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Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism

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Sammanfattning

Denna rapport ger en översikt av Social identitetsteori (SIT) och dess användbarhet som integrativt ramverk för kvalitativa studier av terrorism och våldsbejakande extremism. SIT är en sociologisk teoribildning som syftar till att synliggöra effekterna av social identifiering på grupptillhörighet, gruppbeteende och relationer mellan grupper. Den skapades specifikt för att studera konflikt mellan grupper, men forskare har över tid utvecklat en omfattande analytisk apparat för att bättre kunna förstå ett flertal aspekter av konflikt och relationer både mellan och inom grupper. SIT kan tjäna som ett ramverk för att organisera vår kunskap om terrorism och våldsbejakande extremism, men också som en grund för nya analytiska verktyg och strukturer.

Efter ett förord visar kapitel två på behovet av ett integrativt analytiskt ramverk inom kvalitativa studier av terrorism och våldsbejakande extremism. Kapitel tre diskuterar varför SIT:s är lämpligt i den funktionen samt de huvudsakliga invändningarna mot teorin. I kapitlen tre till sju undersöks SIT:s grundläggande hypoteser och implikationer och varje kapitel pekar på några av de viktigare konsekvenserna för studiet av terrorism och våldsbejakande extremism. Kapitel åtta beskriver i korthet en inom terrorismstudier synnerligen viktig SIT-baserad analytisk struktur – Fathali Moghaddams "trappa till terrorism" - och kapitel nio innehåller en kort sammanfattning och slutsats.

Nyckelord: Social identitetsteori, identitet, social identitet, terrorism
våldsbejakande extremism, radikalisering, SIT, ESIM, SIAM,

Summary

This report provides an overview of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and its utility as an integrative framework for the qualitative study of terrorism and violent extremism. SIT is a sociological theory for understanding the effects of social identification on group membership, group behaviour, and intergroup relations. It was designed specifically for the study of intergroup conflict, but scholars have developed a comprehensive analytical apparatus for improving our understanding of multiple aspects both of inter- and intragroup relations and conflict. SIT can serve as scaffolding for organizing our knowledge about terrorism and violent extremism, but also as a foundation for new analytical tools and structures.

Following a preface, chapter one demonstrates the need for an integrative analytical framework in the qualitative study of terrorism and violent extremism. Chapters two discusses why SIT is suitable as such a framework, and also the main criticisms against it. Chapters four through seven examine the basic hypotheses and implications of SIT and each chapter identifies some to the key implications for the study of terrorism and violent extremism. Chapter eight outlines a particularly influential SIT-derived structure for organizing analysis of terrorism – Fathali Moghaddam’s “staircase to terrorism” – and chapter nine provides a brief summary and conclusion.

Keywords: Social identity theory, identity, social identity, terrorism, violent extremism, radicalization, SIT, ESIM, SIAM

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1 Preface

This report examines Social Identity Theory (SIT) and its utility as an organizing framework in the study of terrorism and violent extremism. The two intended primary audiences are *practitioners* with a professional interest in analysis of these phenomena, and *scholars* engaged in the academic study of the same. The aspiration is to present the scholarship in ways that are useful to practitioners while also contributing to the cumulative body of scholarship itself.

There is significant overlap between the various concepts and processes, but the report aims to present them as clearly as possible. *Chapter 2* establishes a problem space, outlining the need for an integrated approach to research on terrorism and violent extremism that places an emphasis on the worldview of the research subjects. The chapter also contains an abbreviated summary description of SIT. *Chapter 3* discusses the main reasons that SIT is useful to the study of terrorism and violent extremism and provides an overview of the primary criticisms against the theory. *Chapter 4* explains the basic principles of social identity formation. It describes the insight that SIT can give into how membership of a group affects the ways in which we understand ourselves, members of other groups, and the world around us. *Chapter 5* examines the group-level behavioural effects of the need to protect or attain a positive social identity. The chapter describes how social identity needs inform strategic and tactical choices during conflict with other groups.

Social identity needs shape behaviour on both the individual and group levels. *Chapter 6* examines the main hypotheses about individual motivation for seeking group membership. The chapter considers conditions that can lead individuals to commit to a violent extremist cause through social categorization. *Chapter 7*, in turn, discusses the behavioural effects of social categorization, illustrating how these can intensify both intergroup conflict and the individual radicalization process. *Chapter 8* discusses an especially influential application of SIT principles – Fathali Moghaddam's "staircase to terrorism" model of radicalization. *Chapter 9* concludes the report with some brief summary remarks. Examples are used throughout the text in order to illustrate specific theoretical points, but each chapter concludes with a section dealing specifically with the implications for CT and CVE research.

My profound gratitude goes to those who have reviewed this text, including Professor Bruce Hoffman at Georgetown University's Edmund E. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Michael Jonsson, Deputy Research Director at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), Tanja Viklund at the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities, and David W. Brannan at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS). Their feedback strengthened the text immeasurably. Dave Brannan and I have worked together for the past two decades, developing ways in which to make SIT analysis accessible to CT and CVE practitioners. I would be remiss to not thank the many

graduates of the MA program at CHDS – practitioners from local, state and federal homeland security entities – who have applied SIT on the tactical and strategic levels while staying in dialogue about what works and what does not.

Two key terms used throughout this report are *identity* and *social identity*. Legitimate question marks surround the use of "identity" as an analytical category, including its multiple meanings and uses and the frequent failure of scholars to provide clear and consistent definitions.[1] Throughout this report, *identity* is understood as "the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future."[2] *Social identity*, following Henri Tajfel's classic definition, is understood as a component of identity, consisting of the "individual's knowledge that he belongs to a certain social group together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership."[3]

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[1] For a comparative review of scholarly approaches to identity and social identity, see Timothy J. Owens, Dawn T. Robinson and Lynn Smith-Lovin, "Three Faces of Identity," *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 36 (2010), pp. 477-499. For an examination of the relationship between identity and social identity, see Kay Deaux and Peter Burke, "Bridging Identities," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (2010), pp. 315-320.

[2] Peter Weinreich, "Identity Structure Analysis" in Peter Weinreich and Wendy Saunderson (eds.), *Analysing Identity: Cross-Cultural, Societal and Clinical Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 26.

[3] Henri Tajfel, "Social categorization." English manuscript of "La catégorisation sociale" in S. Moscovici (ed.) *Introduction à la psychologie sociale*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Larousse, 1972), p. 292.

2 Introduction

> "Unless we try to think like terrorists we are liable to miss the point."[4]

The study of terrorism and violent extremism is an interdisciplinary activity. Different disciplines and sub-disciplines, primarily in the social sciences, have produced a range of theories and models through which terrorism is supposedly explained.[5] To be sure, each field of study may hold important pieces of the analytical puzzle, contributing in important ways to our overall understanding of what terrorism and violent extremism "are about". Theories focusing on rational choice or cost/benefit analyses, balance of power or social movement dynamics, economic utility, organisational concerns, community strain, ideological affiliation, individual psychology, and so forth – each may, in any given case, shed light on important aspects of terrorism and violent extremism.

Despite a series of epic battles between proponents of different theoretical and methodological approaches – rational actor models *versus* psychological approaches, economic *versus* criminological theories, and so forth – the field seems (mostly) resolved that no single discipline or theory holds *all* the pieces of the analytical puzzle.[6] Multi-causal explanatory models and a focus on the convergence of risk factors have eclipsed single-factor linear models.[7] Even so, there remain some important challenges that are not resolved by the aggregation or integration of scholarly theories and models.

2.1 The importance (and difficulty) of taking the research subject seriously

In order to know which theories, models, or general concepts that may be appropriate to a particular case – and how they should be integrated in order to reflect the reality-on-the-ground that they purport to explain – students of terrorism and violent extremism need to be attuned to the perspectives of their research subjects. The reason is basic and entirely practical: *terrorists and violent extremists act on the basis of their own understanding of themselves and the world around them*. We can begin to answer the question "why do they do what they do?" only when we have answered the question "how do they understand the world and their place in it?"[8]

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[4] Brian M. Jenkins, *International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict* (Crescent Publications, 1975).

[5] For an early but comprehensive overview of the various theories in the field, see Alex P. Schmid, Albert J. Jongman et al, *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide to Concepts, Theories, Databases and Literature* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing, 1983). For a selective but more recent overview, see Daniela Pisoiu and Sandra Hain, Theories of Terrorism: An Introduction (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[6] Michael P. Arena and Bruce A. Arrigo, *The Terrorist Identity: Explaining the Terrorist Threat* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 6.

[7] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2008), p. 415; Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 11 (2015), p. 958.

The difficulty in attaining that level of analytical granularity lies at the heart of an enduring challenge for terrorism scholarship. Since the inception of the academic field of "terrorism studies" in the early 1970s, a steady stream of scholars within and outside the field have raised concerns about its theoretical and methodological shortcomings.[9] Qualitative social science approaches to terrorism have consistently been criticized for a general failure to engage appropriately with research subjects and primary sources; for treating first-hand encounters with research subjects and original empirical data as a "bonus," rather than basic building blocks of the research process. This state of affairs has placed scholars at a distance – physically but more importantly ideationally – from their research subjects, which has hampered their ability to determine relevant contexts for analysis.[10]

In the social and human sciences, higher level qualitative scholarship requires competent interaction with primary sources including (insofar as they are available) the actual research subjects. Engagement with primary sources is what allows for the production of original knowledge and insight while research based entirely on secondary or tertiary sources can (at best) aggregate and synthesize existing knowledge. Moreover, if we take seriously the proposition that terrorists are *research subjects* rather than *research objects*, their perspective is an integral element of the qualitative research process. Regardless of how morally repugnant the researcher may find a research subject's actions or opinions, and even though a research subject can never be assumed to answer all questions truthfully,[11] the effort to build realistic and original insight requires that the research subject is taken seriously as part of the research process. The questions we ask matter.

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[8] Pioneering work in this vein include Konrad Kellen, *Terrorists – What are they Like? How Some Terrorists Describe their World and Actions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1979); Bonnie Cordes, Brian Michael Jenkins, Konrad Kellen, Gail V. Bass-Golod, Daniel A. Relles, William F. Sater, M. L. Juncosa, William W. Fowler, and Geraldine Petty, *A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Terrorist Groups* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1985); Bonnie Cordes, *When Terrorists do the Talking: Reflections on Terrorist Literature* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1987).

[9] See, for instance, Schmid et al, *Political Terrorism*; Bruce Hoffman, "Current research on terrorism and low-intensity conflict," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (1992), pp. 23-57; Andrew Silke, *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements, and Failures* (New York: Frank Cass, 2004); Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin (eds.), *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009); Marc Sageman, "The Stagnation in Terrorism Research," *Terrorism and Political Violence,* Vol. 25 (2014), pp, 565-580.

[10] For variations on this perspective, see David W. Brannan, Philip F. Esler, and N.T. Anders Strindberg, "Talking to terrorists: Towards and Independent Analytical Framework for the Study of Violent Substate Activism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism,* Vol. 24, No. 1 (2001), pp. 3-24.; Dag Tuastad, "Neo-orientalism and the new barbarism thesis: Aspects of symbolic violence in the Middle East conflict(s)," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2003); Michael Bahtia, "Fighting words: Naming terrorists, rebels, bandits and other violent actors," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2005); Anders Strindberg and Mats Wärn, "Realities of resistance: Hizballah, the Palestinian rejectionists, and al-Qa'ida compared," *Journal of Palestine Studies,* Vol. 34, No. 3 (2005); Anders Strindberg and Mats Wärn, *Islamism: Religion, Radicalization, Resistance* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Marco Nilsson, "Interviewing Jihadists: On the Importance of Drinking Tea and Other Methodological Considerations," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (2018), pp. 419-432.

2.2 Asking the right questions

Asking *what* someone is produces categories, or types, that almost inevitably go on to become the object of explanation (e.g. "John is a neo-Nazi and this is what neo-Nazism teaches"). The characteristics of the research subject are then deduced from the category to which he/she has been assigned (e.g. this is what neo-Nazism teaches and therefore this is what John believes). This may look like a neat deductive syllogism, but it has removed the need for knowing anything about the research subject directly. Instead, we are trying to understand John through an idealized representation of "people like John." Other than the fact that ideal types are seldom real types, this undercuts efforts to get to know the research subject's motivations, reservations, circumstances, or challenges – in short, the sort of factors that are central to de- and counter-radicalization efforts.[12] This approach, which seems to correspond to what social identity theorists refer to as "the outgroup homogeneity effect" (see chapter 6 below), is all too common in research on terrorism and violent extremism, often justified as part of the collectivist focus of social movement theory.

Taking the research subject seriously requires the researcher to consider who the subject is and why, as opposed to merely seeing him or her as a representative of a category or group. As Hannah Arendt observed,

> in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world... This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings – is implicit in everything somebody says and does.[13]

Understanding *who* as opposed to *what* someone is places the focus on the identity of the individual and the contexts within which he or she exists and evolves. This matters because, as Davis and Cragin have suggested, in the study of terrorist organizations and events, "not all details matter, certainly, but which details do matter differ with the case."[14] Therefore "it is essential to distinguish sharply among different *contexts*" – but "failure to do so has probably been the biggest single problem impeding coherent scientific discussion of terrorism and counter-terrorism."[15]

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[11] On the problem presented by terrorists lying to researchers, see Bruce Hoffman, "The study of terrorism." Keynote presentation delivered at "Academia and practitioners: challenges and synergies in strategic research on violent extremism," Stockholm, October 16, 2019. Video retrieved at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHEqMAOptgQ

[12] See Michael Jonsson, *A Farewell to Arms: Motivational Change and Divergence Inside FARC-EP 2002-2010* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2014), esp. pp. 18-29.

[13] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 179.

[14] Davis and Cragin (eds.), *Social Science for Counterterrorism*, p. xxviii

To be sure, it is also possible to study *what terrorists do and how they do it* – to analyse the mechanics of terrorist operations. This may include, for instance, armament choices, attack frequencies, cyber capabilities, methods of intelligence sharing, and financing. Such studies are useful in many ways and can be legitimately conducted without a focus on primary source research or the perspectives of individual research subjects. Nevertheless, any attempt to answer the question *why* they do what they do requires a focus on *who* the research subjects are, rather than *what* they do.

Already in the late 1970s, Leites observed that, while there was plenty of research on terrorist actions and operations, there was virtually no research on motivations and objectives – on "what they thought they were doing" and "what good [they thought] it would do."[16] In the decades since, leading scholars in the field have concurred. For instance, Hoffman, in a 1992 stocktaking of the field, noted that, "too often terrorism research is conducted in a vacuum, divorced from the reality of the subject we study… Those researchers who succeed in overcoming this inherent distance often have the most interesting things to say."[17] In 2007, Silke likewise lamented the problematic fact that "most of what is written about terrorism is written by people who have never met a terrorist and who never actually spent time on the ground in the areas most affected by these conflicts."[18]

The past decade has seen an increase in efforts to incorporate primary source material, including a sharp rise in the number of publications drawing on original interviews with terrorists and violent extremists. Even so, these contributions remain a small fraction of the overall literature.[19] Furthermore, as Khalil notes, "the quality of these studies varies substantially, and this body of literature exhibits a variety of repeating methodological issues."[20] In a 2014 article addressing the challenge of distance between researcher and research subject, Nilsson suggested that

> the field of terrorism research has arguably long been characterized by a "chasm" separating the scholars from their subject of inquiry. For some scholars, not talking to "terrorists" has become a badge of scholarly credibility. For others, security concerns or fears of being unable to apply standard methods of scientific inquiry have deterred efforts to conduct interviews.

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[15] Paul K. Davis, and Kim Cragin, "Conclusions" in Davis and Cragin (eds.), *Social Science for Counterterrorism,* p. 454.

[16] Nathan Leites, "Understanding the Next Act," *Terrorism*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1979), p. 1.

