



NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**PATHWAYS BETWEEN IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE:
A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY APPROACH**

by

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September 2023

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC, 20503.				
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)	2. REPORT DATE September 2023	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's thesis		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE PATHWAYS BETWEEN IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY APPROACH			5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) Maja Čavlović				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A			10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE A	
13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words) This thesis debunks the notion that an individual becomes a terrorist because they are mentally unstable and drawn to terrorist and extremist groups because of their ideologies and fills a gap in the social psychological understanding of the dynamics between a personal and group identity. The thesis investigates the process of radicalization through a lens of identity changes as explained by three social psychological theories: uncertainty identity theory (UIT), social identity theory (SIT), and identity fusion theory (IFT). Each of the three theories is evaluated through a meta-analysis, and the findings from each theory are then compared to each other. Social psychological theories recognize that an individual's personal identity changes under the influence of the social identity of the group to which the individual belongs. UIT, SIT, and IFT explain radicalization with different motivational backgrounds: reducing uncertainty, boosting self-esteem, and sharing experiences and characteristics, but they do agree that social or group identity radicalizes personal identity. The theories also postulate that threat perception plays an important role in pathway to violence, as it enhances radicalization. The outcome of this meta-analysis indicates that radicalization is in great part a product of social conditioning by the group to which an individual belongs.				
14. SUBJECT TERMS personal identity, social identity, social psychology, terrorism, extremism, radicalization			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 115	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	

NSN 7540-01-280-5500

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 2-89)
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39-18

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PSYCHOLOGY APPROACH**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(COMBATING TERRORISM: POLICY AND STRATEGY)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
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ABSTRACT

This thesis debunks the notion that an individual becomes a terrorist because they are mentally unstable and drawn to terrorist and extremist groups because of their ideologies and fills a gap in the social psychological understanding of the dynamics between a personal and group identity. The thesis investigates the process of radicalization through a lens of identity changes as explained by three social psychological theories: uncertainty identity theory (UIT), social identity theory (SIT), and identity fusion theory (IFT). Each of the three theories is evaluated through a meta-analysis, and the findings from each theory are then compared to each other. Social psychological theories recognize that an individual's personal identity changes under the influence of the social identity of the group to which the individual belongs. UIT, SIT, and IFT explain radicalization with different motivational backgrounds: reducing uncertainty, boosting self-esteem, and sharing experiences and characteristics, but they do agree that social or group identity radicalizes personal identity. The theories also postulate that threat perception plays an important role in pathway to violence, as it enhances radicalization. The outcome of this meta-analysis indicates that radicalization is in great part a product of social conditioning by the group to which an individual belongs.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASG	Abu Sayyaf Group
EMSICA	Encapsulate Model of Social Identity in Collective Action
HT	Hizb-ut-Tahrir
IFT	Identity Fusion Theory
ISIS	Islamic State
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
SCT	Self Categorization Theory
SIT	Social Identity Theory
SQT	Significance Quest Theory
START	National Center for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism
UIT	Uncertainty Identity Theory

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the inspirational and insightful mentorship by Professor Mohammed Hafez and advising by Professor Cristiana Matei. I am deeply grateful to both for their willingness to work with me.

To my superiors in Croatia, I am thankful for entrusting me with the task of studying at the Naval Postgraduate School.

My family and friends in Croatia encouraged me on my journey through NPS every step of the way, and I share the results of my work with them.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is applied psychology. It is literally the application of knowledge about other's mind.

—Jeff Victoroff, ed., *Psychology of Terrorism* ¹

Given the type and level of violence that terrorists and extremists engage in, they have often been considered to be mentally disturbed people. Yet, the “mental illness explanation” has been disproven by decades of research, as it has been found “that terrorists are surprisingly normal in terms of mental health.”² Moreover, as the introductory quote by Jeff Victoroff, a neurologist, psychiatrist, and neuropsychiatrist shows, extremists and terrorists are often knowledgeable about the way humans function psychologically, and are also influenced by the same psychological processes on their own radicalization paths. At the same time, identity is an integral part of the psychological processes within radicalization, which has been recognized by scholars.³ Nevertheless, the concept of identity is currently not sufficiently understood to explain and account for terrorist behavior.⁴ This thesis fills the gap in knowledge about identity by placing it in the center of the radicalization process, and explains its role through three different social psychological approaches. This type of identity-centric analysis within radicalization is in line with the expert view about radicalization and identity.⁵

¹ Jeff Victoroff, ed., *Psychology of Terrorism: Key Readings ; Classic and Contemporary Insights*, Key Readings in Social Psychology Series (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2009), 1.

² Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 83.

³ Michael P. Arena and Bruce A. Arrigo, “Social Psychology, Terrorism, and Identity: A Preliminary Re-Examination of Theory, Culture, Self, and Society,” *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 23, no. 4 (2005): 487, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.653>.

⁴ Arena and Arrigo, 487.

⁵ Dina Al Raffie, “Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (December 2013): 67, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.6.4.4>.

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the roles of personal and collective identity during a radicalization process and after an individual has been radicalized? While there is a consensus among researchers that personal identity is a factor in the radicalization process, there are varying explanations about the role of identity and the changes it undergoes for a member of a violent extremist/terrorist group. Uncovering the interaction of an individual's personal identity and the social/collective identity that is associated with a violent extremist group can provide insight on how to mitigate the process of radicalization. A comprehensive analysis of the interaction of the personal and social identity is needed to determine:

1. What makes a violent extremist or terrorist group appealing to an individual from a personal identity perspective?
2. What kind of changes does personal identity undergo while influenced by the social identity of the violent extremist group?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Both intuitively and through research, terrorism scholars see a connection between psychological processes and terrorist actions. The literature confirms that the psychology of an individual and their personal identity and the collective identity they derive from their group have a role in choosing to engage in terrorist actions. Brigitte Nacos states that “some persons are psychologically more prone to become terrorists than others,”⁶ while Jeff Victoroff states that there is a debate between scholars on the individual vs. group factors that contribute to radicalization. The debate centers around whether it is possible to determine if someone will become a terrorist by only looking at the group dynamics or the individual's personality must be considered also.⁷

⁶ Brigitte Lebens Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, Fifth edition (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 173.

⁷ Victoroff, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 77.

Terrorism is a worldwide threat, with the number of attacks globally reaching over 16,000 circa 2015.⁸ The National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin from 30 November 30, 2022, states that the U.S. is facing a continuous and deadly threat from lone offenders and groups, both internally and from abroad.⁹ Islamic State, together with its affiliates, is a representative of a global terrorist organization motivated by religion. Ethnically motivated violent extremists are also present worldwide: from Myanmar, Israel and Palestine, and Turkey and Kurdish groups. For the U.S. terrorism remains an ubiquitous challenge in a variety of forms: transnational terrorist groups, which can be state-sponsored or not, and domestic extremists, who present a threat for the 2024 presidential elections.¹⁰ The U.S. cannot afford to become complacent on these issues.

Governments and their security agencies have spent a great deal of time and resources to analyze the factors involved in violent radicalization in recent decades. The goal has been to produce a list of predictive indicators and red flags that inform authorities about who is radicalizing to intervene appropriately. However, despite their best efforts, experts' analysis of radicalization has failed to reveal the signs early enough to stop terrorist attacks. Therefore, a better understanding of the psychology of radicalization is necessary to determine what is missing. This thesis will fill the gap by conducting a meta-analysis of social psychology literature.

C. ARRIVING TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES

This thesis concentrates on assessing promising social psychology theories to determine the roles of personal and collective identity in a radicalization. The review of the social psychology literature provides an overview of the most relevant and applicable scholarly work that analyzes the pathways to political violence utilizing a psychological

⁸ University of Maryland, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "The Global Terrorism Database," The Global Terrorism Database, accessed January 18, 2023, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?search=&sa.x=49&sa.y=13>.

⁹ U.S. Department of National Security, "National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin – November 30, 2022 | Homeland Security" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, November 30, 2022), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/ntas/alerts/22_1130_S1_NTAS-Bulletin-508.pdf.

¹⁰ Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, "The Terrorist Threats and Trends to Watch Out for in 2023 and Beyond," ed. Paul Cruickshank, *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 11 (December 19, 2022): 1.

approach. The three theories selected for this thesis are applicable for all types of terrorism, i.e., they provide an analysis of the socio-psychological radicalization that includes a wide array of motivational factors: religion, ideology, grievance, threat, kinship, etc.

Radicalization has largely been studied from a political science perspective, while the psychological variables within radicalization have been disregarded. Partly, this is because theories about “crazy” or “evil” terrorists proved inadequate, and rationalist theories and strategic actor models were considered more appropriate.¹¹ Terrorists are not inherently “psychopaths,”¹² but examining psychological patterns within radicalization should not be disregarded. Political science factors that could explain the emergence of terrorism, e.g., discrimination of a minority, affect thousands of individuals, but the number of terrorists is much lower. Psychological theories might help to identify additional variables that lead some, but not others who are similarly situated, to become extremists.

Social psychology theories may also yield specific risk factors that fall under the category of mental health and serve as a foundation for counter-terrorism policies from a psychological perspective. “Mental health” is often identified as an issue within radicalization by western security intelligence agencies, law enforcement units, and their governments.¹³ However, the general category of mental health is too ambiguous and may result in overlooking nuanced psychological features that increase the odds of radicalization. A social psychological approach to studying mental health indicators could be able to produce identifiable risk factors for radicalization, as it centers around the influence of the group on the mental perspectives of the individual.

Many psychology subfields can be applied to studying psychological processes during radicalization: clinical psychology, developmental psychology, forensic and public

¹¹ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 83.

¹² *The 7/7 Bombers: A Psychological Investigation*, Documentary (Horizon, 2005), Dr. Ariel Merari, minutes 6 to 7, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhbTXoPVVd0>.

¹³ Department of Homeland Security, “Department of Homeland Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, September 2019), 22, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf.

service psychology, and social psychology.¹⁴ Social psychology theories have been selected for analysis in this thesis because the field of social psychology examines how a person's beliefs and behaviors change in groups.¹⁵ Additionally, according to Jeffrey R. Seul from Harvard Law School, social psychology recognizes that the individual and group identity interact and influence each other.¹⁶ Even though the harm done by lone-wolf attackers is significant, as stated by Brian J. Phillips, who analyzed the lethality of lone wolf terrorists and terrorist groups, terrorism is deadliest when organized and implemented by a group, therefore is it most beneficial to study the behavior of a terrorist within a group.¹⁷

Social psychology theories recognize that social or collective identities of group members are malleable and context specific.¹⁸ Political science has recognized that the social psychological approach to studying identities is useful in analyzing group violence. Dr Jonathan Leader Maynard from King's College London, through analyzing genocide and mass atrocities, concludes that an individual's values are greatly influenced by the social norms established by the group the individual belongs to.¹⁹ While conducting interviews with 110 former members of Northern Irish paramilitary groups, political psychologists Neil Ferguson and James W. McAuley found that "rather than ideological radicalization fueling their engagement, it was a sense of identity and affinity with their

¹⁴ American Psychological Association, "Psychology Subfields," Psychology Subfields, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/education-career/guide/subfields>.

¹⁵ American Psychological Association, "Social Psychology Examines Interpersonal Relationships," Social Psychology Studies Human Interactions, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/education-career/guide/subfields/social>.

¹⁶ Jeffrey R. Seul, "'Ours Is the Way of God': Religion, Identity, And Intergroup Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 5 (September 1999): 554, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343399036005004>.

¹⁷ Brian J. Phillips, "Deadlier in the U.S.? On Lone Wolves, Terrorist Groups, and Attack Lethality," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2017): 534, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2015.1054927>.

¹⁸ Omar Shahabudin McDoom, "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict: Emotions, Rationality, and Opportunity in the Rwandan Genocide," *International Security* 37, no. 2 (October 2012): 130, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00100.

¹⁹ Jonathan Leader Maynard, "Evil, Genocide, and Mass Atrocities," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evil*, ed. Thomas Nys and Stephen de Wijze, 1st ed. (1 [edition]. | New York : Routledge, 2019. | Series: Routledge handbooks in philosophy: Routledge, 2019), 347–48, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315679518-27>.

community ... that drove their initial engagement with armed groups.”²⁰ The intention of this thesis is to precisely formulate the role of group identities in producing violence, as that is lacking within the existing literature.²¹

The interplay between an individual and collective identity that leads to violence has been illustrated by the case of Osama bin Laden by psychologists Donald M. Taylor and Winnifred Louis.²² They assert that group members are provided with “a number of psychological coping mechanisms”²³ through a collective identity even when their living conditions are miserable. A disrupted collective identity, on the other hand, results in a lack of a clear direction for the group members.²⁴ Taylor and Louis analyze the case of Osama bin Laden and his lack of a clearly defined personal and collective identity and assert that identity confusion played a role in his radicalization. Bin Laden (re)defined his collective identity through Islam and in opposition to the Western world, as the West was responsible for the poverty present in the Muslim world in his view.²⁵

An individual’s common identity, derived from the group, affects the behavior of group members. Donatella della Porta, a social and political scientist, maintains that terrorist groups establish rules that its members must respect, and in some extreme cases, the members experience a “loss of individual identity.”²⁶ The loss of individual identity forces the members to become more dependent on the group and reduces the members’ perception of personal responsibility.²⁷ Marc Sageman, a psychiatrist and political

²⁰ Neil Ferguson and James W McAuley, “Radicalization or Reaction: Understanding Engagement in Violent Extremism in Northern Ireland,” *Political Psychology* 41, no. 2 (2020): 221, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12618>.

