a positive, healthy identity that allows them to fulfill certain needs (belonging, purpose, significance), which they may otherwise seek through involvement in extremism

- empower and enable individuals to pursue political goals and objectives through legitimate and legal means

- strengthen an individual's sense of personal agency over their decisions and behavior, including their ability to reflect on and question ideas, beliefs, and actions

- strengthen beliefs, perceptions, and ways of thinking that make them resistant to harming others

- enable individuals to express their values, beliefs, and emotions (including those brought on by trauma) in constructive, prosocial ways

- reduce individuals' capacity to commit extremist violence by disrupting relationships, networks, and communications[24]

Photo by SPC Anthony Murray Jr. US. Army

IDENTITY & INTERVENTIONS

Although knowledge is limited about what constitutes effective gender-responsive approaches and interventions in this field,[25] it is clear that identity contributes to decisions to engage in or desist from extremist activities. By inference, gender identity will be important in intervention efforts. Some programs—such as the *Healthy Identity Intervention*, used in the prison and probation services of England and Wales—explore how gendered beliefs, expectations, and self-image may contribute to involvement in extremist activities and how they may facilitate disengagement and desistance.[26]

Beliefs, norms, and expectations about being a man or woman have in a number of cases contributed to involvement in extremist violence and also provided opportunities for personal change.[27] For example, psychologists in clinical settings have sought to achieve the following:

- enable men to establish a healthy sense of masculinity without subscribing to distorted notions of toughness, ruthlessness, or loyalty—traits that many extremist groups advocate that are often affirmed through violence

- enable women to have more agency over their lives where the lack of agency previously contributed to involvement in violent extremism

- facilitate and provide a combination of support, relationships, and opportunities for men and women, boys and girls to determine the values, beliefs, relationships, and occupations that will define who they are and what they stand for, rather than letting extremist groups choose for them

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the development of policies and programs, a strong priority must be prevention of initial engagement in violent extremism and also engaging with former extremists and survivors to learn from their experience, prevent their relapse, and assist their recovery and reintegration. The recommendations below will enhance the capacity to achieve this goal.

Create a process in which research and practice can develop concurrently and jointly rather than in fragmented isolation. Best results are more likely when research focuses in on the urgent challenges that practitioners encounter and vice versa when practitioners apply research and evidence-based practices.

Develop intervention programs that build personal resistance to becoming interested and involved in extremist groups, causes, or ideologies and becoming willing to support, facilitate, or commit violence on behalf of them.

Advance policies and programs that:

- take into account, are sensitive to, and respond appropriately to the diversity of motives and circumstances that contribute to violent extremism

- acknowledge and respond to important identity issues (including gender) that affect individuals' choices to become involved in extremist groups, commit extremist violence, and disengage and desist

- acknowledge and accommodate the role that context, thinking, feeling, and relating to others may play in violent extremism and its prevention

Invest in critical research to improve understanding of why people disengage and desist from extremist violence and how this can be translated into interventions to prevent initial interest and involvement. Examine:

- how gender beliefs, identity, expectations, and image may contribute to interest and involvement in extremist groups, causes, or ideologies and violent extremism

- how gender beliefs, identity, expectations, and image may contribute to individuals being more willing and prepared to commit acts of violent extremism

- how interventions to prevent violent extremism can be improved by focusing on and being responsive to gender-related issues

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ENDNOTES

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27. Christopher Dean in relation to his own experience as a practicing psychologist and through supervising other practitioners.