[17] Hoffman, "Current research on terrorism and low-intensity conflict," p. 28.

[18] Andrew Silke, "The Impact of 9/11 on Research on Terrorism," in Magnus Ranstorp, (ed.), *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Directions* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 77.

[19] See Daniel J. Harris, Pete Simi, and Gina Ligon, "Reporting Practices of Journal Articles that Include Interviews with Extremists," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism,* Vol. 39, No. 7–8 (2016), pp. 602–616.

[20] James Khalil, "A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2019), p. 429.

> Consequently, the field has been characterized by a widespread lack of evidence-based research and by scholars' citing each other rather than gathering first-hand data.[21]

Whatever the reason, the upshot of this state of affairs is a widely shared reluctance (or inability) among scholars of terrorism and violent extremism to engage in field research. This has tended to privilege theory over on-the-ground perspectives and also resulted in over-extrapolation of assumptions based on too few cases, which in turn has obscured the perspectives of the research subjects. A preference for talking with other terrorism experts, with members of security forces and intelligence agencies engaged in counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE), anti-extremism watchdogs, or individuals tangential to a terrorist group or violent extremist movement (assumed to be representative of a "general milieu") has too often been allowed to replace the collection and analysis of actual primary source material.[22]

2.3 SIT as an organizing framework

This situation impacts the quality and reliability of analysis and advice offered to practitioners in the fields of CT and CVE. In a survey of the field of terrorism studies, one sociologist concluded that "the key audience for terrorism expertise is not an ideal-typical scientific community, but rather the public and the state."[23] With such an audience in mind, the issue becomes urgent: *robust, precise, and actionable analysis demands that the specific context of the specific research subject is allowed to ground explanatory models and general theories*. Without that grounding, models and theories will remain generalizations bereft of specific analytical value.[24]

Looking to the research subject for context requires two things: 1) a primary-source based familiarity with the research subjects' reality *and with their understanding of that reality*,[25] and 2) a framework for organising those primary source-based insights and integrating them with applicable scholarly perspectives and theories. This report focuses exclusively on the second item: how one might go about building an analytical framework that organizes primary data in a way that emphasizes the reality of the research subject *and* facilitates the integration of insights from appropriate scholarly models and theories.[26] Davis and Cragin argue that "centrality of context is a first principle and establishing context should be the first order of business in organizing thought."[27] This report suggests that a functional framework for establishing context can be found in Social Identity Theory (SIT).

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[21] Nilsson, "Interviewing Jihadists," p. 419.

[22] Brannan et al, "Talking to terrorists"; Nilsson, "Interviewing Jihadists."

[23] Lisa Stampnitzky, "Disciplining an unruly field: Terrorism experts and theories of scientific/intellectual production, *Qualitative Sociology,* Vol. 34 (2011), p. 8.

[24] The terms "terrorism" and "terrorist" are in themselves problematic, not least because of the so-called "terrorist label effect." See Stephane J. Baele, Olivier C. Sterck, Thibaut Slingeneyer and Gregoire P. Lits, "What Does the 'Terrorist' Label Really Do? Measuring and Explaining the Effects of the 'Terrorist' and 'Islamist' Categories," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 42, No. 5 (2019), pp. 520-540.

[25] There are a number of excellent primers and textbooks on the methods and principles of primary source research. See, for instance, Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2015); H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005, 4th ed.); Allan Bryman, *Samhällsvetenskapliga metoder* (Stockholm: Liber, 2018).

SIT is not a "theory of terrorism." Rather, it is a theory of the relationship between the individual and the group with a focus on how group membership affects the perceptions and behaviour of the individual. It was originally developed within social psychology to understand patterns of intergroup prejudice and discrimination and has resulted in a significant body of scholarship on conflict between and within groups.

Briefly, SIT posits that when we belong to a certain group (the "ingroup"), this belonging impacts our self-image and, importantly, how we feel about that self-image. Whether this impact is positive or negative – makes us feel good or bad, proud or ashamed, satisfied or dissatisfied, and so forth – depends in part on the ingroup's own achievements; in part on comparisons with other groups (the "outgroups"). These comparisons impact not only how we feel about ourselves and other members of our ingroup, but also how we perceive and behave towards the outgroup and its members.[28]

As we scan our environment for differences between "us" and "them," our need for a positive social identity leads to evaluations that are intrinsically in-group-favouring and out-group-discriminatory.[29] In situations of conflict, group strategies to maintain or acquire a positive social identity in comparison to other groups generate *observable* and *predictable* patterns of behaviour.[30] These patterns are based on the psychological needs of individuals and invariably shaped by the specific contexts and conflicts *as they are seen, understood, and framed by the ingroup*.[31] The causes and effects of social identity needs on individual and group behaviour have been extensively tested in laboratory settings and in field studies, to the point that SIT hypotheses can be considered scientifically robust.[32]

This report outlines those behavioural patterns and the ways in which they are useful to the study of terrorism and violent extremism. This includes not only using SIT on its own to better understand individual and group level pathways to violent extremism, but also gauging how other theoretical models may be applicable in a given case.

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[26] An interesting example of approaching in this vein may be found in Jan Jämte and Rune Ellefsen, "The Consequences of Soft Repression," *Mobilization: An International Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (2020), pp. 383-404.

[27] Davis and Cragin, "Introduction" in Davis and Cragin (eds.), *Social Science for Counterterrorism*, p. l.

[28] For this, see esp. ch. 4.

[29] For this, see esp. ch. 7.

[30] For this, see esp. ch. 5.

[31] For this, see esp. ch. 6.

[32] For this, see esp. ch. 3.

2.4 What happened to objectivity?

SIT demands of the researcher a high level of familiarity with the research subjects' milieu and worldview. Its central focus is set on the subjects' perception of themselves and their place in the world. SIT does not, however, deny the importance of "objective facts" that exist and have an impact independent of perceptions or opinions. Examples might include balance of power relationships, military capabilities, access to resources, or geographic circumstances. For practitioners seeking to assess a group's chances of growth or success, such factors are important parts of the puzzle.

To better understand their significance in specific conflicts, however, SIT calls for objective facts to be contextualized at the group level so that we can know how they are understood and acted upon by the research subject.[33] For example, it was not an unbiased appraisal of objective facts about West German society that convinced the first generation of Red Army Faction members that the time was right to take up arms. Instead, those facts were analysed within and explained by the Red Army Faction's ingroup narrative.[34] That narrative, heavily influenced by Maoism, interpreted the state's overwhelming power as a sign of its weakness. The strength of the economy was seen as a sign of its fragility. The ingroup itself – politically marginal with no "objective" hope of ever attaining its goals – was transformed into a selfless and heroic vanguard of the global proletariat. Ensslin, Baader, Meinhof, and their cohorts were not unaware of "objective facts" but viewed them through the ingroup lens – *and acted on what they saw*.[35]

Regardless of whether a group's reading of reality seems unrealistic or even insane to an outsider, that is nonetheless the reading that frames ingroup actions, alignments and objectives. Abu Musab al-Suri, formerly a leading strategist and ideologue within al-Qaeda, explained the organization's military theory in light of developments following the September 11 attacks:

> The American campaigns started, with their new military methods, and their full-scale attacks everywhere... The balance of material power between us and our enemies has been shattered. It went to their favor, and then it collapsed. Therefore, between us and them there is no material or military balance. It cannot be compared... If we decided to confront [them], and we regard this as a religious duty – which it truly is – I consider ideas like these, which I will set forth in detail in this section, with Allāh's permission, to be the only workable method, from the perspective of a total confrontation theory.[36]

Simply knowing that there are a number of objective obstacles to terrorist projects does not necessarily tell us anything about how group leaders perceive those obstacles, how they present them to ingroup members, how those members process them, or how the groups intend to address them. Terrorism and violent extremism are rarely about “objectively rational” choices. As later chapters will demonstrate, the fact that a terrorist group’s ideas about what is right and rational is a product of its ingroup narrative is of great importance for CT and CVE practitioners seeking to understand or intervene against it.

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[33] For this, see esp. sections on relevance to CT and CVE research.

[34] For the RAF's analysis of social and economic reality, see Rote Armee Fraktion, *Das Konzept Stadtguerilla* (April 1971), esp. chs. 2, 4, 5.

[35] Stefan Aust (trans. Anthea Bell), *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the R.A.F.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 42.

[36] Abu Musab al-Suri, "The jihadi experiences: The schools of jihad," *Inspire*, No. 1 (2010), pp. 48-49.

3 Why Social Identity Theory?

> "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."[37]

Human beings are inherently social. It is through social connections that we learn about what is right and wrong, true and false, what is acceptable and what is beyond the pale. It is through social connections that we create friendships and develop loyalties, exercise solidarity and empathy – as well as nurture enmities and grievances, rivalries and conflict. Our social connections allow us to share experiences and discuss opinions, develop worldviews, adopt narratives, and transform individual aspirations into collective objectives. They "can promote cohesive ties, but they can also create or accentuate divisions between us and those who do not belong to our group."[38]

Our social connections are also central to the process of learning who we are in relation to others – about our identity. That part of an individual's identity that looks specifically to social connections for content and meaning is referred to as *social identity*.[39] Understanding the emergence, management, mobilization and manipulation of social identity lies at the heart of Social Identity Theory (SIT). It examines questions such as why and how a group develops, where its worldview comes from, and how its narratives emerge and evolve. It conceptualizes relationships within and between groups and allows us to identify – on the basis of primary source research – what *really* matters to a group and its members. Such data points are important because they can serve as a basis for developing effective targeted CVE and CT efforts, minimizing the risk of actions that inadvertently strengthen the identities, narratives, and radicalization processes of the targeted group.[40]

SIT rejects the notion of deindividuation – the idea that once an individual is "submerged" into a group, he or she abandons the rational self and becomes a victim of collective irrationality or "the dark instincts of the collective unconscious."[41] This classical notion in the study of social protest movements belies the fact that human beings are able to think and act as individuals *at the same time* as they are able to think and act as group members. Nevertheless, variations on the deindividuation theme continue to influence analysis of terrorism and violent extremism. It is an enduring feature of Social Movement Theory (SMT),[42] frequently referenced as a theoretical backdrop for studies of terrorist and violent extremist groups despite the fact that many or most terrorist and violent extremist groups lack the characteristics of a social movement.[43] SMT's emphasis on *collective* organization, *collective* narratives, and *collective* identity relegates the agency of the individual to the analytical margins. As Klandermans has pointed out, "collective identity in the social-movement literature is a group characteristic" whereas "social identity in the social-psychological literature a characteristic of a person. It is part of a person's self-image that is derived from the groups of which he or she is a member."[44] SMT's focus on the collective effectively obscures questions related to individual motivation, commitment, radicalization, de-radicalization, dissent, and factionalism, as well as the individual decision to carry out acts of terrorism.[45]

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[37] Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (London: 1892), p. 163.

[38] Reeshma Haji, Shelley McKeown, and Neil Ferguson, "Social Identity and Peace Psychology: An Introduction" in Shelley McKeown, Reeshma Haji, and Neil Ferguson (eds.) *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory: Contemporary Global Perspectives* (Geneva, Switzerland: Springer International, 2016), p. xv.

[39] For a brief but excellent overview of the social identity concept, see Marilynn B. Brewer, "The Many Faces of Social Identity: Implications for Political Psychology," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2001), pp. 115-25.

[40] On the risks of unintended adverse consequences of de-radicalization efforts, see Jan Jämte and Rune Ellefsen, "Countering extremism(s): Differences in local prevention of left- wing, right-wing and Islamist extremism," *Journal for Deradicalization*, No. 24 (2020), pp. 191-230.

[41] S. Alexander Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations* (London, SAGE Publications, 2004, 3rd ed.), p. xvii.

Within SIT, the relationship between the individual and the group is the central analytical focus. Berger suggests that, "with the exception of the wholly original ideologues – the 0.0001 percent of the 0.01 percent of people who become violent extremists – group radicalization precedes individual radicalization."[46] That is to say, a radicalizing individual will almost always attach him- or herself to the narrative of a group, and it is that collective narrative – rather than entirely private thoughts and ideas – that provides the rationale for his or her evolution toward violent action.[47] This is a primary reason why it is useful to frame analysis of radicalization and violent extremism at the group level.[48] Davis and Cragin have noted that,

> Abundant evidence indicates that socialization processes are a necessary precondition for radicalization (by which we mean the process of becoming willing to conduct a terrorist act).

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[42] For an overview of SMT, see Donatella De la Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 2nd Ed).

[43] See Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768–2004* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004).

[44] P.G. Klandermans, "Identity Politics and Politicized Identities: Identity Processes and the Dynamics of Protest," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2014), p. 2.

[45] For an SIT approach to deindividuation, see Stephen D. Reicher, Russel Spears and Tom Postmes, "A Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Phenomena," *European Review of Social Psychology*, Vol. 6 (1995), pp. 161-198.

[46] J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), p. 117.

[47] For an illustrative set of case studies, see Ramón Spaaij, "The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 9 (2010), p. 856.

[48] See also Jacquelien van Stekelenburg, "Going All the Way: Politicizing, Polarizing, and Radicalizing Identity Offline and Online," *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 8 (2014), pp. 540-555; James M. Jasper, "The doors that culture opened: Parallels between social movement studies and social psychology," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2017), pp. 285-302.

> Group processes assure individuals that their chosen path is correct, build up socially motivated courage, and help to dehumanize selected targets.[49]

SIT is a heuristic model of intergroup dynamics. That is to say, it is a model for organizing the discovery of connections and relations on the basis of previously discovered connections and relations. SIT is not a self-contained or abstract universal theory of human behaviour, nor a “theory of terrorism,” and is useful as an integrative framework for research on terrorism and violent extremism for five primary reasons.

First, SIT is sufficiently elastic to accommodate and integrate relevant insights from other theories. While SIT can be (and has been) used as a stand-alone explanatory framework, it is frequently integrated with other theories and models in order to grapple with a given question. Theories from political science, international relations, economics, psychology, critical studies, or other approaches in social psychology, are not necessarily rejected or supplanted by SIT. Rather, SIT provides a grounded structure for evaluating, weighing, and organising theoretical insight based on the social reality of the research subjects; “a means of integrating insights from a variety of analytical models within an intercultural framework.”[50]

For instance, Swann et al seek to explain different levels of commitment and zeal within groups by combining SIT with identity fusion theory.[51] Tezcür and Gurses combine SIT with an institutional political science approach in their study of anti-Kurdish discrimination and ethnic mobilization in Turkey.[52] Focusing on Europe, Hadler et al examine the development of national identities and a common pan-European identity by integrating SIT with insights from environmental psychology.[53] Strindberg and Wärn examine the relationship between the local manifestations and global appeal of Islamism by setting SIT within a postcolonial approach to international relations.[54] Ludwick, a practitioner-scholar, devised a framework for measuring radicalization within terrorist groups by combining SIT with Social Distance Theory.[55]

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[49] Davis and Cragin (eds.), *Social Science for Counterterrorism*, p. xxiv

[50] Brannan et al, “Talking to terrorists,” p. 5.

[51] William B. Swann, Jr., Ángel Gómez, John F. Dovidio, Sonia Hart and Jolanda Jetten, “Dying and Killing for One's Group: Identity Fusion Moderates Responses to Intergroup Versions of the Trolley Problem,” *Psychological Science*, Vol. 21, No. 8 (August 2010), pp. 1176-1183.

[52] Günes Murat Tezcür and Mehmet Gurses, “Ethnic Exclusion and Mobilization: The Kurdish Conflict in Turkey,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2017), pp. 213-230. Cf. Evan S. Lieberman and Prerna Singh, “The Institutional Origins of Ethnic Violence,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (October 2012), pp. 1-24.

[53] Markus Hadler, Kiyoteru Tsutsui and Lynn G. Chin, “Conflicting and Reinforcing Identities in Expanding Europe: Individual and Country-Level Factors Shaping National and European Identities, 1995-2003,” *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (June 2012), pp. 392-418.