²¹ McDoom, “The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict,” 135.

²² Fathali M. Moghaddam and Anthony J. Marsella, eds., *Understanding Terrorism: Psychosocial Roots, Consequences, and Interventions*, 1st ed (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004), 177–78.

²³ Moghaddam and Marsella, 176.

²⁴ Moghaddam and Marsella, 176.

²⁵ Moghaddam and Marsella, 178.

²⁶ Donatella della Porta, “On Individual Motivations in Underground Political Organizations,” in *Terrorism Studies: A Reader*, ed. John Horgan and Kurt Braddock (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 241.

²⁷ della Porta, 241.

scientist, classifies the creation of common identity through social bonds as one of the strongest contributors to radicalization.²⁸ He describes that the appeal of a common identity, accompanied with other factors, can transform someone into a jihadist.²⁹

Social psychologists believe that juxtaposing collective or group identities can instigate violence between the groups. Political scientist Paul Wallace explains that the collective religious identities of the Sikh militants and the Hindu minority were the major drivers of the violence in the Indian state of Punjab in 1980s and 1990s.³⁰ Even though Sikhs had been successful economically, socially, and politically, they perceived themselves as the discriminated part of the society.³¹ Wallace explains that the “violence refer [s] back to identity as a community and the shared sense of threat.”³² A collective religious identity can be fueled and exploited to produce violent action. Jerrold M. Post, Ehud Sprinzak, and Laurita M. Denny provide another example of how a group identity can enhance extremist beliefs, based on interviews with 35 Middle Eastern terrorists. Post, Sprinzak, and Denny assert that “once [a member is] recruited, there is a clear fusing of individual identity and group identity”³³ and that the success of the group becomes central to their individual identity.³⁴

In 2005, Victoroff wrote a review and critique of psychological approaches to the study of the mind of a terrorist, asserting that the policy makers have been left to devise counterterrorism strategies without having sufficient academic input about the cause for terrorist behavior.³⁵ While there have been advancements in the psychological study of terrorism since 2005, a comprehensive social psychology analysis of the origin of terrorist

²⁸ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 135.

²⁹ Sageman, 135.

³⁰ Martha Crenshaw, ed., *Terrorism in Context* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 354.

³¹ Crenshaw, 359.

³² Crenshaw, 360.

³³ Victoroff, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 112.

³⁴ Victoroff, 112.

³⁵ Jeff Victoroff, “The Mind of the Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 1 (February 2005): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002704272040>.

behavior from an identity perspective could add to the systemic understanding of the mind of a terrorist.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This thesis identifies three promising social psychology theories that analyze the interaction of the individual and social identity and can offer new insights for an individual's radicalization: uncertainty identity theory, social identity theory, and identity fusion theory.

Uncertainty identity theory (UIT) offers a causal claim that the reduction of self-uncertainty, attained by group membership, can increase the likelihood of radicalization.³⁶ Within this causal claim, the self-uncertainty is the independent variable and the type of group the individual joins is the dependent variable, i.e., uncertain individuals can be more attracted to joining extremist groups. Michael Hogg, the main proponent of the theory, explains that individuals, when feeling uncertain, are more prone to identify with a group that prescribes their behavior.³⁷ Uncertainty identity theory hypothesizes that group identification “very effectively reduces self-uncertainty”³⁸ and that when individuals feel their values and practices are threatened, identification with “radical” groups is strengthened.³⁹

UIT offers several causal mechanisms as to why individuals have the need to reduce their uncertainty and how that is achieved by joining a group. The theory asserts that 1) being uncertain is anxiety provoking and stressful, therefore people strive to diminish it;⁴⁰

³⁶ Michael A. Hogg, “Self-Uncertainty and Group Identification: Consequences for Social Identity, Group Behavior, Intergroup Relations, and Society,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 64 (Elsevier, 2021), 264, <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2021.04.004>.

³⁷ Michael A. Hogg, “From Uncertainty to Extremism: Social Categorization and Identity Processes,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, no. 5 (October 2014): 340, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414540168>.

³⁸ Hogg, “Self-Uncertainty and Group Identification,” 268.

³⁹ Michael A. Hogg, Christie Meehan, and Jayne Farquharson, “The Solace of Radicalism: Self-Uncertainty and Group Identification in the Face of Threat,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46, no. 6 (November 1, 2010): 1061, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.05.005>.

⁴⁰ Paul A. M. Van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski, and E. Tory Higgins, eds., *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 65.

2) uncertainty reduction is a “fundamental human motivation;”⁴¹ and 3) “self-uncertainty seeks resolution and motivates behavior.”⁴² Additionally, the theory claims that uncertainty reduction is pursued because humans have a need for a positive view of the self,⁴³ and that self-uncertainty is reduced by the validation from other group members.⁴⁴ Therefore, the first hypothesis explored through empirical research is:

H₁: Individuals psychologically assessed as exhibiting signs of self-uncertainty are more prone to join extremist organizations than individuals who do not exhibit such characteristics.

Social identity theory’s (SIT) take on personal identity is opposite to uncertainty identity theory, as it claims that individuals categorize themselves into groups based on a defined personal identity, i.e., uncertainty is not attached to their personal identity.⁴⁵ Social identity theory, or “theory of intergroup conflict,” offers a causal claim that in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination between groups can lead to conflict when the groups view each other as a threat.⁴⁶ Within this causal claim, the independent variable is the disparity between the groups, while the level of the perceived threat from the other group is the dependent variable.⁴⁷

SIT offers several causal mechanisms as to how distinction between groups can lead to conflict. The theory asserts that 1) group members derogate the members of the

⁴¹ Hogg, “Self-Uncertainty and Group Identification,” 269.

⁴² Eunice U. Choi and Michael A. Hogg, “Self-Uncertainty and Group Identification: A Meta-Analysis,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 23, no. 4 (June 2020): 484, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430219846990>.

⁴³ Arie W. Kruglanski, Catalina Kopetz, and Ewa Szumowska, eds., *The Psychology of Extremism*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 102, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003030898-1>.

⁴⁴ Lange, Kruglanski, and Higgins, *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, 62.

⁴⁵ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2000): 225, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870>.

⁴⁶ Richard D. Ashmore, Lee J. Jussim, and David Wilder, eds., *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, Rutgers Series on Self and Social Identity, v. 3 (Oxford [England] New York, N.Y. [USA]: Oxford University Press, 2001), 27.

⁴⁷ Ashmore, Jussim, and Wilder, 35.

other group,⁴⁸ 2) the group models the behavior, thinking, and feelings of its members,⁴⁹ 3) individuals organize themselves into groups through social categorization,⁵⁰ 4) the value and significance of the group is determined through social comparison,⁵¹ and 5) group members become cognitively aware of their group membership and what that emotionally means to them through social identification.⁵² When the causal mechanisms are connected to a perceived threat from another group, “social identities can be responsible for conflict between groups.”⁵³ Therefore, the second hypothesis I explore through empirical research is:

H2: Individuals exhibiting a strong ingroup identity and outgroup bias are more prone to join extremist groups than individuals that do not exhibit such ingroup-outgroup dichotomies.

Identity fusion theory (IFT) claims that individuals can engage in self-sacrificial and even suicidal behavior, when their identity fuses with a group identity.⁵⁴ This foundational causal claim from identity fusion theory is often described as a “visceral sense of oneness with the group.”⁵⁵ Within this causal claim, the identity fusion of the individual with the group is the independent variable, while the behavior of the individual is the dependent variable. Psychologist Francois Alexi Martel and his colleagues describe that the identity of the individual fuses with the group identity and the individual perceives

⁴⁸ Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman, “Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 6 (May 28, 2009): 542, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100902888453>.

⁴⁹ Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 1995): 259–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787127>.

⁵⁰ Lange, Kruglanski, and Higgins, *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, 381.

⁵¹ Lange, Kruglanski, and Higgins, 381.

⁵² Lange, Kruglanski, and Higgins, 381–82.

⁵³ *Understanding Peace and Conflict through Social Identity Theory: Contemporary Global Perspectives* (New York, NY: Springer Science+Business Media, 2016), xv–xvi.

⁵⁴ Benjamin Grant Purzycki and Martin Lang, “Identity Fusion, Outgroup Relations, and Sacrifice: A Cross-Cultural Test,” *Cognition* 186 (May 2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2019.01.015>.

⁵⁵ Harvey Whitehouse, “Dying for the Group: Towards a General Theory of Extreme Self-Sacrifice,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 41 (2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X18000249>.

himself as one with the group.⁵⁶ This also causes the individual to believe that any threat towards the group equates to a threat to him.

IFT offers two causal mechanisms to explain why individuals join groups and how their individual identity gets fused to the identity of the group: 1) through sharing of intense collective experiences or 2) feeling their common “shared essence.”⁵⁷ Researchers of identity fusion claim that intense collective experiences (usually negative), such as grievances,⁵⁸ incarceration,⁵⁹ and pain and fear⁶⁰ produce identity fusion of an individual with a group. Shared experiences become “entrenched as self-defining memories”⁶¹ for the group members. The causal mechanism of a “shared essence” or “perceived biological traits” stems from the perception of biological kinship with the members of the group.⁶² Consequently, the third set of hypotheses I explore through empirical research are:

H_{3a}: Individuals who are members of a violent extremist group are more likely to engage in violence, including suicide attacks, than individuals who are on the periphery of violent extremist groups.

H_{3b}: Individuals that exhibit intense identification with a violent extremist organization are more likely to engage in violence, including suicide attacks, on behalf of that organization than individuals who exhibit sympathy with violent extremist groups.

⁵⁶ Francois Alexi Martel et al., “Why True Believers Make the Ultimate Sacrifice: Sacred Values, Moral Convictions, or Identity Fusion?,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (November 15, 2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.779120>.

⁵⁷ William B. Swann et al., “When Group Membership Gets Personal: A Theory of Identity Fusion,” *Psychological Review* 119, no. 3 (July 2012): 448–49, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028589>.

⁵⁸ Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2021, 104.

⁵⁹ Victoroff, *Psychology of Terrorism*, 111–12.

⁶⁰ Harvey Whitehouse et al., “The Evolution of Extreme Cooperation via Shared Dysphoric Experiences,” *Scientific Reports* 7, no. 1 (May 2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep44292>.

⁶¹ Whitehouse et al., 2.

⁶² Swann et al., “When Group Membership Gets Personal,” 448.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis employs the meta-analysis approach and analyzes single and comparative case studies to find common results and identify overall trends for pathways leading to violence while examining the interaction of personal and group identity as explained by UIT, SIT, and IFT. This thesis uses existing case studies to assess the appeal of violent extremist or terrorist groups to individuals from a personal identity perspective. Furthermore, this thesis investigates the influence of group identity on the personal identity of its group members, and how the interaction between a personal identity and the group produces violence.

This thesis has a two-fold focus in terms of the outcomes: theoretical and policy relevance. The theoretical aspect focuses on the applicability of the social psychological theories for explaining the process of radicalization, while the policy viewpoint formulates policy recommendations for terrorism prevention. The end goal of the thesis is to provide policy makers with recommendations on how to formulate counterterrorism policies informed by social psychology.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis analyzes UIT in Chapter II, SIT in Chapter III, and IFT in Chapter IV. Each of the chapters dedicated to a specific theory also assesses the viability of the theory for studying radicalization. Chapter V identifies and compares the commonalities from the three theories. Chapter VI provides a conclusion of the research.

II. UNCERTAINTY IDENTITY THEORY

This chapter explains the key premises of the uncertainty identity theory (UIT), its development and mechanisms. Furthermore, this chapter describes the principle of self-categorization and how it is used in UIT, while also explaining the similarities and differences from the usage of self-categorization in social identity theory. Additionally, this chapter lays out empirical evidence that supports the UIT's explanation of radicalization and analyzes the relevance of the evidence presented. Moreover, this chapter outlines UIT's account of leadership under the conditions of uncertainty, and the relationship between UIT and significance quest theory, both of which share uncertainty as a motivational factor. The final part of the chapter goes beyond UIT and explores how significance quest theory rationalizes the emergence of extremist behavior by using the quest for personal significance as the main motivational factor.