[54] Strindberg and Wärn, *Islamism*.

[55] Keith W. Ludwick, *Closing the Gap: Measuring the Social Identity of Terrorists* (Master’s thesis, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, 2008).

Second, SIT is a framework for understanding regular, observable, and testable patterns of human action and interaction in groups. SIT makes only two basic assumptions about terrorists and violent extremists: that they are human beings and that being human informs their behaviour in similar ways to other humans. Since SIT is not theory of terrorism, it makes no assumptions or generalizations about terrorist-specific behaviour or motivations. Indeed, decades of research has cast doubt on the need for special theories of "terrorist behaviour" or "terrorist motivations" because terrorists and violent extremists are, simply put, not that special. As Crenshaw's has observed, "the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normality. Terrorism often seems to be the connecting link among widely varying personalities."[56] Davis and Cragin have similarly noted that, "Terrorists are not particularly impoverished, uneducated, or afflicted by mental disease. Demographically, their most important characteristic is normalcy (within their environment)."[57] The consequences of violent extremist and terrorist actions may be – indeed, are often designed to be – spectacular and extraordinary; the social dynamics that underpin their actions and interactions, on the other hand, are not.

Since SIT provides a broad analytical framework for understanding human action and interaction in groups, it can be used to inform analyses of any given terrorist or violent extremist group across the spectrum of cultures and societies. It can also draw on examples and lessons from outside the narrow confines of terrorism studies.

Third, as a theory of human behaviour, SIT is supported by empirical test results. These come primarily from the so-called minimal group experiments, a method devised by Henri Tajfel – the founder of SIT – in order to investigate the minimal conditions required for ingroup/outgroup discrimination.[58] In order to empirically discover the point at which intergroup discrimination would occur, Tajfel had intended to create groups with minimal meaning and then incrementally add meaning in order to discover a tipping point. He found, however, that even the most minimal group conditions created discriminatory responses favouring the ingroup. SIT emerged as a way to explain this phenomenon.[59]

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[56] Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13 (1981), p. 390.

[57] Davis and Cragin (eds.), *Social Science for Counterterrorism*, p. xxiv. For an earlier argument in this vein, see Clarke McCauley, "Psychological issues in understanding terrorism and the response to terrorism" in Chris E. Stout (ed.) *The Psychology of Terrorism*, Vol. 3 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

[58] Henri Tajfel, M.G. Billig, R.P. Bundy & C. Flament, "Social categorization and intergroup behaviour," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (April–June 1971), pp. 149-178. For the claim that minimal group experiments are more consistent with the Behavioural Interaction Model than with SIT, see Jacob M. Rabbie, Jan C. Shot and Lieuwe Visser, "Social Identity Theory: A conceptual and empirical critique from the perspective of a behavioural interaction model," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol 19, No. 3 (1989), pp. 171-202.

[59] Henri Tajfel, "Interindividual behaviour and intergroup behaviour" in Henri Tajfel (ed.) *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (London: Academic Press,1978), pp. 27–60.

According to Tajfel, prejudice and intergroup conflict were best understood as "group phenomena generated by basic human motivations and cognitive processes impacted by people's beliefs about themselves, and about the society, social context, and immediate situations people finds themselves and their groups in."[60] Over the past half-century, "literally hundreds of minimal group experiments have been conducted across the globe" and "the robust finding" is that simply knowing that you have been categorized as a member of a group "produces ethnocentrism and competitive intergroup behaviour."[61] The thrust of the scholarly debate no longer concerns whether group categorization leads to observable patterns of intergroup discrimination and conflict, but focuses instead on why this is so and how specific conditions impact specific behaviours.

Fourth, SIT is explicitly interested in the everyday lifeworld of self-reflective and interacting individuals. It seeks to understand meaning, intention, and emotion as experienced and organized by individuals in groups. SIT may be thought of as an intersectional approach: it has to take seriously the impact of multiple contexts and structures (e.g. cultural setting, religious milieu, socioeconomic status, group ideology, gender relations) on an individual's commitment to his/her group and its guiding narrative, and on the group as it interacts with other groups.

This makes SIT analysis complex as well as dynamic but allows it to highlight how and why terrorist and violent extremist groups differ from each other in important ways – even though they may profess the same ideology and operate in the same space – and also why and how they may change over time. As Hogg has pointed out, SIT "is a unified conceptual framework that explicates group processes and intergroup relations in terms of the interaction of social cognitive, social interactive, and societal processes, and places self-conception at the core of that dynamic."[62] This is important because it forces the researcher to take seriously and engage with the research subject's perspective – appropriate contextualization is a central concern and can never be a retro-fitted afterthought. In the words of one CT practitioner,

> A Social Identity perspective affords counterterrorists a perspective into both the physical environment and the mental context that produces terrorists because it takes into account 'who' the terrorists are and 'why' terrorist groups form and disintegrate. SIT also acknowledges that identities can shift with circumstances, which in turn allows informed counterterrorists the ability to apply different models when analyzing terrorist activity.[63]

Fifth, SIT has generated practical tools for CT and CVE on both the tactical and strategic level. For instance, when SIT hypotheses were applied specifically to the behaviour of crowds, questioning the classical notions of deindividuation and crowd mentality, the eventual result was the development of the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM).[64] ESIM provides an understanding of a group's socially constructed identity specifically applied to crowd behaviour.[65] It posits that shared social identity defines norms and that these norms determine both the behaviour of the crowd and who participates in it. ESIM shows that the diversity of group norms accounts for the variety of observable crowd behaviours and, importantly, that crowds change their collective identity and behaviour in predictable ways based on the influences of other groups, such as rival crowds or law enforcement.[66] These insights were far more granular than previous theories of the crowd and quickly gave rise to a number of crowd-management models for law enforcement that have been operationalized by law enforcement in, among other places, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[67]

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[60] Michael A. Hogg, "Social Identity Theory" in McKeown et al (eds.) *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, p. 7.
[61] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 6.
[62] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," pp.13-14.
[63] Brad Deardorff, *The Roots of our Children's War* (Salinas, CA: Agile Press, 2013), p. 45.

Another example is the Social Identity Analytical Method (SIAM), a tool for strategic and policy level analysis of terrorism, violent extremism and organized criminal activity. Currently used within several local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies in the United States, SIAM was initially conceived as a framework for adapting the SIT analytical process to practitioner needs. It is the result of an ongoing scholar-practitioner dialogue centred at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security.[68] Yet despite the practical utility of SIT and SIT-derived tools, SIT and other social identity perspectives have remained marginal within the academic study of terrorism and violent extremism.

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[64] See Stephen D. Reicher, "The St. Pauls Riot: An explanation of the limits of crowd action in terms of social identity," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1984), pp. 1-21.

[65] See Clifford Stott and John Drury, "Crowds, context and identity: Dynamic categorization processes in the 'poll tax riot,'" *Human Relations*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2000), pp. 247-273.

[66] Clifford Stott and Stephen Reicher, "How Conflict Escalates: The Inter-Group Dynamics of Collective Football Crowd 'Violence,'" *Sociology*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1998), pp. 363-364.

[67] For the Swedish "Special Police Tactics" and "dialogue police" concepts, see Stefan Holgersson, *I demokratins yttersta gränsland: Om behov av dialog och dialogpoliskonceptet* (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2019). For the application of Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM) by UK police services, see Clifford Stott, *Crowd Psychology and Public Order Policing: An Overview of Scientific Theory and Evidence. Submission to the HMIC Policing of Public Protest Review Team* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool, 2009). For a comparative overview of its use in the United States and Europe, see Christopher J. Barney, *The 'English Disease' and Political Protest: How Social Identity Theory Can Enhance Public Safety at Crowd Events* (Master's thesis, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, 2019). An overview of the general principles of ESIM can be found in Stephen T. La Macchia and Winnifred R. Louis, "Crowd Behaviour and Collective Action" in McKeown et al (eds.), *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*," pp. 89-104.

[68] SIAM and its uses have been documented primarily in the form of unpublished memoranda. For an overview of the components of SIAM, see David Brannan, Kristin Darken and Anders Strindberg, *A Practitioner's Way Forward: Terrorism Analysis* (Salinas: Agile Press, 2021, forthcoming, 2nd ed.).

3.1 Concerns and criticisms

SIT is not without critics, although a main concern seems to be its “real world” applicability rather than the soundness of its observations and assumptions. Huddy, for instance, has expressed concern about SIT’s supposed over-reliance on laboratory environments for empirical evidence. She concedes that the key findings of SIT have been widely replicated and that it has “generated testable hypotheses that can be applied to a wide range of groups, including those linked to politics.”[69] However, she argues, “social identity theorists’ disinclination to examine the sources of social identity in a real world complicated by history and culture”[70] raises doubts about the relevance of SIT.

This criticism does not take issue with the findings of the minimal group experiments, but with their centrality. These experiments are an empirical corner stone of SIT for a reason: the laboratory environment is important for the ability to test SIT hypotheses with a minimum of interference from the unknowable number of intervening variables present in “real world” social relations. That said, important work has been done also outside the laboratory. SIT hypotheses have been tested on populations in conflict areas around the globe, including the Philippines[71], Rwanda[72] and Northern Ireland.[73] Social identity theorists studying the inter- and intragroup dynamics of riots and other major public events have engaged in extensive and ongoing field research.[74] ESIM developed as a distinct variant of SIT as a direct result of studies of the April 1980 riot in St Pauls, Bristol[75] and was later used to study the 2011 riots in the United Kingdom.[76] While the limited group experiments are central and, indeed, foundational to SIT, there is no shortage of real world studies and applications.

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[69] Leonie Huddy, “From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory,” *Political Psychology* Vol. 22, No. 1 (2001), p. 128.

[70] Huddy, “From Social to Political Identity,” p. 129.

[71] Cristina Jayme Montiel, Ma. Elizabeth J. Macapagal and Jose Jowel Canuday, “Collective and Social Identities in Philippine Peacebuilding: Does a Superordinate Bangsamoro Social Identity Mediate the Effects of Collective Ethinc Identity?” in McKeown et al (eds.), *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, pp. 333-347.

[72] Sigrun Marie Moss, “Representations of Social Identities in Rwanda” in McKeown et al (eds.), *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, pp. 199-213.

[73] Tania Tam, Miles Hewstone, Jared Kenworthy and Ed Cairns, “Intergroup trust in Northern Ireland,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2009), pp. 45-59. 4; Stefania Paolini, Miles Hewstone, Ed Cairns and Alberto Voci, “Effects of Direct and Indirect Cross-Group Friendships on Judgments of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland: The Mediating Role of an Anxiety-Reduction Mechanism,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 30 No. 6 (2004), pp. 770-786.

[74] Stephen D. Reicher, “Social influence in the crowd: Attitudinal and behavioural effects of de-individuation in conditions of high and low group salience,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1984), pp. 341-350; ““The Battle of Westminster”: Developing the social identity model of crowd behaviour in order to explain the initiation and development of collective conflict,” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (1996), pp. 115-134; Clifford Stott and John Drury, “Crowds, context and identity: Dynamic categorization processes in the ‘poll tax riot,’” *Human Relations*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2000), pp. 247-273.

[75] Stephen D. Reicher, “The St. Pauls Riot: An explanation of the limits of crowd action in terms of social identity,” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1984), pp. 1-21.

[76] Stephen D. Reicher and Clifford Stott, M*ad Mobs and Englishmen: Myths and Realities of the 2011 Riots* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2011).

The second critical theme centres on the notion that the explanatory power of SIT far exceeds its predictive power.[77] The thrust of the argument is that SIT is useful in retrospective analysis – the post-mortem of events – but less reliable in forecasting behaviours and actions. This argument seems mistaken. As already mentioned, social relations in the field contain an unknowable number of potential intervening variables, which complicates matters for all model-based prediction efforts. The minimal group experiments, however, have allowed researchers to isolate the relationship between dependent and independent variables. This has produced findings that are robust, repeatable, and predictable. In the field, researchers can only account for the effects of as many intervening variables as they know about, but the findings appear to have been no less consistent.[78]

Moreover, ESIM serves as a foundation for law enforcement tactics in several countries *precisely because* it facilitates the prediction of actions, reactions, and chains of events when dealing with riots and other major public events. The predictive capacity of ESIM facilitates effective and targeted conflict resolution and amelioration.[79] Similarly, SIAM has gained ground with law enforcement analysts dealing with terrorism, violent extremism, and other violent sub-state actors due to its ability to accurately forecast actions and reactions. SIT has also spawned a number of targeted conflict resolution models, which may be seen as a testament to its capacity to predict and forecast actions and events.[80]

That said, this predictive capacity is directly connected to a realistic empirical understanding of the actors and their context. As Anthony et al point out, SIT "must not be misunderstood as an unconditional theory that explains conflict independently of contextual factors."[81] SIT is not a substitute for empirical and contextual data but a way to organize that data. Leading scholars in the field have repeatedly noted that SIT must be combined with contextual understanding of a given specific group, movement, or situation under consideration.[82] In the words of Tajfel and turner, "the effects of [SIT] variables are powerfully determined by the previous social, economic, and political processes."[83]As has already been noted in this report, the necessity of giving SIT a relevant contextual grounding based on empirical research is precisely what commends it for use in the study of terrorism and violent extremism.

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[77] Michael A. Hogg and Kipling D. Williams, "From I to we: Social identity and the collective self," *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Vol. 4, No, 1 (2000), pp. 81–97.

[78] See source references in notes 71-75 above

[79] See Stefan Holgersson, *I demokratins yttersta gränsland, pp. 38-54, 79-80.*

[80] For scholarly approaches to SIT-derived models of conflict resolution, see Stefania Paolini et al, "Effects of Direct and Indirect Cross-Group Friendships on Judgments of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland"; Marilynn B. Brewer and Norman Miller, "Beyond the Contact Hypothesis: Theoretical Perspectives on Desegregation," in Norman Miller and Marilynn B. Brewer (eds.), *Groups in Contact: The Psychology of Desegregation* (New York: Academic Press, 1984); B. Ann Bettencourt, Marilynn B. Brewer, Marian R. Croak, and Norman Miller, "Cooperation and the Reduction of Intergroup Bias: The Role of Reward Structure and Social Orientation" in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 28 (1992), pp. 301–309; Rupert Brown, "Tajfel's Contribution to the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict" in Peter Robinson (ed.), S*ocial Groups and Identities: Developing the Legacy of Henri Tajfel* (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 1996), pp. 169–189, 175–176; Samuel L. Gaertner et al, "Reducing intergroup Conflict: From superordinate goals to decategorization, recategorization, and mutual differentiation," *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2000), pp. 98-114; Miles Hewstone et al, "Stepping stones to reconciliation in Northern Ireland: Intergroup contact, forgiveness, and trust" in Arie Nadler, Thomas E. Malloy and Jeffrey D. Fisher (eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 199-226.

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[81] Francis-Vincent Anthony, Chris A.M. Hermans and Carl Sterkens, *Religion and Conflict Attribution: An Empirical Study of the Religious Meaning System of Christian, Muslim and Hindu Students in Tamil Nadu, India* (Leiden, Brill, 2015), p. 170.

[82] Henri Tajfel, "Intergroup Relations, Social Myths and Social Justice in Social Psychology" in Henri Tajfel (ed.), *The Social Dimension* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984, 2nd ed.), pp. 695–715; John C. Turner, "Some current issues in research on social identity and self-categorization theories" in Naomi Ellemers, Russel Spears and Bertjan Doosje (eds.), *Social Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Science, 1999), pp. 6–34; John C. Turner and Katherine J. Reynolds, "The Social Identity Perspective in Intergroup Relations: Theories, Themes, and Controversies" in Rupert Brown and Samuel L. Gaertner (eds.). *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 133-152.

[83] Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict" in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), pp. 33–47.

4 Group identity

> "Inferiors revolt in order that they may be equal and equals that they may be superior. Such is the state of mind that creates revolutions."[84]

Originally, social identity theorists were interested mainly in intergroup relations and the issue of conflict *between* groups but have come to focus increasingly on the dynamics of social identification *within* groups.[85] The combination of the two focus areas is often described as the *social identity approach*, or *social identity perspective*.[86]

At the core of the social identity approach lies Tajfel's above-mentioned classic definition of social identity as an "individual's knowledge that he belongs to a certain social group together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership."[87] A positive ingroup value can generate feelings such as joy, pride, and satisfaction while a negative ingroup value can generate insecurity, anxiety and resentment. Importantly, these feelings impact not only how one feels about oneself and one's fellow ingroup members, but also how one relates to those who are not part of the ingroup; that is, members of an outgroup.[88] While some group memberships are purely functional and emotionally irrelevant – say, membership in a supermarket's loyalty club – others can be so important that they become part of our identity. Who *we are* as a group becomes intertwined with who *I am* as an individual.

4.1 Intergroup Relations

SIT "focuses less on how individuals operate within social groups and more on how social groups operate within the minds of individuals."[89] According to the original approach, known as *the Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Relations*,[90] groups have a fundamental need to provide their members with a positive social identity – establish a positively valued distinctiveness from other groups – in order to maintain their existence.[91] Put differently, at the group level, a positively evaluated social identity among group members is an existential concern: "any threat to the distinctively superior position of a group implies a potential loss of positive comparisons and possible negative comparisons, which must be guarded against."[92]

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[84] Aristotle, *Politics*, Book V. II.

[85] Tajfel and Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict"; Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 7.

[86] Tom Postmes and Nyla R. Branscombe, "Sources of social identity" in Tom Postmes and Nyla R. Branscombe (eds.), *Rediscovering Social Identity: Core Sources* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010), p. 1; Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, pp. 17-39.

[87] Tajfel, "Social categorization," p. 292.

[88] Yueh-Ting Lee and Victor Ottati, "Determinants of ingroup and outgroup perceptions of heterogeneity: An investigation of Sino-American stereotypes," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1993), pp. 298–318.

[89] Sarah E. Martiny and Mark Rubin, "Towards a Clearer Understanding of Social Identity Theory's Self-Esteem Hypothesis" in McKeown et al (eds.), *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, p. 19

[90] Tajfel and Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict."

As a result, intergroup comparisons are "intrinsically in-group-favouring and ethnocentric" and intergroup behaviour is "effectively a struggle over the relative status or prestige of one's ingroup. Higher status groups fight to protect their evaluative superiority; lower status groups struggle to shrug off their social stigma and promote their positivity."[93]

The strategies that a group employs in order to maintain or acquire a positively evaluated social identity relative to other groups (discussed in detail in chapter five) are shaped by its worldview – its own unique set of "generalized attitudes toward the world and its social organization… orienting dispositions, serving to guide people's responses in complex situations."[94] As Beale et al have pointed out,

> Every particular worldview rests on a logic of social categorization (which social groups exist, which individuals belong to them and according to what criteria), and also involves a logic of explanation (an account of the dynamic relations that exist between the social groups). In other words, social cognition not only works with static categories, but also involves certain folk causal theories about how these categories dynamically coexist and interact.[95]

4.2 Self-categorisation

Within this broader worldview, the experiences and perceptions of specific groups can lead to the development of more specific narratives. Worldview and narrative are closely connected but they are not the same.[96] While the former is often a set of unspoken assumptions about the world – "background knowledge" based on things like culture, tradition, and upbringing – the latter is a more specific articulation of causes and effects, right and wrong, friends and enemies, problems and solutions. That said, a well-developed and believable narrative – that is, a narrative that makes sense of individuals' experiences and offers a way to deal with them – can become a group's worldview, functioning as the totality of truth about the world for its members.

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[91] William A. Gamson, "Commitment and Agency in Social Movements," *Sociological Forum,* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1991), pp. 27-50.

[92] Tajfel and Turner, "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict," p. 45.

[93] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory", pp. 8, 7. Cf. Marilyn B. Brewer and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism and Intergroup Attitudes: East African Evidence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1976).

[94] Ellen Peters and Paul Slovic, "The Role of Affect and Worldviews as Orienting Dispositions in the Perception and Acceptance of Nuclear Power," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology,* Vol. 16, No. 26 (1996), p. 1430.

[95] Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace and Travis G. Coan, "From 'Incel' to 'Saint': Analyzing the violent worldview behind the 2018 Toronto attack," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (published online, August 2, 2019), p. 2.

[96] Josefin Graef, Raquel da Silva and Nicolas Lemay-Hebert, "Narrative, Political Violence, and Social Change," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (2020), pp. 431-443.

Insights from research on intergroup behaviour prompted researchers to turn their attention to what goes on inside groups. *Self-categorisation theory* (discussed in greater detail in the following chapter) emerged in the early 1980s in order to explain how social identities impact the commitments and actions of individuals within groups. The theory suggests that, "the cognitive process of categorization, when applied to oneself, creates a sense of identification with the social category or group and produces the array of behaviors that we associate with group membership."[97] That is to say, when we begin to think of ourselves as members of a group, we begin to act as members of the group.

According to Hogg, human groups can be thought of as "categories that people mentally represent as *prototypes* – fuzzy sets of interrelated attributes (attitudes, behaviours, customs, dress, and so forth) that capture overall similarities within groups and overall differences between groups."[98] These prototypes are idealizations of "what we are like" and "what they are like" and emphasize "the extent to which a group appears to be a distinct and clearly defined entity."[99] Group members internalize these general traits as part of their social identity, which can provide the individual with a sense of belonging, purpose, and direction.[100] Self-categorization is an important mechanism in that "one's worldview and self-concept are validated."[101]

4.3 Relevance for CT and CVE research

Berger defines *extremism* as "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for *hostile* action against an out-group."[102] Hostile action can range from verbal attacks, denigration through memes and other symbolism on social media, discrimination, and marginalization to murder, terrorism, and genocide. *Violent extremism*, then, is a subset on one end of the extremism spectrum, defined as "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for *violent* action against an out-group."[103]

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[97] Michael A. Hogg, "Self-Categorization Theory" in John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010). Cf. John C. Turner, Michael A. Hogg, Penelope J. Oakes, Stephen D. Reicher and Margaret S. Wetherell, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

[98] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 8.

[99] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 8.

[100] Turner et al, *Rediscovering the Social Group*. Cf. Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, "Social identity and self-categorization" in John F. Dovidio, Miles Hewstone, Peter Glick and Victoria M. Esses (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Discrimination* (London: Sage, 2010).

[101] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 10.

[102] J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), p. 44. Emphasis added.

[103] Berger, *Extremism*, p. 46. Emphasis added.

Violent extremist narratives can emerge within virtually any ideological or theological belief system. *The emergence of violent extremist narratives is not bound to a particular ideology or theology, but to the ways in which groups organize their beliefs about the ingroup and its relationship to others*. Ideologies and theologies give collective meaning, broader context, and inclusivity to the perceptions and emotions of the individual. They give shape and direction to violent action. They are not, however, the cause of violence. Violent extremist groups can, and frequently do emerge within broader extremist milieus that share its ideology but reject the path of violence.[104]

Some worldviews and narratives may lend themselves to violent interpretations more easily than others. Nevertheless, when an ideology is crafted into (or adopted as) a narrative that connects the wellbeing of the ingroup to violent action against an outgroup, this has already been preceded by a) the formation of an ingroup, b) the identification of a villainous outgroup, and c) the social categorization into us and them. *Group identity draws the battle lines.*[105]

Identities are complex, but they are also overlapping. That is to say, while social identity may consist of the three components identified by Tajfel (i.e. cognitive, evaluative, and emotional), most if not all individuals also have multiple sources of social identity. Precisely because identities may overlap, there can be tension between them. SIT prompts us to ask questions that identify salient sources of social identity at a granular level. Answers to those questions can offer a roadmap to understanding which sources of identification matter, when they matter, and why – which, contrary to the criticism mentioned in the previous chapter, is what allows for prediction and forecasting.

A member of, for instance, the Lebanese Hizballah has a Muslim social identity that may predispose him towards a sense of solidarity with other Muslims. At the same time he also has a specifically Shia Muslim social identity, a specifically Khomeinist social identity, and a Lebanese social identity (and likely many other, besides). Depending on circumstances and events, each of these may propel the individual towards analyses, alignments, or actions that conflict with one or all of the others.[106] *Understanding such sources of social identification and how they compare (perhaps differently at different times) in depth and strength to competing sources of social identification offers a range of valuable insights*. This is where the analyst can gauge what motivates group membership, the complexity and dynamism of worldviews and narratives, and the cognitive and emotional terrain that group leadership must navigate and manage in order to maintain group viability.[107] According to one CT practitioner,

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[104] For an analysis of relationship patterns between the broader milieu and the terrorist group, see Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, "The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 37, No. 12 (2014), pp. 979-998.

[105] For an interesting analysis of the possibly secondary role of ideology in party rivalries, see Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood and Yphtach Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (2012), pp. 405-431.

[106] Strindberg and Wärn, *Islamism*, pp. 122-148.

> The SIT framework allows for multiple identities to drive behavior depending on local contexts: the same group may behave as rational actors, for what they perceive as altruistic goals, or be driven by religion, nationalism or ethnicity (amongst other motivations) depending on the immediate circumstances.[108]

In his study of literature from the right-wing extremist Christian Identity movement, Berger argues that, conceptually, "extremists tie an out-group to a crisis or crises, and connect the ingroup to solutions," but points out that these connections "can be unbundled into a series of more complex links."[109] For instance, elements of ingroup identity are linked to vulnerability assessment while elements of outgroup identity are linked to threat assessment. Both types of assessment can range from perceptions of minor vulnerability and threat to apocalyptic levels, and in turn are "bundled into a crisis construct, which adds urgency to the in-group's attempts to recruit and mobilise members."[110] The crisis construct, in turn, is linked to prescribed solutions to the problem posed by the outgroup, which can range from assimilation to annihilation.

An example of such a mobilizing crisis construct is the consistent messaging of Islamic State through its magazines *Inspire* and *Dabiq*.[111] The consistent core of this messaging has been summed up by one scholar as, "we are the epitome of the Sunni Muslim identity, non-Muslims are responsible for the *ummah's* crises, so support us because we are your champions and protectors and together we will confront our enemies to restore Islam to its rightful status."[112]

Renaud Camus' notion of "the great replacement" is another important example of a crisis construct. In 2011, Camus' book *Le Grand Remplacement* advanced the claim that Europe is facing an all-out attack from mass immigration. White Europeans are literally being replaced with successive waves of non-white opportunists who, like parasites, seek to enrich themselves at the expense of their host, but also at the expense of their own "natural" context and identity.[113] The economic, cultural, and racial aspects of what has become known as "replacement theory" are inseparable, converging on a sense of existential urgency that can only be addressed by a robust countermovement. Adherents and thought leaders in far-right extremist circles seized on Camus' notion and began to analyse current events through that lens. When Europe was eventually impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis, the identitarian movement, which contains a number of extremely violent groups, had a ready-made diagnosis and solution, a fully operational crisis construct. It is noteworthy that the manifestos of several of the most notorious violent extremists from the radical right – including Anders Behring Breivik, Brenton Tarrant, and Patrick Crusius – explicitly referenced the great replacement as a reason for their violent acts.[114]

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[107] Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 12-16.

[108] Deardorff, *The Roots of our Children's War*, p. 48.

[109] J.M. Berger, *The Extremist Construction of Identity: How Escalating Demands for Legitimacy Shape and Define In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics. ICCT Research Paper* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter Terrorism, April 2017), p. 8.

[110] Berger, *The Extremist Construction of Identity*, p. 8.

[111] Haroro J. Ingram, "An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 40, No. 5 (2017), pp. 357-375.

[112] Ingram, "An Analysis of Inspire and Dabiq," p. 370.

[113] For an excellent examination of the identitarian movement, see Christopher J. Adamczyk, *Gods Versus Titans: Ideological Indicators of Identitarian Violence* (Masters thesis, U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, 2020).

There are, of course, reasons to join a terrorist group or violent extremist movement that are unrelated to processes of social identification. An individual may join due to, for example, poverty, coercion, deception, or a search for excitement.[115] SIT is not focused on all motivations. That said, for a terrorist group that resorts overwhelmingly to deception or coercion to recruit and retain its members, the lack of social identification constitutes a weakness both internally and in relation to other groups. Leadership must balance and protect against that weakness in some way, either through compensatory or punitive measures (e.g. generous salaries, violent purges, executions).[116] This may strain the group in terms of resources, membership commitment, or credibility in its broader environment. Such strains may, in turn, be exploited by outgroups, including government agencies tasked with CT and CVE, seeking ways in which to fragment and defeat it.

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[114] See Adamczyk, *Gods Versus Titans*, pp. 63-81

[115] For an interesting study of motivations and motivational change, see Michael Jonsson, *A Farewell to Arms*.

[116] For an example of a group that used the full range of measures, see Patrick Seale, *Abu Nidal, A Gun for Hire: The Secret Life of the World's Most Notorious Arab Terrorist* (New York: Random House, 1992), esp. p. 6-9.

5 Intergroup conflict

> "Both the origins and effects of terrorist acts are anchored in group dynamics."[117]

As noted above, intergroup comparisons are inherently ingroup favouring and intergroup conflict is effectively a struggle over the status or standing of one's ingroup relative to one or several outgroups. Higher status groups seek to protect their evaluative superiority while lower status groups seek to redress their predicament, remove their social stigma, and promote their positivity. Hogg has noted that

> One of the most distinctive features of group life and intergroup relations is that groups and their members go to great lengths to protect and promote their belief that 'we' are better than 'them'. Members strive for evaluatively positive intergroup distinctiveness because self is defined and evaluated in group terms and therefore the status, prestige, and social valence of the group attaches to oneself.[118]

Berger suggests that it may be more fruitful to understand groups in terms of the quest for *legitimacy* rather than status. He defines legitimacy as "the conclusion that a particular collective identity group may rightfully be defined, maintained and/or protected."[119] He explains this substitution by pointing out that status "must be understood relative to in-group/out-group dynamics, whereas legitimacy offers a starting point that primarily focuses on enhancing the in-group in the earlier stages of identity construction, before expanding to address comparisons to out-groups."[120] In other words, legitimacy is a category that can be studied even prior to a discernible intergroup conflict.[121]

5.1 Perceiving threats

A seminar white paper at the 2006 Director of National Intelligence Summer Hard Problem Program (DNI SHARP) noted broad agreement in the social sciences that "perceived external threat is the most reliable source of ingroup cohesion and associated idealization of ingroup values, support for ingroup leaders, and punishment for ingroup deviates."[122] When a group finds itself in a position where it has a lower social status than a significant outgroup, its ability to contribute positively to its members' social identities is weakened. The strategies that groups adopt to manage their identity depend on beliefs about the nature of the relationship between their group and a specific outgroup.[123] Beliefs focus on

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[117] Clark McCauley, "Psychological Issues in Understanding Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism" in Chris E. Stout (ed.) *The Psychology of Terrorism,* Vol. 3 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), pp. 24-25.

[118] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 9.

[119] Berger, *The Extremist Construction of Identity,* pp. 3-4.

[120] Berger, *The Extremist Construction of Identity*, p. 5

[121] See Dina Al Raffie, "Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora," *Journal of Strategic Security,* Vol. 6, No. 4 (2013), pp. 67-91.

[122] Director of National Intelligence, "Popular support for jihadist groups: Its centrality, what produces it, what reduces it, and the implications of its loss" *White Papers SHARP 2006* (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Washington, DC, 2007), p. 46.