While uncertainty is a condition everyone experiences as a part of their personal identity, and in most cases, people are able to resolve it without negative consequences, in certain conditions it can lead to radicalization and engaging in violent and extremist behavior. Thus, researching uncertainty within the framework of pathway to radicalization can result in uncovering how uncertainty can lead to extremism. UIT was developed by Michael A. Hogg in mid-2000s, and the theory rests on a key principle that feelings of uncertainty are unpleasant and therefore unwanted.⁶³ Hogg claims that UIT can “explain the conditions under which radicalization and extremism arise and the various forms they can take.”⁶⁴ UIT rests on the notion that people find self-uncertainty aversive, and will attempt to reduce it, which can be accomplished through joining a group identification. Hogg explains that individuals, when feeling uncertain, are more prone to identify with a group that is “distinctive, unambiguous, all-encompassing, explanatory, and behaviorally

⁶³ Michael A. Hogg and Janice Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership: Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (September 2013): 438, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12023>.

⁶⁴ Hogg, “Self-Uncertainty and Group Identification,” 264.

prescriptive.”⁶⁵ Because extremist groups often have such attributes, Hogg rationalizes that identity uncertainty can be a pathway to radicalization, as individuals seek to join such groups. This type of individual’s behavior, driven by feelings of uncertainty, has also been described and offered as an explanation for extremism by other researchers.⁶⁶

John M. Levine and Arie W. Kruglanski state that groups “characterized by clear boundaries and internal structure, homogenous membership, a high degree of social interaction, and common goals and fate, are most effective in reducing self-uncertainty.”⁶⁷ More generally, Dr. Farhaan Wali from Bangor University claims that individuals who are searching for their place within society are attracted to homogenous groups.⁶⁸ Hogg and Janice Adelman take this assertion a step further and make a claim that extremist groups can be especially attractive for uncertainty reduction.⁶⁹ Additionally, social psychologist Allard R. Feddes states that “a strong and powerful group is attractive for people”⁷⁰ and illustrates this with the establishment of the ISIS Caliphate in 2014, which indicated ISIS’s strength at the time and resulted in more people joining it.⁷¹ Researchers in the field have recognized that there are many ways to reduce uncertainty, but have found that group identification is “particularly effective.”⁷² UIT rests on four key expectations: (1) uncertainty initiates identification with a group; (2) the higher the level of uncertainty, the higher the identification with the group; (3) identification with the group reduces uncertainty, and (4) uncertain individuals will not seek out only high status groups, but can

⁶⁵ Hogg, “From Uncertainty to Extremism,” 340.

⁶⁶ Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2021, 101–2.

⁶⁷ Arie W. Kruglanski, Catalina E. Kopetz, and Ewa Szumowska, eds., *The Psychology of Extremism: A Motivational Perspective* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 101.

⁶⁸ Farhaan Wali, “Post-Radicalisation Identity: Understanding ‘Collective Identity’ within Radical Islamist Groups,” *Journal of Social & Psychological Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2011): 56.

⁶⁹ Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2022, 101.

⁷⁰ Allard Rienk Feddes et al., *Psychological Perspectives on Radicalization* (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 102.

⁷¹ Feddes et al., 101.

⁷² Hogg and Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” September 2013, 439.

also identify with a low status group. However, when individuals have a higher degree of uncertainty, they prefer to identify with a high-status group.⁷³

UIT explains that an uncertain individual can become radical because they are seeking to reduce their uncertainty by joining a group with a forceful agenda that can also actualize its plan into action, i.e., a radical group.⁷⁴ Hogg elaborates on this claim by stating that when feeling uncertain, individuals will seek to identify with “assertive radical groups, perhaps transforming members into fanatics, zealots, true believers, and ideologues.”⁷⁵ In support of his claim, Hogg lists studies he conducted with Paul G. Grieve (1999) and Barbara-Ann Mullin (1998) to demonstrate that individuals who identified with a group and were biased in favor of their group did that only when they were uncertain.⁷⁶ Grieve, Mullin, and Hogg induced uncertainty for the participants in the studies by asking them to describe what is happening in ambiguous pictures, as well as to estimate “the number of objects displayed in pictures in which there were either very few objects or so many objects that they could only make a wild guess.”⁷⁷ The reciprocal connection of a highly uncertain individual who seeks to reduce their uncertainty by joining a forceful and extreme group can pose a societal problem, as it can lead toward the radicalization of uncertain individuals.

According to UIT, religious zealotry and extremism can be explained as an outcome of the need to reduce feelings of self-uncertainty by identifying with a fundamentalist religious group.⁷⁸ UIT posits that religions are “a group phenomenon that specify beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors,” therefore they are a conducive way for an uncertain individual to decrease their uncertainty by joining.⁷⁹ Two studies involving 50 participants,

⁷³ Hogg and Adelman, 440.

⁷⁴ Hogg and Adelman, 441.

⁷⁵ Hogg and Adelman, 441.

⁷⁶ Hogg, “From Uncertainty to Extremism,” 339.

⁷⁷ Hogg, 340.

⁷⁸ 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* 14, no. 1 (February 2010): 72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309349692>.

⁷⁹ Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg, 73.

conducted by Michael Inzlicht et al., and an Internet study with 1,529 participants and a laboratory experiment with 151 people taking part in it, conducted by Kees van den Bos, Jitse van Ameijde, and Hein van Gorp have showed that people turn to religion when feeling uncertain, as well as that religion can decrease their feelings of uncertainty.⁸⁰ Most religious groups are not extremist in their beliefs, values they propagate, and how they are practiced or structured, but they can become extremist when their followers are uncertain about some aspects of themselves and their role in society and are therefore “prepared to go to great lengths to protect and promote”⁸¹ their crucial, religious identity, which is providing them with uncertainty reduction.

UIT also stipulates that orthodox religious views are more probable when religiousness and uncertainty are elevated.⁸² The structure of religions favors authoritarian leadership and encourages unquestioning obedience, which are favorable conditions for moral failure and a pathway for extremism.⁸³ Psychologist Anthony J. Marsella states “that some belief systems are dangerous and pathological for a person, group, or nation.”⁸⁴ Marsella continues on to explain that “true believers” blindly follow their viewpoints, and that this unwavering and uncritical commitment either eliminates or reduces their uncertainty.⁸⁵ Marsella asserts that terrorist groups are unable to tolerate doubt and uncertainty, as the realities they construct for themselves “provide a sense of righteousness and messianic fervor.”⁸⁶ From the viewpoint of UIT, if the terrorist’s uncertainty is high, they will become even more entrenched into their belief system, in an effort to reduce the feelings of uncertainty.

⁸⁰ Michael Inzlicht et al., “Neural Markers of Religious Conviction,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 3 (March 2009): 390, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02305.x>; Kees van den Bos, Jitse van Ameijde, and Hein van Gorp, “On the Psychology of Religion: The Role of Personal Uncertainty in Religious Worldview Defense,” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 4 (December 2006): 337, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2804_6.

⁸¹ Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg, “Religion in the Face of Uncertainty,” 79.

⁸² Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg, 78.

⁸³ Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg, 79.

⁸⁴ Moghaddam and Marsella, *Understanding Terrorism*, 41.

⁸⁵ Moghaddam and Marsella, 42.

⁸⁶ Moghaddam and Marsella, 42.

A. UIT AND SELF-CATEGORIZATION

UIT is similar to the following theory that will be analyzed, the Social Identity Theory (SIT), as it uses processes similar to SIT.⁸⁷ UIT and SIT share a process of self-categorization through which a group member first identifies, and then develops a connection with the group, as well as accentuates the differences from other groups.⁸⁸ UIT propositions that uncertainty reduction is the main motivation behind group identification and behavior.⁸⁹ UIT suggests that uncertainty reduction through group identification can result in extremism because individuals are drawn to coherent, united, and internally structured groups, which are generic characteristics of an extremist group. As Hogg and Adelman state: “feelings of uncertainty ... (1) strengthen identification with highly entitative or extreme groups, (2) enhance intentions to behave in more extreme group-serving ways and to support extreme measures to protect and promote one’s group.”⁹⁰ Because of these traits of extremist and radical groups, they can provide a strong and clearly defined sense of self to someone who feels uncertain about themselves and what is their role in the society.⁹¹

In addition to self-categorization being a mutual element between UIT and SIT, UIT also recognizes the ingroup-outgroup bias, which is a key component of SIT.⁹² UIT explains that group members “share the same prototype of ‘us’, and share the same prototype of ‘them’,”⁹³ but leaves certain aspects of how a person self-categorizes into a group unanswered. UIT posits that group members arrive to ingroup-outgroup distinction and bias via self-categorizing into a group, and states that uncertainty is the motivation for

⁸⁷ Choi and Hogg, “Self-Uncertainty and Group Identification,” 484.

⁸⁸ Choi and Hogg, 485.

⁸⁹ Choi and Hogg, 484.

⁹⁰ Hogg and Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” September 2013, 449–50.

⁹¹ Hogg and Adelman, 449.

⁹² Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz, eds., *Organizational Identity: A Reader*, Oxford Management Readers (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 56.

⁹³ Michael A. Hogg, “Uncertain Self in a Changing World: A Foundation for Radicalisation, Populism, and Autocratic Leadership,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 32, no. 2 (July 3, 2021): 243, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2020.1827628>.

self-categorization.⁹⁴ Additionally, UIT states that “the more uncertain people are the more likely they are to identify ... with a self-inclusive social category,”⁹⁵ e.g., their nation. Given that UIT claims that extremist groups are particularly appealing to uncertain individuals, as a means of reducing their uncertainty, the notion that people will self-categorize with a self-inclusive category raises a question of how self-inclusive an extremist group is to an individual who has no prior connection to extremism. Additionally, UIT does not explain why an uncertain individual would choose to self-categorize or identify with an extremist group as opposed to a more usual social group, if the “common” social group is able to offer the same level of uncertainty reduction.

UIT offers a partial explanation for why an extremist group that is not self-inclusive for an individual would be appealing for self-categorizing by claiming that extremist groups can be especially attractive for uncertainty reduction because of their homogeneity, common goals, and rigidity in ideology and authority.⁹⁶ However, the attraction of extremist groups does not provide an explanation as to why an individual would choose an extremist group as opposed to a socially positive group that can provide the same level of uncertainty reduction. Moreover, UIT imposes a limitation for highly rigid and structured groups when it comes to uncertainty reduction, by stating “that people who identify [with that group] need to believe that the group is welcoming, and that it validates their identity and accepts and includes them as full members.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, Hogg, as the originator of UIT, recognizes that, if individuals do not feel welcome by a group they self-categorize with, that could lead them to feel even more self-uncertainty.⁹⁸ In summary, UIT is not able to completely explain the process of self-categorizing, i.e., identifying with a group, when it comes to extremist groups.

⁹⁴ Hogg, 243.

⁹⁵ Hogg, 243–44.

⁹⁶ Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2022, 101.

⁹⁷ Hogg, “Uncertain Self in a Changing World,” 245.

⁹⁸ Hogg, 245.

B. UIT AND SUPPORT FOR EXTREMIST BEHAVIOR

In support of UIT, Hogg and Adelman offer an example of how uncertainty and membership in a coherent and unified group can result in more support for extremist and violent behavior. Hogg and Adelman list the results of a two-year field study conducted in Israel and the Palestinian territories that included over 1600 participants, both Israeli and Palestinian.⁹⁹ The researchers tested and confirmed that the highest level of support for extremist behavior would occur when uncertainty was high and national identity strong with the participants of the study. One of the findings of the study was that “among Palestinian Muslims support for the use of suicide bombs was ... notably stronger among those who identified strongly as Palestinian and reported higher levels of uncertainty.”¹⁰⁰ Palestinian Muslims from the study indicated they felt self-uncertain due to the social and political conditions in which they lived, i.e., the outcomes of the conflict in the Middle East.¹⁰¹ In a different part of the study, the Israelis reported a higher level of support for the overall usage of military tactics in the conflict (as opposed to other, more moderate options), when they were primed to feel uncertain and also strongly identified as being Israelis.¹⁰² The authors explain that the level of self-uncertainty was primed experimentally by using the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians and the subsequent social and political uncertainty.¹⁰³ The results of the study give a certain real-life support for an UIT anchored explanation of group-based violence.¹⁰⁴ However, Hogg and Adelman state that more field studies are needed to fully confirm their hypothesis, as the results from this research were not equally compelling for both Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Hogg and Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” September 2013, 443.

¹⁰⁰ Hogg and Adelman, 444.

¹⁰¹ Michael A. Hogg and Janice Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership: Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (September 2013): 443–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12023>.