- ***Status*** (what is my group's social standing relative to the outgroup?)
- ***Stability*** (how stable is this status relationship?)
- ***Legitimacy*** (how legitimate is this status relationship?)
- ***Permeability*** (how easy is it for people to change their social identity by transferring to the outgroup?)
- ***Cognitive alternatives*** (is a different intergroup relationship conceivable?)

These beliefs are informed by the group's narrative and, in a feedback loop, inform and impact that narrative. *A negative valuation of the ingroup* is an incentive for members to leave the group, weakening the group's cohesion and stability. This, in turn, is likely to have a negative impact on other members' valuation and can create a downward spiral of disintegration. Such a trajectory might come about through a group's persistent tactical failures, a leadership scandal, or the loss of external patronage, leading to difficulty in recruiting and retaining members. *A positive valuation of the outgroup* provides an incentive for members to question or revaluate the meaningfulness of ingroup membership and may also serve as an incentive to leave, creating a similar downward spiral. Depending on which outgroup this relates to, this could involve, for instance, the recognition that another violent extremist group is actually better at its craft (which encourages defection to that outgroup) or that ingroup stereotypes about the police and the state are incorrect (which facilitates deradicalization).

5.2 Addressing threats 1: mobility

Leaving an ingroup to join an outgroup is referred to as social mobility strategy. The viability of this option depends on the permeability of intergroup boundaries, external limitations (e.g. negative evaluations of one's religious affiliation or ethnic background in the group to which access is sought), and internal limitations (e.g. disapproval or punishment of dissent).[124] This threatens dissolution of the group and its integration or assimilation into the dominant group – something that leadership needs to guard against. In reality, according to Hogg, intergroup boundaries are rarely permeable and those attempting to cross over may end up in "social identity limbo"[125]

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[123] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 7. Cf. Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Naomi Ellemers, "The influence of socio-cultural variables on identity management strategies," *European Review of Social Psychology*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1993), pp. 27-57; Per-Olof H. Wikström, "Questions of Perceptions and Reality," *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2009), pp. 59-63.

[124] Hogg and Abrams, *Social Identifications*, p. 54.

Social mobility is a key aspect of targeted de-radicalization and CVE programs. These programs depend, without exception, on the ability of the individual (or group of individuals) to move from the terrorist or violent extremist group into general society. Mindful of the accuracy of Hogg's observation – crossing group boundaries is a difficult and complex effort – de-radicalization and CVE programs are designed to create conditions that lead to a negative re-evaluation of the ingroup and/or a positive re-evaluation of the outgroup, and to create conditions that make it possible for individuals to move across the boundaries.[126]

5.3 Addressing threats 2: creativity

The effort to revaluate the ingroup in relation to the dominant outgroup in order to find positive points of comparison is referred to as a social change strategy. Two types of social change responses are available to those who are dissatisfied with their negatively charged social identities: social creativity or social competition, or a combination of both.[127]

Social creativity involves an effort by the subordinate group to redefine and manipulate the premises of competition with the dominant outgroup and is most common when the negative balance cannot be redressed "in reality." There are four primary social creativity tactics that may be chosen at different times or combined, as the need arises and the worldview and narrative allow:

- ***Focusing attention on some outgroup other than the dominant one*** in order to bring about a more favourable comparative situation. This may be thought of as lowering the bar – calibrating it to allow for comparison with an outgroup that is less positively evaluated than the ingroup.
- ***Redefining the value of some existing comparison***, tweaking the ingroup narrative so as to turn a weakness into a strength (e.g. "the fact that we are the smaller group indicates our elite nature").
- ***Emphasising the notion that true positive values are per definition the antithesis of those held by a significant outgroup.*** This also involves tweaking or altering the ingroup narrative.
- ***Concealing problematic ideas by renaming them***. If the ingroup narrative is beyond the pale of the discursive boundaries of general

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[125] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 7

[126] For a practical application of SIT in CVE, see Deardorff, *The Roots of Our Children's War*, pp. 195-224. For an operationalization of ESIM, see Holgersson, *I demokratins yttersta gränsland*, pp. 58-62, 81-84.

[127] Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 52.

> society, the option to rename problematic concepts may serve to enhance a group's appeal and thus enhance its social status.

Social creativity, then, is largely a matter of creating and disseminating a new ingroup narrative. Radicalization is a gradual process – "political movements are not born extreme; they evolve that way over time."[128] Movements become extreme when their demand for status or legitimacy "escalates to the point it can only be satisfied at the expense of an out-group."[129] One way of gauging an escalation towards extremism is an expanded scope of complaints: the ingroup narrative shifts from a focus on real, present-day grievances by placing those grievances (and their resolution) in a larger historical or cosmic context.[130] This can be a way for group leadership to effectively sidestep obstacles that may appear to the outside world as objectively insurmountable. Entrenching oneself deeper in the righteousness of one's cause – making the cause more righteous and/or the enemy more evil – rather than admitting that what one has struggled for has turned out to be a fool's errand, is a very human response.

5.4 Addressing threats 3: competition

Social competition, on the other hand, refers to the efforts by a subordinate ingroup to improve its actual social status vis-à-vis a dominant outgroup. This means taking on the outgroup within the framework of the existing narrative and the ongoing struggle and intensify (rather than redefine and circumvent) the competition. Esler has suggested that this sort of direct competition presupposes that an alternative arrangement is possible – that there is a realistic chance to shift the balance in the ingroup's favour – and that the comparative relationship is thus unstable.[131] It seems, however, that all that is needed is a perception within the subordinate group that this is possible. After all, the basis for action is the ingroup's own understanding of the world, not that of the outgroup.[132] Social competition tactics can range from debate through protest, to revolution, terrorism, and war.

5.5 Relevance to CT and CVE research

It is important to note that *none of these tactics for bringing about social change are mutually exclusive*. Depending on the worldview and narrative of any given group, it may seek to combine one or more social creativity tactics with one or more social change tactics. A good illustration of this is Hamas, which emerged in 1987 as a response to the persistent political and military failure of the leftist and nationalist factions within the Palestinian National Movement. Hamas' rapid rise and popular appeal was not the result of a sudden outbreak of religiosity among Palestinians. Rather, Hamas was able to *compete* with the other factions – it was militarily more effective in the context of the intifada – but it also *creatively reframed* the conflict in ways that *encouraged and enabled mobility*.[133]

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[128] Berger, *The Extremist Construction of Identity*, p. 3.
[129] Berger, *The Extremist Construction of Identity*, p. 3.
[130] Berger, *The Extremist Construction of Identity*, p. 3.
[131] Esler, *Galatians*, p. 54.
[132] Strindberg and Wärn, *Islamism*, p. 67.

Hamas' narrative explained the historic failure of the other factions – they were secularists who had not been guided by Islam. It replaced the need for ideological constructs such as Marxism and Arab nationalism with simple adherence to Islam.[134] The centrality of historic borders, human rights, and United Nations resolutions gave way to the idea of Palestine as an entirely and eternally Islamic endowment.[135] The "Zionist enemy," which the secular factions understood as an expression of imperialist ideology, was reframed as "the Jews" with whom Muslims were locked in an ongoing conflict[136] and the "national liberation struggle" was reframed as a jihad, a religious duty.[137] In short, Hamas managed to comprehensively reframe all aspects of the conflict through a resonant, accessible and coherent crisis construct. The force of this new narrative and the fact that Hamas in practice stayed focused on same national struggle as the secularists enabled social mobility from the other factions.[138]

The internal life of social groups is constantly evolving and terrorist groups are no exception. Through its schematic account of the various options for addressing ingroup concerns and intergroup conflict, as well as with the conditions under which the various options make "social identity sense," SIT provides a comprehensive overview of the human dynamics of terrorist groups and violent extremist movements. The fact that we can know something about the ingroup and intergroup effects of certain behaviours means that we can engage in analysis that allows us to go beyond official rhetoric and timelines of violence. Speeches and announcements, actions and inaction: all take place in context and can be probed for their social identity outcomes. Those outcomes, in turn, can tell us something about strengths and weaknesses, alignments and enmities, recruitment and sponsorship, and so forth. Understanding these features of the internal life of groups is relevant to both intelligence-led policing and targeted de- and counter-radicalization efforts, even though their methods and objectives are different.[139]

Acts of terrorism can be understood as concrete outcomes of violent extremism. In Berger's words, "terrorism is a tactic, whereas extremism is a belief system."[140] Put differently, terrorism may be understood as a tool based on the terrorist group's own assessment of the intergroup conflict. As such, acts of terrorist violence may be outcomes of a combination of a range ingroup beliefs about social creativity, social change, or social competition. For this reason, *a social identity approach views the belief system as the appropriate object of study*. Acts of terrorism are part of the analytical puzzle. Timing and target selection, for instance, can tell us a lot about a group's belief systems, narratives, objectives, alignments, rivalries – and changes within these. Nevertheless, in SIT, it is the belief system along with the social identity effects of that belief system that is the proper object of study.

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[133] Strindberg and Wärn, *Islamism*, pp. 89-90.

[134] Articles 3 and 4, "Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement" (18 August 1988).

[135] Article 11, "Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement."

[136] Preamble, Articles 7, 13, 15, 20, 28, 32, "Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement."

[137] Articles 3, 8, 11 and 15, "Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement."

[138] See Strindberg and Wärn, *Islamism*, pp. 63, 90

[139] For an accessible comparison of the two, see Holgersson, *I demokratins yttersta gränsland*, pp. 72, 73.

[140] Berger, *Extremism*, p. 30.

6 Motivational dynamics

> "The less justified a man is in claiming excellence for his own self, the more ready is he to claim all excellence for his nation, his religion, his race or his holy cause."[141]

There are two closely related primary hypotheses about what motivates this ingroup/outgroup categorization. ***The self-esteem hypothesis***[142] suggests that positive evaluation of one's ingroup and negative evaluation of outgroups are part of a fundamentally human effort to acquire and protect self-esteem.[143] In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-esteem is understood as a basic need in and of itself, although group membership could conceivably be an element at all levels of the hierarchy, from safety and protection to self-actualization.[144] The hypothesis suggests that low self-esteem motivates group identification and prototypical behaviour because it elevates self-esteem.[145]

The uncertainty-identity hypothesis[146] is based on the premise that uncertainty about the world – in particular, about how to behave and how others can be expected to behave – can be unsettling and distressing. Individuals naturally seek to lessen uncertainty about their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours, especially if they impinge on identity and sense of self. This, then, drives group identification by providing ingroup/outgroup boundaries as well as prototypical behavioural norms and cues.[147]

"Ultimately, people need to know who they are, how to behave, and what to think – and who others are, how they might behave, and what they might think."[148] Group membership entails a number of actionable benefits, such as epistemic understanding,[149] social status,[150] belonging,[151] and collective agency.[152] Lüders et al have suggested that an emphasis on these aspects of social identity allows individuals to compensate for and overcome threats – real or perceived – to identity,[153] and points to "neural, behavioural, and self-report evidence for anxious uncertainty control."[154]

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[141] Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2002), p. 14.

[142] Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, "Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination," *European Journal of Social Psychology,* Vol. 18 (1988); Mark Rubin and Miles Hewstone, "Social identity theory's self-esteem hypothesis: A review and some suggestions for clarification," *Personality and Social Psychology Review,* Vol. 2 (1998).

[143] Constantine Sedikides and Michael J. Strube, "Self-evaluation: To thine own self be good, to thine own self be sure, to thine own self be true, and to thine own self be better" in Mark P. Zanna (ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology,* Vol. 29 (New York: Academic, 1997), pp. 209-296.

[144] Abraham H. Maslow, "A theory of human motivation," *Psychological Review,* Vol. 50, No. 4 (1943), pp. 370–396.

[145] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 9.

[146] Michael A. Hogg, "Uncertainty-identity theory" in Mark P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology,* Vol. 39 (New York: Academic, 2007), pp. 70-115.; Michael A. Hogg, "Uncertainty-identity theory" in Paul A.M. Van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski and E. Tory Higgins (eds.) *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology,* Vol. 2 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012), pp. 62-80.

[147] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 10.

[148] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 10.

6.1 Relevance for CT and CVE research

SIT hypotheses on the motivational dynamics of group identification can help us identify and understand conditions that underpin commitments to a violent extremist or terrorist cause, that prompt individuals to immerse themselves in a particular social identity and internalize a particular worldview, or that simply produces conformity and compliance.[155] As mentioned above, because SIT does not see the individual as an anonymous part of the collective, it is able to give us insight into the mechanisms of the radicalization process, as well as the necessary conditions for successful counter- and de-radicalization.

An upshot of the self-esteem hypothesis is that factors that cause individuals to experience low self-esteem – such as marginalization, discrimination, oppression, significant losses (e.g. of land, status) – are simultaneously factors that may cause polarizing ingroup/outgroup categorization. Narratives about "us" and "them," and why "we" are in conflict with "them," tend to inflate the collective sense of self in significant ways – morally, politically, ethnically, or theologically. Xenophobic rhetoric against a minority population has been shown to elevate the importance of ingroup identification and create incentives for counteraction among those in the minority group who already identify strongly.[156] This, of course, has the potential to create a spiral of intergroup polarization and conflict.

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[149] Michael A. Hogg, "Uncertainty-identity theory" in Mark P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 39 (New York: Academic, 2007), pp. 69-126.

[150] John C. Turner, Rupert J. Brown and Henri Tajfel, "Social comparison and group interest in in-group favouritism," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 9 (1979), pp. 187-204.

[151] Mark R. Leary and Roy F. Baumeister, "The nature and function of self-esteem: Sociometer theory" in Mark P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 32 (New York: Academic, 2000), pp. 1-62.

[152] Immo Fritsche, Eva Jonas, Catharina Ablaser, Magdalena Beyer, Johannes Kuban, Anna-Marie Manger and Marlene Schultz, "The power pf we: Evidence for group-based control," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2013), pp. 19-32.

[153] Adrian Lüders, Eva Jonas, Immo Fritsche and Dimitrij Agroskin, "Between the Lines of Us and Them: Identity Threat, Anxious Uncertainty, and Reactive In-Group Affirmation: How Can Antisocial Outcomes be Prevented?" in Mckeown et al (eds.) *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, p. 40.

[154] Lüders et al, "Between the Lines of Us and Them," p. 39.

[155] Elizabeth Suhay, "Explaining Group Influence: The Role of Identity and Emotion in Political Conformity and Polarization," *Political Behavior*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2015), pp. 221-251.

[156] Efrén O. Pérez, "Xenophobic Rhetoric and Its Political Effects on Immigrants and Their Co-Ethnics," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (2015), pp. 549-564.

Understood from this perspective, it is not an ideological or theological narrative that causes conflict. For instance, in the example of Hamas above, its ideological program clearly did not cause the conflict – the conflict had been ongoing for several decades. Rather, self-categorization during a conflict informs or shapes the choice of a purposeful ideology or theology. Self-esteem can be group-based or personal, but group-based self-esteem is more closely associated with social identity processes and phenomena. Leadership (returned to in the following chapter) must feel the pulse of the ingroup and know what motivates its members, especially in smaller groups. One of the central tasks of leadership is to mobilize, manage, and manipulate commitment to the ingroup and its narrative.

As for the uncertainty-identity hypothesis, Hogg has noted that

> The more self-conceptually uncertain one is the more one strives to belong, particularly to groups that effectively reduce uncertainty – such groups are distinctive, with high entativity and simple, clear, prescriptive, and consensual prototypes. In extreme circumstances, these groups might be orthodox and extremist, possess closed ideologies and belief systems, and have hierarchical leadership and authority structures.[157]

The tighter the group and the more absolute its categorization into "us" and "them," the less ambiguity it admits. This may impact how ingroup members process information from or about the outgroup, how the narrative develops, and how the group can approach conflict resolution.

Different members may adopt the same ingroup narrative for different reasons, and there are no firewalls between the motivational factors; it is possible to seek self-esteem, certainty, and a number or material gains (e.g. safety, income, shelter) at the same time. Importantly, "radicalization processes never take place in a social vacuum" but hinge on relations and influences within "real world" social networks as well as virtual social networks.[158] Young adults or adolescents who are in the process of identity formation more generally, experiencing both uncertainty and anxiety about "who they are," may be more sensitive to radicalizing impressions and influences than adults. In either case, "it is crucial that the confrontation with a suitable violent script occurs in the 'right moment' when the individual is seeking a solution for their stressful situation."[159]

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[157] Michael A. Hogg, "From uncertainty to extremism: Social categorization and uncertainty processes," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 32 (2014), pp. 338-342.

[158] Nils Böckler et al, "Same but Different? Developmental Pathways to Demonstrative Targeted Attacks – Qualitative Case Analyses of Adolescent and Young Adult Perpetrators of Targeted School Attacks and Jihadi Terrorist Attacks in Germany," *International Journal of Developmental Science* Vol. 12 (2018), p. 20.

[159] Böckler et al, "Same but Different?," p. 20.

The motivational dynamics related to SIT extend into the virtual world.[160] Kaati et al have noted that, “The internet has helped many lonely people to find togetherness and community with others despite geographic, physical, social or psychological obstacles to meeting in physical space.”[161] Whether it is by enhancing an individual’s self-esteem or providing him or her with a more robust sense of identity, terrorist and violent extremist groups have been able create extended “virtual ingroups” on the Internet. These ingroups consist of individuals who consume, internalize, and reproduce radicalizing rhetoric and are bonded together even though they may never have met another member “in real life.”

A “seeker” can immerse himself into a group’s worldview or adopt its narrative entirely unbeknownst to the group in question, and for reasons that are entirely his own. For instance, Omar Mateen, the individual who attacked The Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killing 49 people and wounding 58 others, swore allegiance to Islamic State prior to the attack. Nevertheless, he appears to have had no prior link to or contact with the group.[162] Exposure to Salafi-jihadi messaging without active or direct contact with a group appears to have prompted Mateen to self-categorize and then act upon his new ingroup narrative.

Neophytes or seekers, including Mateen, can end up confusing and mismatching social categorizations and ingroup narratives, effectively crafting their own unique relationship to violence. This yet again points to the analytical importance of the individual consumer of extremist messaging, which will be returned to in the following chapter. Suffice it for the moment to note that in order to understand radicalization in both physical and virtual environments, *one must not lose track of the basic identity-related reasons that an individual searches for an ingroup, consumes a group narrative, and self-categorizes as a group member*.

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[160] For an analysis of IS use of the Internet to create networks and identities, see Khalil Sardarnia and Rasoul Safizadeh, “The Internet and its potentials for networking and identity seeking: A study on ISIS,” *Terrorism and Political Violence,* Vol. 31, No. 6 (2019), pp. 1266-1283.

[161] Lisa Kaati, Katie Cohen and Nazar Akrami. *Ensamagerande våldsverkare: Profiler, riskbedömningar och digitala spår*. FOI-R--4736--SE (Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, 2019), p. 18. Original quote: “Internet har hjälpt många ensamma personer att finna gemenskap och samhörighet med andra trots geografiska, fysiska, sociala eller psykologiska hinder från att träffas i det fysiska rummet”

[162] Rukmini Callimachi, “Was Orlando shooter really acting for ISIS? For ISIS, it’s all the same.” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016; Spencer Ackerman, “CIA has not found any link between Orlando killer and Isis, says agency chief.” *The Guardian,* June 16, 2016.

7 The effects of categorization

> “A doubtful friend is worse than a certain enemy. Let a man be one thing or the other, and we then know how to meet him.”[163]

The social categorization process is linked to two significant phenomena: the outgroup-homogeneity effect (or outgroup homogeneity bias) and normative conformity. The *outgroup-homogeneity effect* refers to a view of outgroup members as less diverse than ingroup members.[164] SIT suggests that the outgroup homogeneity effect is tied to the cognitive effort to establish a positive and distinct social identity for the ingroup.[165] Placing the comparative focus on differences between the ingroup and an outgroup creates an exaggerated impression of homogeneity within the latter.[166] “They” are seen as more uniformly representative of “their” values and behaviours than they actually are. “They” become representatives or embodiments of the outgroup prototype.

In a situation of intergroup conflict, this perceived outgroup homogeneity revolves around negative attributes. Insofar as the ingroup is seen as homogenous, this tends to revolve around features that are considered positive and serves to promote ingroup solidarity.[167] The group’s worldview and narrative are central to the process of projecting negative features onto the outgroup while emphasizing the positive features of the ingroup. For instance, Islamic State consistently refers to all outgroups with reference to its ingroup narrative. Sunni Muslims who oppose Islamic State are *murtaddun* (apostates), Shi’a Muslims are *rafidiyyun* (rejecters), the Syrian Arab Armed Forces are *nusayriyyun* (a pejorative term for the *alawi* sect to which the ruling Assad family belongs), Western powers are crusaders, and so on. Each of these terms is meant to signal the historic depth and religious significance of the current conflict.

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[163] Aesop, Thomas James, *Æsop's Fables: A New Version, Chiefly from Original Sources* (1866), p.107.

[164] George A. Quattrone and Edward E. Jones, “The perception of variability within in-groups and out-groups: Implications for the law of small numbers,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (1980), pp. 141–152.

[165] Alexander Haslam, Penny Oakes, John Turner and Craig McGarty, “Social identity, self-categorization, and the perceived homogeneity of ingroups and outgroups: The interaction between social motivation and cognition” in Richard Sorrentino and E. Tory Higgins (eds.). *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition, Volume 3: The Interpersonal Context* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996). pp. 182–222.

[166] Mark Rubin, Miles Hewstone, Richard J. Crisp, Alberto Voci and Zoë Richards, “Gender out-group homogeneity: The roles of differential familiarity, gender differences, and group size,” in Vincent Yzerbyt, Charles M. Judd and Olivier Corneille (eds.), *The Psychology of Group Perception: Perceived Variability, Entitativity, and Essentialism* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), pp. 203-220; Bernadette Park and Charles M. Judd, “Measures and models of perceived group variability,” in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (1990), pp. 173–191. See also Thomas M. Ostrom, Sandra Carpenter, Constantine Sedikides and Fan Li, “Differential processing of in-group and outgroup information,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol. 64, No. 1 (1993), pp. 21–34; June Chance and Alvin Goldstein, “Depth of processing in response to own and other race faces,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1981), pp. 475–480; S. Alexander Haslam, Penelope J. Oakes, John C. Turner and Craig McGarty, “Social categorization and group homogeneity: changes in the perceived applicability of stereotype content as a function of comparative context and trait favourableness,” *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1995), pp. 139–160.

[167] Yueh-Ting Lee and Victor Ottati, “Determinants of ingroup and outgroup perceptions of heterogeneity.”

7.1 Normative conformity

Another important effect of social categorization is *normative conformity*. Once the ingroup norm has been established, it is adopted and internalised (through self-categorisation) as part of the ingroup prototype to which members conform. Conformity is not a matter of mere compliance, but a more profound process "whereby people internalise and enact the group's prototype."[168] Generally, we are unaware of these norms and conformity requires no conscious or active decision. It is only when something is jarring, new, or unfamiliar that we might have to actively ask ourselves, "what is the appropriate way to think or act in *this* instance or towards *those* people?"

Through publications in print and online, video channels and podcasts, terrorist groups and violent extremist movements of all stripes offer advice to their followers on ingroup appropriate ways to think and behave. Whether it is a podcast from the Nordic Resistance Movement in Sweden explaining the necessity of vaccinating children against disease[169] or a video from Hizb ut-Tahrir in the United Kingdom explaining why voting in an upcoming election is un-Islamic[170] – the ability to provide practical guidance on appropriate ingroup behaviour is important for ingroup cohesion. It is also an opportunity to distinguish us from them:

> Because in-group norms not only capture intragroup similarity but also accentuate intergroup distinctiveness they tend to be polarised away from the out-group and thus are often ideals that are more extreme than the group as a whole – conformity through self-categorisation often produces group polarisation.[171]

Groups are almost always internally differentiated, crucially in terms of perceived prototypicality. Less prototypical members, especially if marginal, are easily seen as less liked, less trusted, deviant, or potential threats.[172] Minorities that feel that they have lost their voice within a group may ultimately fragment the group by defecting to an outgroup or forming their own group.[173] Meanwhile, leadership that fears dissent from marginal members may enact pre-emptive or retaliatory policy, such as demotions or purges. In terms of both ingroup cohesion and intergroup relations, marginal members can be very damaging to the group. According to the theory of *subjective group dynamics*, reactions to marginal members stem from the fact that their very existence "can threaten the normative clarity and integrity of the group."[174]

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[168] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 11.

[169] "Podcasten Ledarperspektiv #68: Sjukvård, vaccin och valfusk" (18 November 2020). https://motståndsrörelsen.se/2020/11/18/ledarperspektiv-68-sjukvard-vaccin-och-valfusk/

[170] "Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain: Message on Election 2019" (2 December 2019). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhBIbPdWnBk

[171] Dominic Abrams, Margaret S. Wetherell, Sandra Cochrane, Michael A. Hogg and John C. Turner, "Knowing what to think by knowing who you are: Self-categorization and the nature of norm formation, conformity, and group polarization," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1990), pp. 97-119.

[172] José M. Marques, Dominic Abrams, Dario Páez and Michael A. Hogg, "Social categorization, social identification, and rejection of deviant group members" in Michael A. Hogg and R. Scott Tinsdale (eds.) *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 400-424.

Individuals who feel that they are perceived as peripheral members within a group that is important to their identity may become zealous extremists on behalf of the group. Efforts at *exemplary normative conformity* – attempting to show just how well they reflect ingroup norms and values – is one way in which individuals can signal that they are loyal and essential rather than deviant and peripheral.[175] This places particular pressures on converts and other new members of groups who are trying to act in ways that they believe conform to their new ingroup's norm. For instance, a survey of 476 terrorists linked to Islamist terrorist groups convicted in the United States between 2001-2017 found that at least 130 of them had "converted to Islam as part of their radicalization process."[176]

SIT research on perceptions of homogeneity suggests that minorities and marginal groups who perceive themselves as attacked or discriminated against are particularly likely to accentuate ingroup cohesion. Such groups are more likely to perceive threats to their self-esteem and seek to redress this by emphasising positive ingroup homogeneity and negative outgroup homogeneity.[177]

7.2 Leadership and rhetoric

Norms are a source of influence within the group and some members embody those norms more closely than others. While one group member may be trying to discover identity-consistent and ingroup-appropriate norms and behaviours, another member may personify them fully. The prototypical member – the one who has figured out the norms and behaves accordingly – may then serve as a reference point for the one who is still searching. "This process endows prototypical members with greater influence than non-prototypical members within the group,"[178] referred to as *referent informational influence.*[179] For instance, in all of its English language publications, Islamic State has dedicated sections to biographies of martyrs in order to illustrate for its readers what ideal prototypical ingroup behaviour looks like.[180]

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[173] Fabio Sani, "When subgroups secede: Extending and refining the social psychological model of schisms in Europe," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 8 (2005), pp. 1074-1086.

[174] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 12. Cf José M. Marques, Dominic Abrams and R. Rui Serôdio, "Being better by being right: Subjective group dynamics and derogation of in-group deviants when generic norms are undermined," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (2001), pp. 436-447; Isabel R. Pinto, José M. Marques, John M. Levine and Dominic Abrams, "Membership status and subjective group dynamics: Who triggers the black sheep effect?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (2010), pp. 107-119.

[175] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 12, referencing Michael A Hogg and Joseph A. Wagoner, "Normative exclusion and attraction to extreme groups: Resolving identity-uncertainty" in Kipling D. Williams and Steve A. Nida (eds.) *Ostracism, Exclusion, and Rejection* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 207-223.

[176] Heather J. Williams, Nathan Chandler, and Eric Robinson, *Trends in the Draw of Americans to Foreign Terrorist Organizations from 9/11 to Today* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), pp. 27, 33.

[177] Bernd Simon and Rupert Brown, "Perceived intragroup homogeneity in minority-majority contexts," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (1987), pp. 703-711.

Prototypical members tend to occupy leadership roles and are more effective in such roles than less prototypical ones.[181] Paradoxically, being prototypical also empowers leaders to diverge from group norms to a greater degree than less prototypical ones; they can be "normatively innovative," which is a hallmark of leadership.[182]

Leaders speak for the group but they also speak to the group. One's ingroup is what Hymes refers to as a "speech-community" in which there are shared norms concerning the conduct and interpretation of speech. Leadership is marked out in part by the ability to establish and control those norms.[183] Rhetoric, therefore, is an important variable in the internal life of the group in that it maintains a common discourse with common discursive boundaries. Paine distinguishes rhetoric as a particular kind of discourse, arguing that while most speech-acts are "speech about something" the core of rhetoric is that "saying is doing."[184] The effect of the successful use of rhetoric may be to cause an audience to achieve a state of identification with a speaker, "whereby aspects of the social identity or being of the people involved in the rhetorical encounter come more closely to approximate one another."[185] This is not to suggest that leadership positions cannot be gained and maintained by other means – such as deception, coercion, or purges – but simply to note that,

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[178] Hogg, "Social Identity Theory," p. 11. See also Michael A. Hogg and Daan Van Knippenberg, "Social identity and leadership processes in groups" in Mark P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 35 (New York: Academic, 2003), pp. 1-52; Michael A. Hogg, Daan Van Knippenberg and David E. Rast III, "The social identity theory of leadership: Theoretical origins, research findings, and conceptual developments," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2012), p. 258-304; Stephen D. Reicher, S. Alexander Haslam, Michael Platow and Nik Steffens, "Tyranny and leadership" in Shelley Mckeown, Reeshma Haji and Neil Ferguson (eds.) *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, pp. 71-88.

[179] John C. Turner, Michael A. Hogg, Penelope J. Oakes, Stephen D. Reicher and Margaret S. Wetherell, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, "Social identification, self-categorization and social influence," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol 1, No. 1 (1990), pp. 195-228.

[180] See, for instance, "Among the believers are men: Abu Qudamah al-Masri," *Dabiq*, No. 7 (March 2015), pp. 46-49; "Among the believers are men: Abu Jandal Al-Bangali," *Dabiq*, No. 14 (April 2016), pp.50-51; "Among the believers are men: Abu Mansur al-Muhajir," *Rumiyah*, No. 1 (September 2016), pp. 14-17; "Among the believers are men: Abu 'Abdillah Al-Britani," *Rumiyah*, No. 3 (November 2016), pp.14-15. See also "Abu Khalid al-Hindi: May Allah accept him," *Voice of Hind*, No. 8 (2020), pp. 12-14; Abu Rawahah al-Hindi: May Allah accept him," *Voice of Hind*, No. 9 (2020), pp. 13-14.

[181] This observation serves as the foundation of the *social identity theory of leadership*. See Hogg and Van Knippenberg, "Social identity and leadership processes in groups"; Hogg et al, "The social identity theory of leadership: Reicher et al, "Tyranny and leadership."

[182] Dominic Abrams, Georgina Randsley de Moura, José M. Marques and Paul Hutchison, "Innovation credit: When can leaders oppose their groups' norms?," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (2008), pp. 662-678.

[183] Dell Hymes, "Models of Interaction of Language and Social Life," in John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (eds.) *Directions in Sociolinguistics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

> Rhetoric can be seen as an instrument by which a speaker gains or increases control over a political environment. And once this control becomes routinized, institutionalized, then control over language, over the right to speak, may be defined as an essential base of power and authority.[186]

7.3 Relevance to CT and CVE research

A primary relevance of normative homogeneity for research on terrorism and violent extremism is an understanding of the depersonalization involved in seeing others as representative of a prototype, rather than as idiosyncratic individuals. In situations of conflict, it may amount to a dehumanization that directly facilitates violence. Prototypes not only tell us what another individual is (e.g. Karl is a police officer), but also prescribe group-appropriate ways to think and feel about them (e.g. we hate the police) and ultimately how we should behave towards them (e.g. we should obstruct/harass/fight/kill the police). The ingroup narrative provides a rationale for the prototype (e.g. the police represent fascism, oppresses our community) that corresponds with the group's broader worldview – and "Karl the individual human being" has disappeared from view. In this way, self-categorisation may not only transform one's view of oneself and others but also produce normative behaviour and action.