¹⁰² Hogg and Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” September 2013, 444.

¹⁰³ Hogg and Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” September 2013, 443–44.

¹⁰⁴ Hogg and Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” September 2013, 444.

¹⁰⁵ Hogg and Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” September 2013, 445.

A study with a student population in Australia has also showed support for an UIT premise, that when individuals feel uncertain, they tend to identify with a radical group and show intent to engage in radical behavior. Psychologists Hogg, Christie Meehan, and Jayne Farquharson conducted a study with 82 students in Queensland, in which they tested the propensity of uncertain individuals to radicalize through being an active member of a radical group.¹⁰⁶ In the explanation of the study, Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson state and provide evidence that the students who took part in the study generally prefer moderate over radical groups.¹⁰⁷ The researchers find that when the students were primed to feel highly uncertain and felt that their values and interests are under threat, they identified more strongly with a radical group.¹⁰⁸ Students' uncertainty was manipulated by showing them a video of other students expressing either low or high levels of uncertainty about their ability to pay tuition. This type of uncertainty manipulation was selected as the study itself was centered around the students' behavior when faced with the prospect of elevated tuition costs.¹⁰⁹ The second outcome from the study found that the students identified with a moderate group when uncertainty was not elevated and considered, and their values were placed under threat.¹¹⁰ On the basis of their findings, Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson suggest that the combination of self-uncertainty and threat can lead people to become extremists, terrorists, and suicide bombers.¹¹¹

It has been ascertained that the concept of personal uncertainty has a role in radicalization, alongside other psychological elements. Through conducting a study with 131 young nonradical Muslims in the Netherlands, psychologists Bertjan Doosje, Annemarie Loseman, and Kees van der Bos were able to find a causal relationship between

¹⁰⁶ Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson, "The Solace of Radicalism," 1062–63.

¹⁰⁷ Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson, 1062–63.

¹⁰⁸ Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson, 1065.

¹⁰⁹ Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson, 1063.

¹¹⁰ Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson, 1065.

¹¹¹ Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson, 1065.

personal uncertainty and radicalization.¹¹² The researchers identify personal uncertainty as one of three driving factors of radicalization, or the process of adopting a radical belief system, alongside injustice and different groups perceiving each other as a threat.¹¹³ Personal uncertainty of the participants of the study was measured by Victoria Greco and Derek Roger's Uncertainty Response Scale (URS), which "measures emotional responses as a consequence of uncertainty,"¹¹⁴ and includes items such as: "I get worried when things are changing" and "Uncertainty frightens me".¹¹⁵ Doosje, Loseman, and van der Bos explain that the radical belief consists of four elements: "perceived illegitimacy of authorities,"¹¹⁶ "perceived in-group superiority... perceived distance to other people ... and perceived societal disconnectedness."¹¹⁷ The study finds that the combination of these four elements, i.e., having a radical belief system is a predictor of an individual's intention to engage in violence.¹¹⁸ Additionally, the study shows that the three driving factors of radicalization, one of which is personal uncertainty are "a good set of predictors of a radical belief system."¹¹⁹ Finally, the researchers explicate that the drivers of radicalization, including personal uncertainty, can only facilitate the embracement of a radical belief system, i.e., experiencing personal uncertainty can make someone vulnerable to radicalization, but cannot necessarily predict one's propensity to commit a terrorist act.¹²⁰

¹¹² Bertjan Doosje, Annemarie Loseman, and Kees van den Bos, "Determinants of Radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands: Personal Uncertainty, Perceived Injustice, and Perceived Group Threat: Determinants of Radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands," *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (September 2013): 586, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12030>.

¹¹³ Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, 589.

¹¹⁴ Veronica Greco and Derek Roger, "Uncertainty, Stress, and Health," *Personality and Individual Differences* 34, no. 6 (April 2003): 1058, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869\(02\)00091-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(02)00091-0).

¹¹⁵ Greco and Roger, 1058.

¹¹⁶ Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, "Determinants of Radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands," 587.

¹¹⁷ Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, 588.

¹¹⁸ Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, 597.

¹¹⁹ Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, 598.

¹²⁰ Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, 599.

C. LEADERSHIP UNDER UIT

It is assumed and confirmed that group leaders have a pivotal role because they provide the members of the group with direction and represent them. Following this line of thought, it has been established that groups prefer to have a prototypical group leader, one who embodies and emulates the representative features of the group.¹²¹ However, UIT asserts that, because of feelings of uncertainty, the preference for a prototypical group leader is weakened, as feelings of uncertainty can motivate people to support any type of a leader, regardless of their prototypical or non-prototypical traits.¹²² Additionally, UIT suggests that because the group members are self-uncertain, they desire dependable information about their group's identity, which puts leaders in a position to be especially influential.¹²³ Subsequently, leaders in such position might take on an autocratic role, or even "a particular personality constellation, the Dark Triad, [a type of] autocratic, toxic and dysfunctional leadership."¹²⁴ Furthermore, Hogg purports that self-uncertain individuals favor populist leaders who endorse conspiracy theories and issues that threaten the existence of groups, therefore justifying violence toward the outgroup.¹²⁵

UIT and SIT have been used together to study people's preferences for leadership in times of uncertainty.¹²⁶ SIT posits that, when people identify intensely with their group, they support an effective leader, who has the ability to "embody and fit the group's prototypical properties."¹²⁷ UIT takes this notion a step further, and claims that under uncertainty, people endorse a more autocratic leader, as that style of leadership is more

¹²¹ Joseph A. Wagoner and Michael A. Hogg, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," in *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, ed. Virgil Zeigler-Hill and Todd K. Shackelford (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 6, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_1195-1.

¹²² Wagoner and Hogg, 6.

¹²³ Hogg, "Uncertain Self in a Changing World," 255.

¹²⁴ Hogg, 256.

¹²⁵ Hogg, 258.

¹²⁶ David E. Rast, Michael A. Hogg, and Steffen R. Giessner, "Self-Uncertainty and Support for Autocratic Leadership," *Self and Identity* 12, no. 6 (November 2013): 635, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2012.718864>.

¹²⁷ Rast, Hogg, and Giessner, 637.

effective in reducing uncertainty, i.e., it provides “a clear [and] unambiguous”¹²⁸ example for the group members. In a study done with 93 women and 122 men in the United Kingdom, David E. Rast III, Hogg, and Steffen R. Giessner tested how self-uncertainty influences people’s preferences for leadership styles: autocratic or not.¹²⁹ The findings of the study supported the UIT claim about more support for an autocratic leader when uncertainty within the group members is present.¹³⁰ It was also found that uncertainty increased “trust in an autocratic leader and weakened support for and trust in a non-autocratic leader; under high uncertainty the more autocratic the leader the more strongly he or she was supported and trusted, and vice versa under low uncertainty.”¹³¹ This research suggests that autocratic leaders can gain more support by manipulating the level of uncertainty their followers are experiencing, i.e., if the leader introduces a threat that induces uncertainty with the followers, it is more likely the followers will support the leader, even though he acts in an autocratic manner.

Leaders of extremist groups are especially important for society, as the group they are heading has a greater potential to commit violence than a non-extremist group. Psychologist Viviane Seyranian describes extremist leaders (e.g., Hitler, Osama bin Laden, Stalin) as “tyrannical and ... employ [ing] deception, manipulation, dominance, control, or any means available to achieve their ends.”¹³² Seyranian agrees with UIT’s premise that feeling uncertain amplifies an individual’s tendency to join extremist groups, i.e., having a larger likelihood to be exposed to extremist leadership.¹³³ Seyranian continues to explain that members of extremist groups have a common social identity, usually framed by the leader, which she supports with examples from the United Kingdom and Congo.¹³⁴ In a

¹²⁸ Rast, Hogg, and Giessner, 638.

¹²⁹ Rast, Hogg, and Giessner, 639.

¹³⁰ Rast, Hogg, and Giessner, 644.

¹³¹ Rast, Hogg, and Giessner, 644.

¹³² Viviane Seyranian, “Constructing Extremism: Uncertainty Provocation and Reduction by Extremist Leaders,” in *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*, ed. Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2011), 229, 240, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444344073.ch14>.

¹³³ Seyranian, 230.

¹³⁴ Seyranian, 232.

connection to SIT, Seyranian states that extremist leaders, among other issues, use a perceived or realistic threat from an outgroup and derogation of the outgroup to construct an extremist social identity for the ingroup.¹³⁵ However, as a difference from SIT, she claims that threat from the outgroup produces a state of a higher uncertainty for the ingroup members, causing them to be more inclined toward following an extremist leader.¹³⁶ To illustrate the social identity construction by an extremist leader, Seyranian uses the example of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. The Hutu, led by an extremist leader, derogated the outgroup (i.e., the Tutsi) to a level where the ingroup did not think of the outgroup as being deserving to be treated like human beings.¹³⁷ In her work, Seyranian does not offer studies that analyze uncertainty and social identity construction within an extremist group, therefore she only provides a conceptual warning about the dangers of extremists leaders in connection to uncertainty.

An example of a leader's influence on its group by manipulating feelings of uncertainty has been examined in a study with the Hindu minority in India. Sucharita Belavadi and Michael A. Hogg conducted a study with 163 Hindus, who represent a minority in India, against a majority that is Muslim, i.e., the Hindus are an ingroup, while Muslims are the outgroup.¹³⁸ Belavadi and Hogg explore, while postulating their study with SIT and UIT, how a leader can gain more support from his followers or group members, in conditions when the group members are uncertain, by evoking collective victimhood narratives.¹³⁹ Researchers postulate that the ingroup feels uncertain when an outgroup is seen as more vital, i.e., that the status of the identity of the ingroup is "under threat of dwindling in status and numbers."¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, the researchers posit that victimhood narratives, presented and accentuated by a group's leader, unify the ingroup

¹³⁵ Seyranian, 236.

¹³⁶ Seyranian, 237.

¹³⁷ Seyranian, "Constructing Extremism."

¹³⁸ Sucharita Belavadi and Michael A. Hogg, "If They Rise, Will We Fall? Social Identity Uncertainty and Preference for Collective Victimhood Rhetoric," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, February 3, 2023, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12964>.

¹³⁹ Belavadi and Hogg, 2.

¹⁴⁰ Belavadi and Hogg, 2.

against the outgroup because of the shared suffering, as well as rally more support for the leader.¹⁴¹ The study's findings confirm the researchers' expectations, and find that by evoking the victimhood narratives, the leader is able to diminish the feelings of uncertainty within the group.¹⁴² One study is not enough to conclusively establish a causal connection between ingroup uncertainty and increased support for a leader who utilized victimhood narratives, therefore more related studies are needed. Additionally, it would be beneficial to examine the finding that the support for the leader diminished when tolerance and equality between groups was talked about.¹⁴³

D. UIT AND SIGNIFICANCE QUEST THEORY

Significance quest theory (SQT) includes elements of UIT, i.e., the need to seek certainty, to explain the process of radicalization.¹⁴⁴ Psychologist David Webber et al. conducted a series of four studies, where two studies included members of the Islamic militant Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) from the Philippines and a terrorist group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from Sri Lanka, to test if the loss of personal significance, which causes uncertainty, can lead to extremist behavior.¹⁴⁵ As explained by Webber et al., SQT describes that radicalization frequently begins with an event through which a person loses their personal significance, therefore triggering the quest for significance.¹⁴⁶ Researchers explain further that significance can be lost through a number of catalysts, such as humiliation, shame, or dishonor.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, SQT posits that, when someone's personal significance is reduced, this generates self-uncertainty, which, in turn, activates the need for cognitive closure, defined as "a desire for a quick and decisive answer, and an

¹⁴¹ Belavadi and Hogg, 3.

¹⁴² Belavadi and Hogg, 6.

¹⁴³ Belavadi and Hogg, 6.

¹⁴⁴ David Webber et al., "The Road to Extremism: Field and Experimental Evidence That Significance Loss-Induced Need for Closure Fosters Radicalization.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, no. 2 (February 2018): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000111>.

¹⁴⁵ Webber et al., 272.

¹⁴⁶ Webber et al., 271.

¹⁴⁷ Webber et al., 271.

aversion to ambiguity.”¹⁴⁸ More succinctly, uncertainty is an undesirable feeling, and people are motivated to seek clarity.

SQT holds that extreme behaviors are “seen as a means to gaining or restoring an individuals’ sense of personal significance, importance of effectiveness,”¹⁴⁹ i.e., that people can reestablish their sense of self-worth by engaging in extremist behavior. Webber et al. assert that throughout the four studies that included 74 ASG and 237 LTTE members, as well as two control studies with several hundred American students, they found that “feelings of insignificance were related to an increased need for cognitive closure,”¹⁵⁰ while also connecting the need for closure with a heightened extremist attitude. Looking at inversely, it can be stated that the extremist beliefs and behaviors offer significance restoration and sense of certainty to individuals who engage in extremist behavior, as such attitudes and behaviors leave very little room for doubt.¹⁵¹

Extremism and terrorism of any prefix is rigid in its definitions of what matters and what does not, and in what way members of an extremist or terrorist group should behave. Because of these aspects of extremism and terrorism, Webber et al. suggest that the results of their studies could have relevance for deradicalization. In more detail, Webber et al. recommend that reducing a person’s uncertainty and increasing their level of significance could reduce the appeal of extremism.¹⁵² However, the researchers offer no details on how to accomplish their recommendation, aside from stating that offering “alternative, certainty-providing ideologies that oppose violence rather than condone it.”¹⁵³

A previously introduced mechanism from SQT, need for cognitive closure, has been utilized independently from SQT in explaining how people who feel threatened by terrorism decrease their uncertainty, which appears as a reaction to a terrorism threat.

¹⁴⁸ Webber et al., 272.

¹⁴⁹ Webber et al., 271.

¹⁵⁰ Webber et al., 280.

¹⁵¹ Webber et al., 281.

¹⁵² Webber et al., 282.

¹⁵³ Webber et al., 282.

Furthermore, it has been established that because of uncertainty people feel due to a terrorism threat, they are aspiring toward stability and decisiveness (cognitive closure).¹⁵⁴ Edward Orehek et al. conducted several studies that examined the connection between the threat of terrorism and the need for closure, or, “favoring actions to restore certainty ... for the ingroup.”¹⁵⁵ In a study done with 110 elderly people in the Netherlands, the researchers tested whether the insecurity the participants felt because of the number of Muslims in their neighborhood, resulted in a need for closure.¹⁵⁶ The need for closure was measured with the participants indicating how they feel on a scale that contains six items, and had a five-point range, in which some of the items were: “I don’t like situations that are uncertain” and “I feel uncomfortable when someone’s meaning or intention is unclear to me.”¹⁵⁷ The researchers explain that the larger the percentage of Muslims in the neighborhood, the more uncertain the elderly people felt, as they associated Muslims with the threat of terrorism. The higher the level of uncertainty the elderly people felt, the more prominent was their need for closure.¹⁵⁸ The participants of the study identified with their nation, i.e., they saw themselves as Dutch, which was their ingroup, and perceived the Muslims, as the outgroup, as a threat.¹⁵⁹ While the researchers elaborate on why and how the participants of the study associated Muslims in their neighborhoods with terrorism, the results appear to show a correlation to terrorism, and not a full equivalent of a terrorism threat.

The research done by Orehek et al. goes beyond establishing that the need for uncertainty reduction, a result of the fear from terrorism, leads to cognitive closure. They have also examined the relationship between uncertainty because of terrorism threat and support for the severity level of counterterrorism policies.¹⁶⁰ In a study with 102 American

¹⁵⁴ Edward Orehek et al., “Need for Closure and the Social Response to Terrorism,” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 32, no. 4 (November 18, 2010): 280, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2010.519196>.

¹⁵⁵ Orehek et al., 281.

¹⁵⁶ Orehek et al., 282.

¹⁵⁷ Orehek et al., 282.

¹⁵⁸ Orehek et al., 282.

¹⁵⁹ Orehek et al., 282.

¹⁶⁰ Orehek et al., 285.

students done during the two weeks after the London Transit Bombing in July 2005, the findings displayed that the students favored harsher counterterrorism policies while also displaying a need for closure. The need for closure was a result of living in uncertain times, therefore “those high on a need for closure are motivated to support policies that can promise to deliver closure.”¹⁶¹ Need for closure was measured by the answers students gave on six-point scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) that contained 14 items, in which some of the statements were: “In case of uncertainty, I prefer to make an immediate decision, whatever it may be” and “Any solution to a problem is better than remaining in a state of uncertainty.”¹⁶² As a result of the study, Orehek et al. postulate that terrorists could expect a harsher reaction from the political leadership of a country within which they conduct their attack, because the government of that country will want to give its citizens what they want, i.e., a more punitive counterterrorism approach.¹⁶³ However, excessively harsh counterterrorism policies, an overreaction of the government, is one of the terrorists’ goals, as that provides them with an excuse for more terrorist attacks through which they “defend” their cause and themselves.

E. SIGNIFICANCE QUEST THEORY WITHOUT THE UNCERTAINTY ELEMENT

It has been postulated that radicalization occurs because of a motivational shift, where the quest for significance is the motivational force that leads an individual toward radicalization. Kruglanski et al. present the case that significance quest is triggered by significance deprivation, often caused by humiliation.¹⁶⁴ The researchers support their claim with examples of Palestinian and Chechen women who volunteered for martyrdom after suffering humiliation or stigmatization.¹⁶⁵ Information obtained by journalist Anne Nivat, who interviewed the mother of a Chechen woman who martyred herself supports

¹⁶¹ Orehek et al., 286.

¹⁶² Orehek et al., 286.

¹⁶³ Orehek et al., 288.

¹⁶⁴ Arie W. Kruglanski et al., “To the Fringe and Back: Violent Extremism and the Psychology of Deviance,” *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (April 2017): 221, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000091>.

¹⁶⁵ Kruglanski et al., 222.

the claim, as the mother “said her daughter was driven by ‘despair’ and a quest in significance in life.”¹⁶⁶ At the same time, Kruglanski et al. state that “the quest for significance does not necessarily promote violence as the means of choice,”¹⁶⁷ and posit that there are also moderate means through which people can achieve their desired level of significance, like art and business. Nevertheless, the explanation by Kruglanski et al. maintains that violence can be a particularly appealing way of achieving significance, and list school shootings, ideological extremists in the U.S., and suicide attackers as examples of situations where the perpetrators have been attempting to gain significance by conducting violent acts.¹⁶⁸ The researchers do not comment on the ineffectiveness of a self-sacrificing quest for significance in some cases of suicide attackers and school shooters, i.e., when they are killed during or after the attack, which also ends their quest for significance. However, Kruglanski et al. state that school shootings are often motivated by the perpetrator’s rejection from society, while the violence level in a suicide attack is associated with the level of the attacker’s motivation to gain significance.¹⁶⁹ Additionally, the researchers claim that when a person experiencing significance loss associates themselves with an ideology, that can result in extremist action, as the ideology provides legitimacy for pursuing a violent course of action.¹⁷⁰

The state of personal insignificance, and subsequently the quest for significance, is identified as a common denominator for domestic violent extremism: from far left and right extremists to Islamic extremists. Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree, and Arie Kruglanski found that loss of significance can be a predictor of the use of violence and detected that the following threats lead to personal insignificance: economic failure, social detachment, and abusive experiences.¹⁷¹ Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski analyzed the data on 1496

¹⁶⁶ Feddes et al., *Psychological Perspectives on Radicalization*, 67.

¹⁶⁷ Kruglanski et al., “To the Fringe and Back,” 222.

¹⁶⁸ Kruglanski et al., 223.

¹⁶⁹ Kruglanski et al., 223.

¹⁷⁰ Kruglanski et al., 223.

¹⁷¹ Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree, and Arie Kruglanski, “Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism: The Case of Domestic Radicalization: Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism,” *Political Psychology* 38, no. 5 (October 2017): 827, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12376>.

ideologically motivated domestic extremists from the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS), collected and stored by the START Center (National Center for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism) at the University of Maryland.¹⁷² The multivariate analysis the researchers conducted showed that “most of the indicators of loss of significance were positively related to the probability of political violence.”¹⁷³ At the same time, the researchers found that the loss of significance alone is not an accurate predictor of becoming a violent extremist, and that an ideological justification for the use of violence has to exist in order for the person to consider engaging in extremist actions.¹⁷⁴

Significance quest theory also offers an explanation for a differentiation between collective and individual significance quest when it comes to violent extremism, and the influence of a social context. Katarzyna Jasko et al. posit that both individual and collective significance quest are predictors of violent extremism.¹⁷⁵ Jasko et al. investigated the effect of social contexts on both individual and collective quest for significance within radical and terrorist organizations, and found differences in how violent extremists take part in significance quest as individuals and in a group setting.¹⁷⁶ Jasko et al. conducted four studies comparing radical and less radical groups of the same country: 335 members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Tamil community members who were never a member of LTTE; 260 Moroccans from Casablanca (less radical sample) and Tetouan (radical sample); and 379 moderate, Islamist, and Jihadi population from Indonesia.¹⁷⁷ The researchers tested the relationship between individual and collective

¹⁷² Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski, 819.

¹⁷³ Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski, 827.

¹⁷⁴ Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski, 827.

¹⁷⁵ Katarzyna Jasko et al., “Social Context Moderates the Effects of Quest for Significance on Violent Extremism.,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 118, no. 6 (June 2020): 1169, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000198>.

¹⁷⁶ Jasko et al., 1165.

¹⁷⁷ Jasko et al., 1169, 1172, 1174.

significance quest, ideological and violent extremism, and the social context within which the tested individuals and groups are living.¹⁷⁸

Throughout all four studies the researchers were able to confirm that social contexts and quest for significance correlate regarding violent extremism. In three of the four studies, the researchers found that in more radicalized social contexts the collective significance quest was a higher “predictor of violent extremism than in less radicalized contexts.”¹⁷⁹ Put more succinctly, it was the group’s grievance that was fueling political violence, not the individual’s. Jasko et al. theorize that, because of this finding, it is the social context (the group’s influence) that is driving the violence, and not the view of the individual, i.e., the group prescribes the behavior of the group member.¹⁸⁰ Given the lack of unified results in all four studies, the research provides some support for a higher relevance of collective significance quest within a radicalized social context, but more field studies with violent extremists in different social contexts are needed to confirm the superior importance of a collective significance quest over the individual one when it comes to predicting ideologically motivated violence.

While UIT has been able to prove, to some extent, the role of personal uncertainty in a radicalization process, it appears that SQT research has been able to provide more empirical evidence showing significance quest as a motivational factor that can lead to violent extremism. Additionally, UIT has not been able to fully explain some of the mechanisms and notions it uses in its explanations of radicalization under UIT, like self-categorization. UIT lacks clarity on why uncertain people choose to join extremist groups, as it claims, as opposed to pro-social, “average” groups that can offer the same level of uncertainty reduction. SQT elaborates its motivational basis for significance quest in a more comprehensive manner, offering examples from a range of issues that can trigger a quest for significance, or rather, significance loss. Furthermore, SQT researchers were able to confirm their assertions with empirical studies with former extremists and current

¹⁷⁸ Jasko et al., 1168.

¹⁷⁹ Jasko et al., 1180.

¹⁸⁰ Jasko et al., 1180.

members of extremist groups. However, neither theory offers a complete explanation of the radicalization process, which is also recognized by both. Each theory is analyzing a specific motivational factor that can lead to radicalization, but are not an encompassing theory of radicalization, rather they are a social psychological theory that is assessing one psychological aspect of a pathway to ideological violence.

III. SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

This chapter describes the main building blocks of social identity theory (SIT), its expansion over the course of the last five decades, and its relevance for the analysis of the pathways to violence between groups. The theoretical framework SIT offers for explaining ingroup-outgroup dynamics and propensity for conflicts between groups is accompanied with empirical evidence from psychological studies. Furthermore, this chapters elucidates how SIT regards the influence of religion on personal and social identity, and what is the connection between a religious social identity and extremist and terrorist ideology and behavior. Additionally, this chapter investigates related psychological frameworks that uses SIT as a foundation in order to explain other pathways to violent behavior, which incorporate religion as an element of radicalization. This chapter also links UIT and SIT through examining the notion of self-categorization as it is explained within SIT, and continues with an analysis of the self-categorization theory, on off-shoot of SIT and its self-categorization mechanism. The final part of the chapter explores other modalities of SIT, its adaptations and varieties, and associated theories that borrow from SIT to build their own radicalization pathways.