This accords with the observations of Albert Bandura, the originator of Social Cognitive Theory. In his seminal contribution to understanding the mechanisms of moral disengagement in terrorist groups, he noted that

> To perceive another as human enhances empathetic or vicarious reactions through perceived similarity… Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects. They are portrayed as mindless "savages," "gooks," "satanic fiends," and the like… Dehumanized individuals are treated much more punitively

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[184] Robert Paine, "When Saying is Doing," in Robert Paine (ed.) *Politically Speaking* (St. John's Canada: ISER Press, 1981), p. 9.

[185] Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 119.

[186] Rapport and Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology*, p. 119.

> than those who have been invested with human qualities… Dehumanization fosters different self-exonerative patterns of thought.[187]

A classic example is found in Ulrike Meinhof's letter announcing the formation of the Red Army Faction, describing the totality of existing social, political and economic structures as "pig society" and those who represent it simply as "pigs."[188]

Personal contact and positive interaction can chip away at normative homogeneity and its effects.[189] This is important for de-radicalization and CVE efforts. However, another important consequence of self-categorization and normative homogeneity is resistance to alternative narratives. An individual's sense of who he or she is in relation to other groups provide, to use Denzin's words, "a horizon or frame of experience against which ongoing activity is judged."[190] Information received from outgroups is processed with a far higher degree of scrutiny and suspicion than information received from ingroup members or leaders. In the ingroup narrative, the ingroup itself always has the favoured position. Bad actors and bad intent are considered marginal, exceptional, or even non-existent within the ingroup, but seen as typical for the outgroup. This dynamic is heightened in situations of conflict, which makes messaging for de- or counter-radicalization purposes particularly challenging.[191] It does not necessarily matter that an offer is honest or a counter-narrative is logical from the point of view of the outgroup because *the ingroup will have its own distinct frame for receiving, understanding, and responding*. Again, Bandura similarly noted that,

> Staunch believers often choose not to waste their time scrutinizing opposing arguments or evidence because they are already convinced of their fallacy. When confronted with evidence that disputes their beliefs, they question its credibility, dismiss its relevance, or twist it to fit their views.[192]

Ingroup and outgroup identities are in part linked to source knowledge.[193] That is to say, what we believe about the world is shaped by the news we consume, the history we are taught, by traditions and folklore, as well as sacred texts, myth, pseudo-science and conspiracy theories. The sources of our understanding are part and parcel of our understanding. As a group moves towards extremism, it moves away from shared or diverse sources of knowledge towards more narrow, exclusive, and polarizing ones. The emerging ingroup narrative, through guidance from ingroup leaders, determines what sources are legitimate and authoritative – even what messaging is appropriate for which audience[194] – and does so in order to maintain and solidify processes of social categorization. Unfavourable media coverage can cause negative ingroup valuations and erode support, even among those who already identify with a particular group.[195]

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[187] Albert Bandura, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement" in Walter Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 180-181.

[188] Ulrike Meinhof, "Die Rote Armee aufbauen" (May 1970).

[189] Dominic Abrams, Julie Van de Vyver, Diane M. Houston, and Milica Vasiljevic, "Does Terror Defeat Contact? Intergroup Contact and Prejudice Toward Muslims Before and After the London Bombings," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2017). See also Alison Ledgerwood and Shannon P. Callahan, "The Social Side of Abstraction: Psychological Distance Enhances Conformity to Group Norms," *Psychological Science*, Vol. 23, No. 8 (2012), pp. 907-913.

[190] Norman Denzin, "Interpretive Interactionism" in Gareth Morgan (ed.) *Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Research* (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 1983), p. 131.

[191] Hornsey, "Why being right is not enough."

[192] Bandura, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement," pp. 189.

[193] Berger, *The Extremist Construction of Identity*, p. 8

Research related to referent informational influence sheds light on the dynamics of leadership and role models in violent extremist movements and milieus. It offers a way to conceptualize the challenge and organize analysis of specific cases. For instance, those individuals who left their homes in the West to fight alongside terrorist groups in the Syrian civil war have been presented as paragons of self-sacrifice and virtue – role models to be emulated – within their respective ingroup narratives. Upon their return, their capacity to influence views and actions is outsized as they move around their communities. SIT in general, and research on referent informational influence in particular, provide models for analysing these dynamics and thinking critically about appropriate and effective counter-efforts.[196]

Insights from social identity theory of leadership suggests, paradoxically, that prototypical leaders are those who are most empowered to alter the ingroup narrative in creative ways. This is significant when seeking to engage a group in dialogue. Additionally, insights into the processes of self-categorization explain why the rise of ideological and authoritarian belief systems – providing strong, simple, and exclusive ingroup identities, secular as well as religious – is often associated with social conditions of uncertainty and instability.[197] The appeal of exclusionary ideologies in combination with perceptions of homogeneity (positive for the ingroup, negative for the outgroup) as a result of a group's perception of being marginal or poorly treated is potentially explosive.

Radicalization, on this view, is "the escalation of an in-group's extremist orienttation in the form of increasingly negative views about an out-group or the endorsement of increasingly hostile or violent actions against an out-group."[198] A group can characterize its violence in any number of ways – pre-emptive, offensive, defensive – but the point is that violence against an outgroup is not conditional on some other factor, but on their mere existence. "Them, their values, norms, and actions against us, our values, norms and actions."

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[194] Jennifer Boutz, Hannah Benninger and Alia Lancaster, "Exploiting the Prophet's Authority: How Islamic State Propaganda Uses Hadith Quotation to Assert Legitimacy," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 42, No. 11 (2019), pp. 972-996.

[195] Karl Kaltenthaler, Daniel Silverman and Munqith Dagher, "Identity, Ideology, and Information: The Sources of Iraqi Public Support for the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 41, No. 10 (2018), pp. 801-824.

[196] A prescient example of this is the 2009 report on violent Islamist extremism from the Swedish Security Service. The conceptual portion of the report "breathes" SIT and makes full use of its insights, without mentioning SIT by name. See Säkerhetspolisen, *Violence-Promoting Islamist Extremism in Sweden* (Stockholm, 2009), pp. 27-39. For referent informational influence, see p. 31.

[197] Michael A. Hogg, Janice R. Adelman and Robert D. Blagg, "Religion in the face of uncertainty: An uncertainty-identity theory account of religiousness," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol, 14, No. 1 (2010), pp. 72-83.

[198] Berger, *Extremism*, p. 46

Terrorism scholars and practitioners often start grappling with the challenges that a group presents only when it is already several rungs up on the ladder of escalation. Prior to this, however, SIT points to a number of observable warning signs, "radicalisation markers" that can aid practitioners in thinking about proactive and preventative efforts. Groups that are in the process of becoming more extreme typically escalate their expectations and demands in a number of areas. The demand for recognition of the ingroup's claimed legitimacy or status intensifies. The scope of actions considered legitimate to advance those demands is broadened. Attacks on outgroups move from the verbal to the physical. When perceptions of ingroup vulnerability and outgroup threat escalate, the criteria for ingroup membership can change. They can become either more expansive in order to marginalize an outgroup ("poaching" outgroup members) or more restrictive in order to exclude marginal or nominal members ("purging" ingroup members).

Self-categorization leading to normative conformity can (and usually does) emerge through direct personal relations with other ingroup members. It can also emerge in the virtual world. A noted earlier, this process does not require physical proximity or even a reciprocal relationship. The Internet has increased the speed and reach of radicalizing rhetoric from groups propagating its worldviews and narratives. It has not, however, altered the cognitive dynamics of the radicalization process.[199]

That said, internalizing radical messages through the internet without a mentor to guide the process seems to have facilitated *ideological cross-over*, the process whereby an individual is radicalised by messaging from one group but engages in terrorism on behalf of another. In fact, Omar Mateen appears to have been an example of this. His only known jihadist associations prior to swearing allegiance to Islamic State can be traced to al-Qaida through al-Nusra Front, which at the time were literally engaged in active combat against Islamic State.[200] Mateen's journey towards terrorism may have ended with a massacre carried out on behalf of Islamic

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[199] Researchers have cautioned against overestimating the importance of "self-radicalization," the process whereby an individual is radicalized and embraces violence entirely through online communications. See, for instance, Gabriel Weimann, "Lone Wolves in Cyberspace," *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2012).

[200] See Devlin Barrett, Adam Entous and Alan Cullison, "FBI Twice Probed Orlando Gunman," *Wall Street Journal* (June 13, 2016); Rebecca Shabad, "FBI Director Comey: 'highly confident' Orlando shooter radicalized through internet," *CBS News* (June 14, 2016); Evan Perez, Shimon Prokupecz, Catherine E. Shoichet and Tim Hume, "Omar Mateen: Angry, violent 'bigot' who pledged allegiance to ISIS." *CNN* (June 14, 2016).

State but it began with exposure to the ideas of al-Qaida. Whether he understood or even cared about the difference remains an open question.[201]

Mateen is far from alone in making this transition in an online setting. A virtual social environment in which group distinctions have no real-world everyday impact – even less are a matter of life and death – is difficult to navigate for the neophyte or seeker. When the most strident and polarizing rhetoric is what validates the self-concept and captures the imagination, any number of very real, yet subtler, perhaps even unspoken points of intergroup differentiation may pass by unnoticed.

Another process that arguably has been aided by the Internet may be termed *ideological fusion*, the effort to synthesize key elements of disparate ideologies. This is not in itself something new. For instance, in 2011, August Kreis, a leader of Aryan Nations, became the focus of an FBI investigation after he had stated during a court hearing "that he and members of his movement desired to join Al Qaeda in its jihad against the United States government."[202] Setting aside difference to make common cause against a common enemy is as old as politics itself. However, the anonymity and reach of the internet may be pushing this practice to new levels. A notable example is Ethan Meltzer, a U.S. Army soldier who was arrested in June 2020 and charged with plotting an ambush on his own unit in Iraq.[203] Meltzer was allegedly a member of the Order of the Nine Angles (O9A), an occultist Satanist group with links to Nazi ideology, but had "consumed propaganda from multiple extremist groups."[204] He was both inspired by, and attempting to create synergies between O9A, Islamic State, al-Qaida, as well as RapeWaffen Division, a violent right-wing extremist group. The purpose was to carry out what Meltzer himself allegedly referred to as a "jihadist attack"[205] based on what he considered to be overlapping worldviews and common outgroups.

Efforts to bring together conflicting groups by attempting to create a superordinate identity on the basis of some significant commonality have been thoroughly studied within the SIT framework.[206] Typically, however, scholarship has sought to understand how such efforts may facilitate the *reduction of polarization and conflict* between groups.[207] A fusion of violent extremist identities on the basis of shared hatreds and common outgroups could arguably be seen as an effort to use the same social identity-based process to achieve the opposite result. This is a dangerous trend in an online environment where violent extremist groups frequently overlap in their most polarizing rhetoric while "lesser" points of differentiation are obscured. SIT can provide a useful analytical framework for much needed future research.

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[201] Adam Taylor, "Omar Mateen may not have understood the difference between ISIS, al-Qaeda and Hezbollah". *Washington Post*. (June 13, 2016).

[202] Bill Morlin, "Neo-nazi leader was investigated for supporting al-Qaeda." Southern Poverty Law Center Hate Watch, (August 23, 2011).

[203] The United States Attorney's Office, Southern District of New York. "U.S. Army Soldier Charged With Terrorism Offenses For Planning Deadly Ambush On Service Members In His Unit." Press release, June 22, 2020. Retrieved at https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/us-army-soldier-charged-terrorism-offenses-planning-deadly-ambush-service-members-his#_ftn1

[204] The United States Attorney's Office. "U.S. Army Soldier Charged With Terrorism Offenses."

[205] The United States Attorney's Office. "U.S. Army Soldier Charged With Terrorism Offenses."

[206] See Samuel L. Gartner, John F. Dovidio, Jason Nier, Colleen Ward and Brenda Banker, "Across Cultural Divides: The Value of a Superordinate Identity" in D. Prentice and D. Miller (eds.) *Cultural Divides: Understanding and Overcoming Group Conflict* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1999), pp. 173-212; Shelley McKeown, "Perceptions of a superordinate identity in Northern Ireland," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2014), pp. 505-515.

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[207] Marilyn B. Brewer, "In-group bias in the minimal intergroup situation: A cognitive-motivational analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (1979), pp. 307-324; Samuel L. Gaertner and John F. Dovidio, *Reducing Intergroup Bias: The Common Ingroup identity Model* (Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press, 2000); Rachael A. Eggins, S. Alexander Haslam, and Katherine J. Reynolds, "Social identity and negotiation: Subgroup representations and superordinate consensus," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 7 (2002), pp. 887-899; Sonia Roccas and Marilyn B. Brewer, "Social identity complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 6 (2002), pp. 88-106.

8 Moghaddam's "staircase to terrorism"

> "People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. What is culpable can be made honorable through cognitive reconstrual."[208]

Fathali Moghaddam's "staircase to terrorism" metaphor illustrates both the broad applicability and proactive potential of the social identity approach. Derived from a combination of SIT and psychological research, the staircase may be thought of as an application of self-categorization theory with a focus on the dynamics of social identification *within* groups. It offers a multidimensional view of the social identity processes at work in the individual's radicalization process.

The staircase metaphor is not an attempt to explain all possible motives for joining a terrorist group. As noted above, individuals may join for reasons that are not necessarily connected to their social identity, such as coercion, deceit, poverty, protection, or a combination of these and other factors. That said, terrorist and violent extremist groups (as well as governments) frequently manipulate perceptions of "material conditions" in order to frame them as evidence of their own particular ingroup/outgroup narrative. In the words of a former al-Shabaab fighter about commenting on terrorist recruitment efforts in the Somali diaspora, "'Look at you: you have graduated university, you can't get a job. Why? Because your name is Mohamed and you're a Muslim.' This is what the al-Qaeda guys are whispering to the ear, to recruit these kids."[209]

Second, material conditions may themselves be outcomes of pre-existing processes of intergroup competition and identity formation. Issues of land use that pits Jewish settlers against Palestinian residents in the West Bank are directly related to the larger intercommunal Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The unequal distribution of wealth in Bahrain is an expression of an enduring conflict between the ruling elite and a majority of the citizenry, which in turn is framed by the Sunni-Shi'a conflict. While the specific purpose of the staircase metaphor is to present a visualization of how and why an individual's social identity impacts the radicalization process, it may also provide a frame for asking new questions about old assumptions

The staircase describes the series of floors – analogous to successive cognitive stages – that the individual passes through on his or her way from being a member of society at large to becoming someone for whom membership in a narrowly defined ingroup can justify acts of terrorism. Moghaddam himself was the first to point out that the staircase is “not intended as a formal model to be tested against alternatives” but rather as “a general framework within which to organize current psychological knowledge and to help direct future research and policy.”[210] It is an SIT-derived heuristic tool that offers insights into the “radicalization process” as it plays out within the full spectrum of political and religious extremist milieus.

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[208] Bandura, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement," pp. 163.