SIT explains social dynamics between groups, including how the groups engage in competition and conflict with each other, based on the personal and social identity of group members. While SIT can be used to study wars, social movements, or bullying in school, its applicability is also important for studying extremism and terrorism. SIT describes the relationship between groups through the “ingroup-outgroup” distinction. Henri Tajfel and John Turner “originally developed [SIT] to explain intergroup conflict and social change”¹⁸¹ in the 1970s. SIT’s main premise states that the members of the group seek to defend and boost the group’s positivity so their self-esteem is also boosted and

¹⁸¹ Scott A. Reid and Michael A. Hogg, “Uncertainty Reduction, Self-Enhancement, and Ingroup Identification,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 31, no. 6 (June 2005): 805, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271708>.

protected.¹⁸² In essence, SIT claims that the group to which an individual belongs provides them a definition of self.¹⁸³ As the individual identifies with the group, all action taken against the group by outside factors is perceived as action taken against the individual, and because of this the individual is primed to defend the group as much as he or she would be willing to defend him or herself. Additionally, everyone not belonging to the group are discriminated against and seen as competitors, i.e., the group both describes and prescribes the behavior of the members.¹⁸⁴ Members of the group are highly motivated to maintain or enhance the salience of their group, as that, in turn, increases the salience of their own identity, i.e., they frame their behavior through ingroup favoritism and outgroup bias.¹⁸⁵

In their original work, where SIT was framed, Tajfel and Turner state that purely the perception of belonging to a group is sufficient to generate discrimination in favor of the ingroup.¹⁸⁶ During 1970 and 1971 Tajfel conducted various experiments with children and adults, who were randomly assigned membership in groups, and then made decisions to award money to others subjects in the experiment. The “basic and highly reliable finding”¹⁸⁷ from the experiments was that the simple fact that the subjects belonging to different groups was enough for them to develop ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination. As Tajfel and Turner explain, group members have a desire to maintain a positive social identity, which is found through a comparison with an equivalent group, but the members can feel motivated to leave the group, or make it more positively distinct, if they are not satisfied with their social identity. By either leaving the group or striving to make the group’s identity positive they can acquire the positive social identity they

¹⁸² Neil Ferguson, Reeshma Haji, and Shelley McKeown, eds., *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory: Contemporary Global Perspectives*, 1st ed. 2016, Peace Psychology Book Series (Cham: Springer International Publishing : Imprint: Springer, 2016), 19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-29869-6>.

¹⁸³ Stephan Desrochers, Jeanine Andreassi, and Cynthia Thompson, “Identity Theory,” *WCOB Faculty Publications*, no. Paper 255 (August 14, 2002): 1–2, http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/wcob_fac/255.

¹⁸⁴ Hogg, Terry, and White, “A Tale of Two Theories,” 259–60.

¹⁸⁵ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 20.

¹⁸⁶ Hatch and Schultz, *Organizational Identity*, 56.

¹⁸⁷ Hatch and Schultz, 57.

want.¹⁸⁸ Tajfel's and Turner's assertion provide two possible outcomes when the salience of the group is undermined: the members will either leave the group or engage in activities to restore the group's identity salience.

While group members are motivated to leave the group if they are not satisfied with the social identity the group is providing them with, this action seems to be unlikely if the group is already in conflict with an opposing group. An analysis of SIT done by Rupert Brown from the University of Kent, posits that a group membership is especially salient during a conflict, therefore, leaving the group during that time is "both psychologically and practically implausible."¹⁸⁹ Since leaving a group during a conflict is improbable due to the elevated salience of the social/group identity of the group members, Brown suggests that identity change is "the most promising direction for policy-makers to take"¹⁹⁰ in order to end the conflict. Additionally, sometimes there can be physical barriers to leaving a group and joining another, such as race, language, and ethnicity. To be successful, identity change should include social categories that are intersecting with the one that is most relevant.¹⁹¹ Brown's analysis suggests that SIT provides a good understanding of group's actions when engaging in destructive and hostile behavior, but also states that the interaction between identity processes and the articulation and propagation of belief systems that allow the ingroup to justify the derogation of the outgroup needs to be analyzed in more detail.¹⁹²

The SIT principle of group members having high self-esteem because of membership in a group, which, in turn, motivates the group members to stay in the group has been established for members of an extremist group. Allard R. Feddes conducted a series of interviews with 13 former right-wing individuals, where he examined the self-

¹⁸⁸ Hatch and Schultz, 60.

¹⁸⁹ Rupert Brown, "Social Identity Theory: Past Achievements, Current Problems and Future Challenges," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 30, no. 6 (November 16, 2000): 768, [https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-0992\(200011/12\)30:6<745::AID-EJSP24>3.0.CO;2-O](https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-0992(200011/12)30:6<745::AID-EJSP24>3.0.CO;2-O).

¹⁹⁰ Brown, 768.

¹⁹¹ Brown, 768.

¹⁹² Brown, 769.

esteem levels of the interviewees prior to being in a right-wing group, during, and after.¹⁹³ The series of interviews indicated that both before and after being in the right-wing group, the levels of self-esteem of the group members “were generally low; [while] during membership self-esteem was high.”¹⁹⁴ Feddes continues to explain that the former right-wing extremists have described that they have reached a very low point in their lives, after they left the group.¹⁹⁵ As SIT postulates, the high self-esteem level the right-wing extremists obtained through the group is a motivational force that causes the group members to remain in the group and resist exiting it. Within the context of deradicalization when dealing with extremist or terrorist groups, the group members’ attachment to the group because of the self-esteem they extract from it, could be particularly difficult to sever.

While SIT provides an explanation for ingroup-outgroup bias, a well-known social experiment done by Muzafer Sharif provides an illustration of an interaction between ingroup-outgroup dynamic when the perception of a common threat is included.¹⁹⁶ Sharif conducted a three-week experiment with 12-year-old boys who were divided into two groups. The two groups competed in sports and games and early in the experiment showed “signs of in-group cohesion and out-group hostility.”¹⁹⁷ In an attempt to reduce hostilities between the groups, the instructors eliminated competitions and provided chances for the groups to meet and interact in a peaceful situation. However, these actions did not reduce the hostilities, rather each such attempt ended in conflict. The only technique that successfully reduced hostilities and resulted in the boys establishing friendly connections between the two groups was an introduction of a common threat.¹⁹⁸ Sharif’s experiment

¹⁹³ Feddes et al., *Psychological Perspectives on Radicalization*, 73.

¹⁹⁴ Feddes et al., 73.

¹⁹⁵ Feddes et al., 73.

¹⁹⁶ Clark R. McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 120–21.

¹⁹⁷ McCauley and Moskalkenko, 121.

¹⁹⁸ McCauley and Moskalkenko, 121.

points to the idea that the only way to reduce ingroup-outgroup discrimination is to introduce a shared threat for both groups.

Through SIT, it has been found that social motives influence ingroup-outgroup biases and discrimination. Shalom H. Schwartz, Naomi Struch, and Wolfgang Bilsky conducted two studies with Israeli and German students, where the students' social motives toward each other were tested through allocation tasks.¹⁹⁹ Researchers choose Israeli and German students because of the complicated relations between Jews and Germans in the past.²⁰⁰ The studies included 120 Israeli students and 117 students from Germany, and specifically tested “whether the usual intergroup biases predicted by social identity theory characterize the relations between”²⁰¹ the groups of students.²⁰² Because of the difficult past between the Jews and Germans, Schwartz, Struch, and Bilsky postulated that the Israeli students would display the ingroup bias toward Germans, and that German students would not express ingroup bias toward the Israeli students, i.e., that their social motives would affect their position toward the other group, which was confirmed by the studies.²⁰³ The students' social motives were expressed through the choices the students made when allocating resources between themselves.²⁰⁴ The researchers explicate that the perception of guilt toward Jews influenced the ingroup and outgroup biases both on the side of the Jews and Germans, when deciding resource allocation in the studies.²⁰⁵

SIT offers a suitable explanation of the interaction between social identities and group behavior and violence, as it was developed for the purpose of understanding intergroup prejudice and discrimination. As explained by Anders Strindberg, SIT has also

¹⁹⁹ Shalom H. Schwartz, Naomi Struch, and Wolfgang Bilsky, “Values and Intergroup Social Motives: A Study of Israeli and German Students,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (September 1990): 185, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2786958>.

²⁰⁰ Schwartz, Struch, and Bilsky, 185.

²⁰¹ Schwartz, Struch, and Bilsky, 185.

²⁰² Schwartz, Struch, and Bilsky, 188.

²⁰³ Schwartz, Struch, and Bilsky, 185.

²⁰⁴ Schwartz, Struch, and Bilsky, 187.

²⁰⁵ Schwartz, Struch, and Bilsky, 195.

resulted in a substantial “body of scholarship on conflict between and within groups.”²⁰⁶ Numerous other researchers also use the SIT mechanism to explain the relationship between individual and group behavior and violence.²⁰⁷ Studies have confirmed the occurrence of political violence in societies where the distinctions between the ingroups and outgroups are substantial. For example, Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman offer the following finding: “Terrorism is most likely to occur in groups and societies that draw sharp distinctions between the ingroup and the outgroup(s) and where outgroups members are dehumanized.”²⁰⁸ Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman support their conclusion with the examples of dehumanization listed by Linda M. Woolf and Michael R. Hulsizer: Armenians living under the Ottoman Empire rule and Tutsis in Rwanda, who “were portrayed as being in league with hostile, invading enemies thus representing ‘alien’ intruders needing of elimination,”²⁰⁹ as well as Jews in Nazi Germany, who were labelled as parasitic. However, the examples are not in connection to terrorism, but genocide, therefore not supportive of the claim Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman make.

Furthermore, Strindberg describes that the ingroup v. outgroup behavior is to be expected in situations of conflict as tests have confirmed this in both laboratory settings and field studies.²¹⁰ This hypothesis was also (unfortunately) proven during the wars between Chechnya and Russia, where “terrorism has been particularly violent because perceived persecution, collectivism, and religiously promoted ‘us-versus-them’ thinking are all present.”²¹¹ The “demonizing” of the outgroup goes as far as to categorize the members of the outgroup as intrinsically evil, embodiments of everything that is wicked.

²⁰⁶ Anders Strindberg, “Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism” (Sweden: Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2020), 14, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5062--SE>.

²⁰⁷ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*.

²⁰⁸ Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, “Terrorism,” 542.

²⁰⁹ Linda M. Woolf and Michael R. Hulsizer, “Psychosocial Roots of Genocide: Risk, Prevention, and Intervention,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 7, no. 1 (March 2005): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520500045088>.

²¹⁰ Strindberg, “Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism,” 14.

²¹¹ Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, “Terrorism,” 548.

The outgroup members, classified with these attributes, become “beyond salvation” for the members of the ingroup, and because of this, the only solution is to eliminate them.²¹² As a juxtaposition to the aforementioned way of thinking and an example of how ‘us-versus-them’ needs to be present for terrorism to occur, Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman list the example of the conflict between Tibet and China, where the peaceful premise of Buddhism and acceptance of others prevents the Tibetans to act out their grievance through violence.²¹³

SIT has been utilized to examine if violent discriminatory behavior that the ingroup decides to conduct against the outgroup can be predicted. Milan Obaidi et. al examined “whether Muslim group identification and injustice appraisals of Western foreign policy would predict intentions to commit violence on behalf of Muslims, through group-based anger.”²¹⁴ Researchers conducted four studies with 954 Muslims living in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and 366 Muslims living in 20 Western countries to ascertain whether there is a difference in the predictors of violent Islamists extremism for the Muslims living in countries experiencing Western military interventions or Muslims in countries without such experiences.²¹⁵ The studies revealed that simply identifying as a Muslim (i.e., a disadvantaged group) does not predict violent behavior, but when the identification as a Muslim is combined with group-based anger and feeling of injustice, this combination does indirectly predict violent behavior.²¹⁶ The results from the studies do not differ when it comes to the location of disadvantaged group (Muslims) in the world: both the Muslims from Pakistan and Afghanistan, and from Western countries, showed intention to engage in violent behavior when they perceived injustice against them and felt angered.²¹⁷ The findings from the study are in line with Tajfel’s and Turner’s premise about SIT, where the

²¹² McCauley and Moskalkenko, *Friction*, 165.

²¹³ Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman, “Terrorism,” 547.

²¹⁴ Milan Obaidi et al., “The Role of Muslim Identity in Predicting Violent Behavioural Intentions to Defend Muslims,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 23, no. 8 (2020): 1271, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220920929>.

²¹⁵ Obaidi et al., 1267.

²¹⁶ Obaidi et al., 1276.

²¹⁷ Obaidi et al., 1276.

members of a group are motivated to maintain a positive social identity, i.e., angry and disadvantaged Muslims are willing to defend their social group, and to do so no matter in what society they live in.

A. SIT AND RELIGIOUS SOCIAL IDENTITY

SIT has been extensively used to explain the extraordinary place religion has in the formation of a person's identity, and subsequently, the role of religion in intergroup conflicts. Jeffrey Seul describes the findings of Hans Mol, a sociologist working in the field of religious studies, who "described the chief function of religion as the stabilization of individual and group identity."²¹⁸ Seul elaborates that, while it is important to note that religion is not a cause of a religious conflict, it provides a foundation for the preservation of a positive social identity, while often bolstering the divide between an intergroup identity and competition over resources. As a conflict between different religious groups emerges, the group members on all sides acquire further inspiration and sense of purpose from their religious identities, in addition to other factors that are fueling the conflict.²¹⁹ At the same time, Seul argues that it is possible for religion to be the primary source of conflict, especially in cases where "religion is the only cultural marker that reliably distinguishes"²²⁰ between the belligerent parties. To support his claim, Seul offers an example of the usage of religion during the wars in former Yugoslavia, when the Bosnian Serbs (Orthodox Christians), Croats (Catholics), and Bosniaks (Muslims), primarily distinguished each other on the basis of their religion, making it the root of their conflict.²²¹ In sum, Seul contends that religion has a particular ability to fuel both the individual and the social identity in intergroup conflicts, but has not conducted studies to prove his assertion.²²²

²¹⁸ Seul, "'Ours Is the Way of God'," 558.

²¹⁹ Seul, 564.

²²⁰ Seul, 565.

²²¹ Seul, 565.

²²² Seul, 567.

SIT describes that one's identity stems from the social interaction with the group, and this type of individual-group interaction can be illustrated in the case of Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi, former leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, killed by an U.S. air strike in 2006. McCauley and Moskalenko illustrate the change in al-Zarqawi's identity and behavior, i.e., the rise in importance of his religious social identity, when his mother enrolled him into a religious school in a mosque.²²³ The Islamic radicals from the school influenced al-Zarqawi, who "submitted to the most basic requirements of Islam by beginning to attend sermons and abstaining from alcohol."²²⁴ The establishment of al-Zarqawi's religious identity provided him with a higher purpose, and he channeled his tendency for violent behavior for the purpose of Islamic jihad in Afghanistan.²²⁵ While al-Zarqawi was known as a local thug who had multiple run-ins with the law before his religious indoctrination in the Islamic school, the obtainment of his religious identity gave him a chance to use his violent tendencies for a higher purpose: defending Islam.²²⁶ As al-Zarqawi religious identity was established through the principle of group identity activation, or rather – SIT, he perceived that it was his duty to defend his fellow group members through engaging in jihad, no matter where in the world that might take him.

The interplay of personal and social, religious, identity, which results in radicalization is also used for explaining the radicalization process of the members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), a radical Islamist group from Great Britain.²²⁷ Dr. Farhaan Wali from the University of Bangor conducted a 12-month study with four members of HT and 22 novices of the group by attending three Halaqah's (private study circles of the group), and conducting interviews with Farid Kassim and Omar Bakri Muhammad, who founded the HT's British affiliate in 1980s.²²⁸ During Dr. Wali's observation of the HT's radicalization

²²³ McCauley and Moskalenko, *Friction*, 70.

²²⁴ McCauley and Moskalenko, 70.

²²⁵ McCauley and Moskalenko, 70–71.

²²⁶ McCauley and Moskalenko, 70.

²²⁷ Farhaan Wali, "Functionality of Radicalization: A Case Study of Hizb Ut-Tahrir," *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 1 (March 2017): 102, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.10.1.1525>.

²²⁸ Wali, 103, 104.

process, centered around the restructuring of the members' identities "into a single religious perspective, one that appeared to be inspired by a collective group identity," Dr. Wali concluded that the group had an elemental role in radicalization.²²⁹ In fact, Dr. Wali concludes his study of HT and defines the group's radicalization process as a three-phase process, where the last step is the creation of the HT's collective group identity.²³⁰ Dr. Wali's conclusion, as well as the example of Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi's radicalization, show the importance of the fundamentalist religious group's influence on the individual during and after radicalization, and illustrate how the change of the personal identity into a collective one occurs.

Because SIT equates the importance of an individual and social (group) identity, and group members are primed to defend the interests of the group when the group is threatened, Joshua D. Wright asserts that the theory's mechanisms can be useful for counterterrorism efforts.²³¹ Identifying with a religious social group is considered to be on a higher level than identifying with other social groups, while also having a particularly "immense cognitive and emotional value,"²³² therefore especially important for Islamic terrorists. As an outcome of this line of thought, Wright suggests that the actions of Islamic terrorists in the West can be reduced if Western countries limit some of their activities, which might be perceived as a threat, such as depicting the Prophet Muhammad in cartoons.²³³ If the Islamic terrorists would not have a reason to perceive the West as a threat to Islam, i.e., their religious identity, they would not have as much of an incentive to engage in terrorist actions against the West. Additionally, Wright argues that a useful counterterrorism strategy would be the reduction of a group's identity salience.²³⁴ The

²²⁹ Wali, "Post-Radicalisation Identity: Understanding 'Collective Identity' within Radical Islamist Groups," 43, 44.

²³⁰ Wali, 46.

²³¹ Joshua David Wright, "A Social Identity and Social Power Perspective on Terrorism," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 6, no. 3 (September 29, 2015): 77, <https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1184>.

²³² Renate Ysseldyk, Kimberly Matheson, and Hymie Anisman, "Religiosity as Identity: Toward an Understanding of Religion From a Social Identity Perspective," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (February 2010): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309349693>.

²³³ Wright, "A Social Identity and Social Power Perspective on Terrorism," 78.

²³⁴ Wright, 79.

higher the importance of a group identity, the more motivated group members are to protect it. However, Wright indicates that social (group) identity salience cannot be reduced by the group, but by leaders who have social power.²³⁵

SIT has also been labelled as a collective action theory and utilized to build similar social identity models of collective action. Using SIT as a foundation, Martijn van Zomeren, Tom Postmes, and Russell Spears created an “integrative social identity model of collective action”²³⁶ or SIMCA, through which they investigated perceived injustice, social identity, and perceived efficacy as predictors of collective action.²³⁷ Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears conducted a meta-analysis that included 182 articles and encompassed 15,855 participants for perceived injustice, 12,758 for perceived efficacy, and 10,051 for social identity.²³⁸ On the basis of their meta-analysis, the authors asserted that social identity is “unique predictor of collective action,”²³⁹ and that a politicized identity (attached to a politicized group) is a stronger predictor of collective action than a non-politicized identity (attached to a disadvantaged group with a political affiliation).²⁴⁰ Furthermore, the authors discovered that an established social identity can be transformed into a politicized one under the influence of a politicized group, and that the strength of the politicized identity is the key predictor for engaging in collective action.²⁴¹ At the same time, van Zomeren, Postmes, Spears indicated that ingroup vs. outgroup distinction is not sufficient for engaging in collective action, and that other, surrounding factors need to be taken into account. While the authors were not able to clearly delineate the linkage between social identity and collective action taken by an individual on behalf of the group, they

²³⁵ Wright, 79–80.

²³⁶ Martijn van Zomeren, Tom Postmes, and Russell Spears, “Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action: A Quantitative Research Synthesis of Three Socio-Psychological Perspectives,” *Psychological Bulletin* 134, no. 4 (July 2008): 504, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.134.4.504>.

²³⁷ van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, 504.

²³⁸ van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, 513.

²³⁹ van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, 511.

²⁴⁰ van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, 509.

²⁴¹ van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, 524.

revealed that the type of the social identity plays a role in the decision process about taking collective action.

The claim by van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears that a politicized social identity is a greater predictor for engaging in collective action as opposed to a non-politicized one is further expanded on by Whinda Yustisia et al. Yustisia et al. confirm the findings by van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, and posit that a jihadist social identity is a significant predictor for Islamist terrorism.²⁴² Yustisia et al. base this hypothesis on a study done with 66 terrorism detainees in Indonesia, during which their Encapsulate Model of Social Identity in Collective Action (EMSICA) was tested. Researchers explicate that “EMSICA suggests that social identity plays a central role in predicting engagement in collective action because it encapsulates other relevant factors of collective action and, in turn, drives collective action.”²⁴³ Similar to Wright, Yustisia et al. find that threat perception toward a social identity plays an important role in predicting acts of terrorism.²⁴⁴ Additionally, and comparably to van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, as well as Wright, the study with Indonesian terrorism supporters reveals that social identity alone, even a politicized or an Islamist one, cannot be regarded as a reliable sole predictor for engaging in violent collective action on the behalf of the group. In all the studies listed, the authors have stated that other factors that might facilitate engaging in collective violent action for the group should be also taken into consideration, such as: perceived injustices, group efficacy, and threat perception.²⁴⁵

SIT-based research has also pointed out that, when a group’s social identity is threatened, ingroup-outgroup behavior can result in an unjust retaliation toward an

²⁴² Whinda Yustisia et al., “An Investigation of an Expanded Encapsulate Model of Social Identity in Collective Action (EMSICA) Including Perception of Threat and Intergroup Contact to Understand Support for Islamist Terrorism in Indonesia,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 23, no. 1 (March 2020): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12372>.

²⁴³ Yustisia et al., 30.

²⁴⁴ Yustisia et al., 37.

²⁴⁵ van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, “Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action,” 504; Yustisia et al., “An Investigation of an Expanded Encapsulate Model of Social Identity in Collective Action (EMSICA) Including Perception of Threat and Intergroup Contact to Understand Support for Islamist Terrorism in Indonesia,” 29; Wright, “A Social Identity and Social Power Perspective on Terrorism,” 76.

innocent group. By using SIT, Ali Mashuri and Esti Zaduqisti studied the effects of a threat on a Muslim social identity when combined with a belief in conspiracy theories about the perpetrators of terrorism. Mashuri and Zaduqisti conducted a study with 139 Indonesian Muslim students where the results have showed that, when a Muslim social identity is under threat, the ingroup perceives the Western outgroup as mistakenly responsible for terrorism in Indonesia, i.e., the ingroup tends to believe in conspiracy theories.²⁴⁶ The study also calls on the research of Olivier Corneille et al., who also found that under the condition of threat, the ingroup erroneously evaluates the outgroup.²⁴⁷ Mashuri and Zaduqisti explain that the results of the study are opposite to the realistic situation in Indonesia, where “domestic Islamist radical groups”²⁴⁸ are responsible for terrorism in Indonesia. At the same time, the authors indicate that globally known events that have negatively influenced the view of Muslims towards the West, such as disrespecting the Prophet Muhammad and Quran, could have negatively influenced the view of Muslims towards the West and added to the belief that the West is responsible for terrorism in Indonesia.²⁴⁹

Combined with other psychological theories, SIT has been used to provide a comprehensive framework for explaining the emergence and success of the terrorist group Boko Haram. Sociologist Emeka Eugene Dim supports the notion that poverty theory, relative deprivation theory, and SIT explain Boko Haram’s success.²⁵⁰ Dim claims that SIT is able to clarify Boko Haram’s success in recruiting and government’s lack of success in countering its actions, both of which are connected to Boko Haram’s religious and ethnic social identity and the religious and ethnic social identities of the citizens of Nigeria and

²⁴⁶ Ali Mashuri and Esti Zaduqisti, “The Effect of Intergroup Threat and Social Identity Salience on the Belief in Conspiracy Theories over Terrorism in Indonesia: Collective Angst as a Mediator,” *International Journal of Psychological Research* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 29, <https://doi.org/10.21500/20112084.642>.

²⁴⁷ Mashuri and Zaduqisti, 29.

²⁴⁸ Mashuri and Zaduqisti, 30.

²⁴⁹ Mashuri and Zaduqisti, 30.

²⁵⁰ Emeka Eugene Dim, “An Integrated Theoretical Approach to the Persistence of Boko Haram Violent Extremism in Nigeria,” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 12, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15423166.2017.1331746>.

its neighboring countries.²⁵¹ As “religious identity overrides citizenship”²⁵² in Nigeria, the ingroup-outgroup competition between the Muslims and the Christians fuels the violence between them. Consequently, Boko Haram is exploiting and stimulating the competition and the violence between Muslims and Christians by preaching a “pure” form of Islam in which all others who do not share the same belief should be converted or killed.²⁵³ Additionally, Dim finds that the common social ethnic identity of belonging to the Kanuri ethnic group provides Boko Haram with a cross-national reach and success in recruiting, as Kanuri live in Nigeria and neighboring countries. The same fact is undercutting the efforts of the Nigerian military against Boko Haram, as the military also recruits from the Kanuri population. Subsequently, military personnel who are of Kanuri ethnicity are reluctant to fight against Boko Haram, as they view that as fratricide.²⁵⁴ Dim’s SIT-based analysis indicates a problem area for any country experiencing ethnic and religious-based terrorism: identical ethnic and religious identities of the terrorists and the security forces tasked to combat them could be a hinderance to counterterrorism efforts.

Psychiatrists and former CIA case officer, Marc Sageman, when analyzing the process of joining the jihad for over a hundred mujahedin, provides certain validation for the elements of SIT being a part of becoming mujahedin, even though he does not use SIT as a base for his study.²⁵⁵ When addressing the order of importance on what influenced the mujahedin to join the global jihad, he identifies intragroup processes as more important than “common hatred for an outside group.”²⁵⁶ Sageman explains that the ingroup common bonds and the mutual devotion the group members share among themselves play a critical role in facilitating the decision to join the global jihad, and not so much the enmity toward the outgroup.²⁵⁷ Sageman’s account of the process of becoming a mujahedin

²⁵¹ Dim, 43.