[209] Moe Abdullahi Mohamed in Vanguard Productions, "American Jihadi," S. 4, Ep. 5 (45:28) Air date: 07/01/2010. https://archive.org/details/VanguardAmericanJihadi

Terrorists, regardless of their ideological or religious agenda, are enabled by the social, cultural, and political conditions within the surrounding milieu. Moghaddam argues that it is essential to understand terrorist groups “as arising out of a larger culture and being imbedded in narratives adopted by a population, rather than being unique to small isolated groups of potential terrorists.”[211] The choices made by the individual are distinctly his or her own, but nevertheless informed by the collective values, norms, and cues within society and the broader extremist milieu.[212]

The route out of the mainstream towards terrorism is neither linear nor deterministic. In the staircase metaphor, according to Moghaddam, what matters “is not only the actual number of floors, stairs, and rooms, and so on, but more importantly, in some contexts, how people perceive the building and the doors they think are open to them.”[213] Indeed, throughout the process of climbing the stairs, a person might vacillate, backtrack, hesitate, and change his or her mind. At any point, he or she might give up or find some other means to address grievances. Nevertheless, the further a person advances into the extremist milieu, the more restrictive the environment and the more limited the possibilities for, and inclination to dissent. “As people climb the stairway, they see fewer and fewer choices, until the only possible outcome is the destruction of others, or oneself, or both.”[214]

The ground floor: The climb begins on the ground floor, which is *the domain of society at large with its diversity of individuals, groups, and interactions*. This is where an assessment of fairness and justice takes place, both in terms of material and social conditions. This does not need to be an articulated cost/benefit analysis or even conscious thought process; it may simply be an implicit sense of being treated unfairly. A perception of individual or collective deprivation of some common good – unfair or unjust treatment – causes some to “become motivated to search further for options to address their grievances."[215] These individuals climb the stairs to the first floor.

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[210] Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration” in Bruce Bongar, Lisa M. Brown, Larry E. Beutler, James N. Breckenridge and Philip Zimbardo, *Psychology of Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 70. Originally published under the same title in *American Psychologist*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2005), pp. 161-169.

[211] Fathali M. Moghaddam, “Cultural preconditions for potential terrorist groups: Terrorism and societal change” in Fathali M. Moghaddam and Anthony J. Marsella (eds.) *Understanding Terrorism: Psychosocial Roots, Consequences, and Interventions* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004), p. 117.

[212] Fathali M. Moghaddam. *From the Terrorists' Point of View: What they Experience and Why they Come to Destroy* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), pp. 45-46.

[213] Moghaddam, “The staircase to terrorism,” p. 70.

[214] Moghaddam, “The staircase to terrorism,” p. 70.

The first floor: "People climb to the first floor and try different doors in search of solutions to what they perceive as unjust treatment."[216] *The first floor may be thought of as the domain of special interests and activism*. Here, there is still a belief that personal mobility is possible and that normative recourse for grievances are available; in short, that things can be improved "within the system." Demonstrations, political activism, lobbying, educational programs – if the individual believes that wrongs can indeed be set right through socially recognized institutions and procedural justice, he or she may remain on the first floor. This is true also for those who advocate for extremist agendas; activists on the fringes of politics seeking to avail themselves of their democratic rights. If, however, the individual reaches the conclusion that the first floor holds no hope of redress he or she may climb to the second floor. In the words of the director of the Nordic Resistance Movement's parliamentary branch, "When you see that it is fruitless to follow the democratic rules, you start looking for other solutions."[217]

The second floor: Here the individual enters into a community of likeminded persons with similar grievances, frustrations, and feelings of hopelessness, desperation and/or anger. *This floor may be thought of as the extremist milieu located on the margins of society.*[218] The individual enters into a new and narrower ingroup, develops new beliefs and loyalties, and adopts new narratives. Here, the plight of the ingroup is part of a narrative and given historic or even cosmic significance. Ingroup leaders maintain such narratives, foster ingroup cohesion and loyalty, and offer a solution to the crisis posed by the outgroup threat. While most people never advance past the first floor, others may be born and raised on the second floor.[219]

On this floor, aggression is displaced. Moghaddam argues that "displaced aggression can be verbal and indirect" and that "most of the people who climb up to the second floor do not undertake physical aggression; rather they limit themselves to verbal attacks."[220] Demonstrations denouncing "race traitors" or leaflet campaigns calling for "direct action" against fur farms would be examples of this.

Moghaddam notes that such displacement of aggression was discussed extensively by Freud, who attached particular importance to three key factors – *the role of leadership* in redirecting negative emotions onto outsiders; *the significance of targets*, "dissimilar outsiders" or symbolic targets that are not chosen randomly;

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[215] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 70.

[216] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 72.

[217] Pär Öberg, quoted in Holgersson, *I demokratins yttersta gränsland*, p. 272.

[218] See Malthaner and Waldmann, "The Radical Milieu."

[219] For an overview, see Radicalization Awareness Network Centre of Excellence, "Vulnerable children who are brough up in an extremist environment" (Stockholm, June 2018).

[220] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 73.

and *the importance of ingroup cohesion*, which develops as a result of the outgroup threat.[221] Some remain on the second floor, content with their level of involvement, but "when ready to physically displace aggression, the person climbs to the third floor."[222]

The third floor: On this floor the individual becomes a recruit. *The third floor may be thought of as the segment of the extremist milieu that advocates or actively supports terrorist violence.* Here, the person becomes morally engaged with the message, methods, and objectives of terrorism. He or she becomes convinced that the values represented by the government and society are the antithesis of true values – which are represented by the ingroup. "Recruits are persuaded to become committed to the morality of the terrorist organization through a number of tactics, the most important of which are isolation, affiliation, secrecy, and fear."[223] At this point, some go underground and disappear off the grid, such as those who left their homes around the world to join al-Qaeda or Islamic State in the Middle East. Those who continue to live openly in society nevertheless "develop their parallel lives in complete isolation and secrecy."[224]

The recruit finds a home in the terrorist organization, which provides him with a purpose and significance. Moghadam notes that terrorist groups position themselves at two levels:

> at the macrolevel, as the only option toward reforming society (they point to alleged government repression and dictatorship as proof of their assertion), and at the microlevel, as a 'home' or ingroup for disaffected individuals (mostly young, single males), some of whom are recruited to carry out the most dangerous missions through programs that often have a very fast turnaround.[225]

The fourth floor: On this floor the recruit becomes a fully-fledged member, immersed in social relationships and activities that are for the narrow ingroup only. Life in a small secret group affects the ingroup members' perceptions, leading to "a legitimization of the terrorist organization and its goals, a belief that the ends justify the means, and a strengthening of the categorical 'us versus them' view of the world.[226]

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[221] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 73. Cf. Donald M. Taylor and Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Theories of Intergroup Relations: International Social Psychological Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), pp. 17-33. See also Sigmund Freud, "Group psychology and the analysis of the ego" in J. Strachey (ed. & tr.) The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 18 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 69–143. Original work published 1921.

[222] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 73.

[223] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 74.

[224] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 74.

[225] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 74.

[226] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 74.

At this point, social categories take on a very sharp relief as the recruit is pressured from two directions. From inside the organization – where leadership holds absolute power – the recruit is socialized into the traditions, methods, and goals of the group and pressured to conformity and disobedience. From outside the organization – the domain of the threatening outgroup – the individual is now considered an enemy who will be punished or even killed as soon as he is identified. The divide between ingroup and outgroup becomes an existential matter. "During their stay on the fourth floor, then, individuals find their options have narrowed considerably. They are now part of a tightly controlled group that they cannot exit from alive."[227]

The fifth floor. On the fifth floor, the member finally carries out acts of terrorism. Terrorist groups prepare and train members for such acts, argues Moghaddam, by "two psychological processes that are central to intergroup dynamics."[228] The first is social categorization, which at this point involves categorizing civilians and non-combatants as part of the outgroup and therefore as part of the threat. Islamic State is extraordinarily explicit about the fact that their hatred is directed against all non-Muslims, not just those who "attack Islam," and that it is permissible to kill all civilians, including the elderly, women and children.[229] From a very different ideological perspective, a veteran of the Palestinian "rejectionist" trend stated that,

> The distinction between settlers, meaning those who live in the lands occupied in 1967, and 'civilians,' meaning those who live in the lands occupied in 1948, is spurious… Are they not all settlers living on the land stolen from the Palestinian people? If attacks on settlements in the areas occupied in 1967 are legitimate, how can attacks inside the areas occupied in 1948 be illegitimate? … The only ones we consider as illegitimate targets are the children, those who have not yet performed their military service…[230]

The other psychological process centres on the outgroup homogeneity effect, which involves an exaggeration of differences between the ingroup and the outgroup. Through these two processes, "terrorists psychologically distance themselves from the other humans they intend to destroy."[231] The individual who may have begun on the ground level by questioning some perceived injustice, arrives at a place where acts of terrorism are not only legitimate and just, but necessary and demanded by leadership.

No part of this process is preordained and every step very much depends on context – the social context within which the terrorist group exists and the group context within which the individual is radicalized. Moghaddam identifies eleven preconditions for an extremist group to engage in terrorism[232]:

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[227] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 74.

[228] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 75.

[229] "Why we hate you and why we fight you," *Dabiq*, No. 15 (July 2016), pp. 30-33; "The blood of a disbeliever is equal to the blood of a dog," *Voice of Hind*, No. 5, (2020), pp. 12-14; "Ruling on killing infidel women, children and the elderly in war," *Voice of Hind*, no. 8 (2020), pp. 3-5.

[230] Said Maragha Abu Musa, Secretary General of Fateh al-Intifada. Author interview, Beirut, 6 April 2004.

[231] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 76.

1. The clandestine nature of terrorist groups leads to social segregation and isolation, which in turn fosters a black-and-white worldview and conformity to ingroup norms, and solidifies the influence of group leadership.
2. The categorization of the world into good and evil leads to the development of ingroup/outgroup stereotypes and perceptions of outgroup homogeneity, which in turn accentuates ingroup/outgroup differences.
3. A belief system that portrays society at large as illegitimate, unjust or evil means that it is responsible for transgression of higher order and that the government does not engender the correct values.
4. Dissatisfaction with the present order and awareness of cognitive alternatives – a belief in the possibility of social change – underpin a belief that radical change is required to right society's wrongs.
5. A belief that there are no available legal means to change society and right its wrongs.
6. A belief that all normative paths are closed, which means that non-normative paths, including murder and criminal activity, must be considered as necessary and justified in order to address the crisis.
7. A belief that acts of terror will destabilize society, inform the public about the illegitimate nature of the current order, and expose its weakness.
8. A perception that the terrorist group can bring about the change required, which means that the ingroup's role is vital and its qualifications to address the crisis are superior, which is reflected in and sustained by the narrative about their ingroup's past, present, and future.
9. A belief that social change through terrorism will improve the ingroup's situation and that sacrifices made will benefit the group, family, friends, and the community at large.
10. An exaggerated and unrealistic view, sustained by isolation, of ingroup members as heroic.
11. A realization that group boundaries are not permeable, which means that disengagement from the group is difficult if not impossible. This realization is evidenced by the outgroup's (i.e. society's) total rejection of the group and reinforced by demands for total loyalty by ingroup leadership.

The climb up the staircase is undertaken by a unique individual who proceeds at his or her own pace and can digress, stall, or reverse at any point. Importantly, rather than "a radicalizing event," Moghaddam's metaphor describes a radicalizing process whereby any event, however mundane, can be radicalizing. This has important implications for CT and CVE initiatives. The focus of counter-efforts and policies has tended to concentrate "on people who have climbed all the way up the stairway and are already committed to carrying out terrorist acts." [233] There is also a tendency to approach all members of a group stereotypically – as if any connection to a violent extremist group automatically places a person on the fourth or fifth floor – despite what we know about the ways in which groups are internally differentiated. As Moghaddam's schematic illustrates, policies aimed at individuals on the upper floors "do not address the foundational problems at the bottom of the stairway, involving the vast majority of people."[234]

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[232] Moghaddam, "Cultural preconditions for potential terrorist groups."

As important as the floors are the stairways, in which different environments overlap. Somewhere between ground level and the first floor, broader society gives way to a critical or activist environment. Between the first and second floor, that critical environment overlaps with an articulated extremist milieu. The stairway leading up to the third floor contains the overlap between the broader supportive extremist milieu and a violent extremist milieu. It is not necessarily obvious where any of these environments begin or end, or how big the overlap is; this will vary from case to case.

What is clear, however, is that prior to stepping onto the third floor, the individual may have done nothing illegal. Even on the third floor, the individual may be guilty of nothing more than espousing objectionable and extreme views and may still be susceptible to intervention or deradicalization efforts. Somewhere on the staircase between the third and fourth floors, however, the nature of the process changes, the social categorization process becomes so intense that the individual may assume that it is no longer possible to turn back and walk down the stairs again. To this might be added Bandura's troubling but prescient observation that,

> The path to terrorism can be shaped by fortuitous factors as well as by the conjoint influence of personal predilections and social inducements. Development of the capability to kill is usually achieved through an evolvement process, in which recruits may not fully recognize the transformation they are undergoing.[235]

The staircase metaphor provides a number of insights as well as a structure that CT and CVE practitioners can use to think critically about early proactive and preventative measures.[236]

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[233] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 77

[234] Moghaddam, "The staircase to terrorism," p. 77

[235] Bandura, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement," pp. 186.

[236] For a CVE application that draws heavily on Moghaddam's staircase metaphor, see Deardorff, *The Roots of Our Children's War*, pp. 195-217, 219-224.

9 Summary observations

SIT was conceived as a model for understanding patterns of prejudice, discrimination and conflict with an initial focus on conflict and cooperation between social groups. As noted above, this original primary interest in intergroup relations was augmented by an increasing focus on the dynamics of social identification *within* groups. Developments such as self-categorization theory along with improved understanding of motivational dynamics have created a complex and realistically grounded understanding of the effects of social identity on relations within as well as between groups.

The preceding chapters have provided an overview of how SIT understands and explains various key aspects of intergroup conflict and why these are of direct relevance to the study of terrorism and violent extremism. SIT assumes, on the basis of robust empirical evidence, that observable and predictable patterns of human identity formation and intergroup dynamics are central to the emergence of violent extremist groups, the formation of their narratives, the development of their strategies, and their adoption of terrorism as a tactic.

When we seek to identify the causes of a terrorist campaign or the motivations of a violent extremist group, SIT requires us to go beyond the ideological programs and official rhetoric. *It requires us to begin at the beginning by examining the social processes through which ideological programs emerge and within which official rhetoric is devised and delivered*.

This is useful in two concrete ways. First, SIT gives us a way of organizing analyses of a wide range of groups and conflicts. *SIT is relevant for the study of intergroup conflict, not just a particular ideological or cultural subset of intergroup conflict*. Its “search parameters” do not discriminate for or against any particular type of group or movement. This means that SIT can be applied across the range of societal or cultural contexts. It also means that it can be combined with any number of other theories and approaches to create dynamic yet context specific analytical tools.

Second, *SIT gives us an insight into problematic dynamics and relationships at an early stage in the conflict cycl*e. As illustrated by Moghaddam’s metaphor, much of the social identity approach speaks to root causes and their ripple effects: problematic ingroup outgroup relationships, motivations for membership and categorisation, and so forth. This gives analysts a way to conceptualise the potential for violent extremism, know what to look for, and take preventative measures at an earlier stage.

This has value for CT and CVE analysis on both the strategic and tactical levels. On the strategic level, the ability to discern and analyse relationships, motivations, trajectories, alignments, and enmities of extremist movements *conceptually and at an early stage* is important for pro-active policy planning and resource allocation.

In the words of one CT practitioner, “The ability to prevent terrorism is necessarily about building a capacity to change the contexts of the potential terrorist threat in a way that is beneficial to national security.”[237]

On the tactical level, that same ability allows for more effective use of resources in outreach and dialogue, as well as various forms of direct counteraction: “SIT affords practitioners the psychosocial framework to develop precise strategies to fit the immediate environment.”[238] It provides a way to structure our inquiry into terrorism and violent extremism at both the macro- and microlevels as well as a means of thinking about counter-efforts.

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[237] Deardorff, *The Roots of Our Children’s War*, p. 32.

[238] Deardorff, *The Roots of Our Children’s War*, p. 34.

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