²⁵² Dim, 42.

²⁵³ Dim, 42.

²⁵⁴ Dim, 43.

²⁵⁵ “Marc Sageman – Foreign Policy Research Institute,” accessed May 1, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/contributor/marc-sageman/>.

²⁵⁶ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 135.

²⁵⁷ Sageman, 135.

evokes the key premise of SIT, that the members of the group are motivated to enhance the group's positivity so their self-esteem is also heightened.²⁵⁸ Additionally, SIT specifies that the group provides the members with a definition of who they are, while Sageman recognizes the importance of social bonds within the group as a tool that developed the common identity of the group.²⁵⁹ While the analysis of the process of becoming a mujahedin does not exactly follow SIT's framework, it uses certain elements from SIT to provide an explanation of the global jihadi or group's appeal and relevance.

B. SIT AND SELF CATEGORIZATION THEORY

One of SIT's causal mechanisms is social categorization or self-categorization, a cognitive process through which distinct individuals are grouped together. By thinking about themselves as having similar characteristics as other members of the group, individuals create a common or group identity for themselves and create group boundaries for the group they belong to.²⁶⁰ This mechanism grew into a separate social psychology theory, developed by John Turner, co-founder of SIT: the self-categorization theory (SCT). Turner defines SCT through four stages: (1) individuals define themselves as members of a group, (2) group members learn the behaviors appropriate for that group, (3) group members become stereotypical representatives of the group, and (4) behavior of the group members becomes the norm as their membership grows in salience.²⁶¹ As an off-shoot of SIT, SCT is frequently used alongside SIT as complementary explanation for group processes and behavior in violent extremism and terrorism.

SIT and SCT have been utilized to explain the process of identity creation and transformation during radicalization of Islamist extremists. Terrorism researcher Dina Al Raffie explains the radicalization of the Muslim diaspora in Europe through a combination of SIT and SCT. Al Raffie suggests that the core of the radicalization process for the

²⁵⁸ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 19.

²⁵⁹ Desrochers, Andreassi, and Thompson, "Identity Theory," 1–2.

²⁶⁰ Lange, Kruglanski, and Higgins, *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, 381.

²⁶¹ Lange, Kruglanski, and Higgins, 406.

second- and third- generation Muslims in Europe is in an identity crisis caused by friction between a national and a religious identity.²⁶² Al Raffie rationalizes that the second and third generation European Muslims are not self-categorized as traditionally Muslim as their parents are, who were born in the country they emigrated from. Furthermore, the religious identities of the second and third generation Muslims have been formed mostly by the social setting they are surrounded with, as SIT posits.²⁶³ As additionally explained by Al Raffie, radicalization becomes a possibility for a young diaspora Muslim in a European country when the social setting from which they are drawing on to form their social identity includes a closed-off Islamist organization. If a person decides to join an Islamist organization that offers a more radical Islamist view of the world, they can become radicalized as these types of organizations promote strict Islamist norms and values, and “demonize” other, secular groups in a society.²⁶⁴ Al Raffie’s explanation of one possible pathway to violent extremism points to the importance of diversified social surroundings with a multitude of positive choices when self-categorizing yourself in a group.

SIT and SCT have been utilized to challenge the notion that the members of extremist groups are stripped of their personal identity and brainwashed by the group’s social identity, i.e., that the group erases the members’ personality. In a study done with the members of a Turkish Nationalist Action Party, which is known to use violent actions and labelled as extremist by some researchers, Gamze Baray, Tom Postmes, and Jolanda Jetten find that the personal identity of the members is enhanced by the social identity of the party.²⁶⁵ The results of the study point out that the individuality of the party members was not erased by the social identity of the party, but strengthened, which is explained by depersonalization. Depersonalization is a concept used both in SIT and SCT, offered as “an underlying reason for group behaviours such as stereotyping, ethnocentrism and collective

²⁶² Al Raffie, “Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora,” 82.

²⁶³ Al Raffie, 83–84.

²⁶⁴ Al Raffie, 87.

²⁶⁵ Gamze Baray, Tom Postmes, and Jolanda Jetten, “When ‘I’ Equals ‘We’: Exploring the Relation between Social and Personal Identity of Extreme Right-Wing Political Party Members,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 4 (December 2009): 642, <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466608X389582>.

action.”²⁶⁶ Depersonalization happens when the group member defines his personal identity according to the group’s norms, so the personal identity becomes interchangeable with the group’s social identity. Baray, Postmes, and Jetten conclude their study with an assertion that the Islamic ideology and the extreme nationalism of the party supported a higher sense of self for the party’s members and vice versa.²⁶⁷ The finding that the member of the group defines their own individuality or personal identity in line with the group’s identity (and not vice versa) is contrary to the popular understanding of extremist behavior, where extremists are thought of as being “brainwashed” by the group.²⁶⁸

C. OTHER MODALITIES OF SIT

Fathali M. Moghaddam uses elements of SIT to build another framework for explaining radicalization on a group level: mutual radicalization. Moghaddam explicates that mutual radicalization “occurs when two groups take increasingly extreme positions opposing one another, reacting against real or imagined threats, moving further and further apart in points of view, mobilizing their resources to launch attacks, and finally attempting to weaken and destroy each other.”²⁶⁹ Mutual radicalization pertains to a process that happens between groups and nations, and not individuals. In support of this framework, Moghaddam lists elements from SIT as part of the process of mutual radicalization: self-categorization, ingroup-outgroup bias, and the individual’s need to establish and protect positive self-esteem.²⁷⁰ In his book, Moghaddam uses the examples of conflicts between the U.S. and Iran, Israel and Palestine, and North Korea and South Korea, to illustrate how mutual radicalization initiates and persists. Moghaddam qualifies SIT as “one of the most useful and widely accepted theories of collective conflict,”²⁷¹ but states that identity needs alone do not provide a comprehensive enough view of radicalization between groups. He

²⁶⁶ Baray, Postmes, and Jetten, 628.

²⁶⁷ Baray, Postmes, and Jetten, 644.

²⁶⁸ Baray, Postmes, and Jetten, 626.

²⁶⁹ Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Mutual Radicalization: How Groups and Nations Drive Each Other to Extremes*, First edition (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2018), 4.

²⁷⁰ Moghaddam, 26, 123.

²⁷¹ Moghaddam, 21.

asserts that in some cases material factors need to be considered to explain conflicts between groups and nations, as in the cases of India and Pakistan and China and Japan.²⁷² Indeed, SIT does not account for any other issues that might lead to conflict between individuals or groups aside from the identity perspective, and it would be unwarranted for it to do so, as SIT is a socio psychological theory only, and not a comprehensive theory about the emergence and sustainment of conflicts.

Because SIT has existed for over half a century, it has served as the bedrock for the development of other theories. As Michael Hogg was developing UIT, he and Dominic Abrams regarded uncertainty as a motivational process within SIT, which they labelled as a metatheory for social identity research.²⁷³ Abrams and Hogg are not alone in regarding uncertainty as a motivational process within SIT, as Isaac Kfir, a researcher in terrorism studies, uses the same linkage between SIT and uncertainty. Kfir uses SIT to explain how terrorist groups form and function, using the example of al-Shabaab, and states that uncertainty is the motivation behind joining terrorist groups.²⁷⁴ Kfir asserts that terrorist groups are socially constructed and that SIT suggests “that the more intolerant the group, the more it would demand the potential recruit to embrace the agenda, outlook, and inclusiveness.”²⁷⁵ As a result, Kfir observes that al-Shabaab solidified its Islamist social identity, and is now a “brand” that stretches over the borders of Somalia.²⁷⁶ According to Kfir, while SIT explains the behavior of al-Shabaab, because of the uncertainty that many Somali youths are experiencing, the group was able to recruit them.²⁷⁷

SIT has been explored as a possible explanation for intergroup relations when the group is under threat of terrorism. Psychologists Paul G. Davies, Claude M. Steele, and

²⁷² Moghaddam, 21.

²⁷³ Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, “Metatheory: Lessons from Social Identity Research,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8, no. 2 (May 2004): 102, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0802_2.

²⁷⁴ Isaac Kfir, “*Al-Shabaab*, Social Identity Group, Human (In)Security, and Counterterrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 9 (September 2, 2017): 774, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1236569>.

²⁷⁵ Kfir, 774.

²⁷⁶ Kfir, 779.

²⁷⁷ Kfir, 782.

Hazel Rose Markus, researched the effect of the terrorism threat on the United States after 9/11 from a national identity perspective.²⁷⁸ Davies, Steele, and Markus conducted three experiments that included 296 Americans to assess how can a challenge to American identity “impact Americans’ endorsement of assimilation and multiculturalism as models for domestic and foreign intergroup relations.”²⁷⁹ When the participants of the study were exposed to information about 9/11, their national identity level was enhanced, and they endorsed multiculturalism or more tolerance for domestic policy, and assimilation or less tolerance for foreign policy.²⁸⁰ While researchers concluded that certain aspects of intergroup relations, when threat perception from terrorism on national identity is introduced, can be explained by SIT, they also state that SIT alone is not enough to explain the full range of changes that a national identity can undergo in this situation.²⁸¹ Davies, Steele, and Markus describe the “rally-round-the-flag” effect in the United States after 9/11 from a socio psychological perspective, and indicate that a common threat is a very powerful unifying factor for a nation.

²⁷⁸ Paul G. Davies, Claude M. Steele, and Hazel Rose Markus, “A Nation Challenged: The Impact of Foreign Threat on America’s Tolerance for Diversity.,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95, no. 2 (2008): 308, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.95.2.308>.

²⁷⁹ Davies, Steele, and Markus, 316.

²⁸⁰ Davies, Steele, and Markus, 316.

²⁸¹ Davies, Steele, and Markus, 316.

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IV. IDENTITY FUSION THEORY

This chapter explains the interaction of the personal and social identity as the main postulate of the identity fusion theory (IFT), and posits that self-sacrificial behavior is a key element of radicalization as clarified by IFT. The conceptual explanation of the self-sacrificial behavior by IFT is supported by empirical evidence from studies that include participants from extremist and terrorist groups. Furthermore, this chapter lists other social psychological concepts that either build on elements of IFT or introduce new elements into it, therefore expanding it. As with UIT and SIT, parts of IFT have been used for the development of alternate theories that explain radicalization, and this chapter provides an overview of them. Additionally, IFT analyzes the differences between how women and men undergo identity fusion based on a study of female and male jihadists. The final part of the chapter examines the implications of identity fusion gradation, i.e., it investigates the effects of a strong vs. weak identity fusion on self-sacrificial behavior and other types of extremist behaviors.

IFT pays particular attention to the union of personal and social identity, and the effects that can produce within an individual and the society around them. IFT is especially relevant to extremism and terrorism studies, as it claims that, under certain conditions, identity fusion is a particularly potent concept, and can result in extreme violence toward self and others. IFT was formulated during the late 2000s by William B. Swann, Jr. Swann describes IFT as a “visceral feeling of oneness with the group ... associated with a highly agentic-personal-self and unusually porous, highly permeable borders between the personal and social self.”²⁸² IFT rests on two hypotheses: the fusion of personal and social identities increases the willingness of group members to support extreme behaviors on behalf of the group, and personal and social identity may become interdependent, resulting in an especially high levels of extreme behavior.²⁸³ Some researchers have labelled IFT as

²⁸² Swann et al., “When Group Membership Gets Personal,” 450.

²⁸³ William B. Swann et al., “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (May 2009): 995, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013668>.

a self-sacrifice theory for the group; a popular psychological explanation of an extraordinary self-sacrifice when a group member is willing to sacrifice themselves for the group.²⁸⁴ When individuals are highly fused with a group, an attack on the group is considered as an attack on the individual.²⁸⁵ Therefore, fused individuals have a desire to protect the group, which they view as a form of self-defense.²⁸⁶

In opposition to SIT, IFT explains that the fusion between a personal and social identity does not result in depersonalization, an interchangeable view of the self and the group, but that the personal identity remains relevant even when the person is fused with their group.²⁸⁷ A fused individual retains “a strong sense of personal identity”²⁸⁸ that merges with the group, and as a result, when either the personal or the social identity of the person is activated, this increases the individual’s propensity for engaging in violence and self-sacrificial behavior for the group.²⁸⁹ This notion challenges SIT and its claim that it is the group’s social identity that prescribes the behavior of the group member, and not group member themselves. As William B. Swann, Jr. et al. explain, when it comes to IFT, on the basis of five preliminary studies, extreme behavior does “not stem from a lack of self-knowledge,”²⁹⁰ but from the people’s desires to validate their personal identity. Nevertheless, both SIT and IFT agree that both personal and social identities play a role in radicalization.²⁹¹

²⁸⁴ Purzycki and Lang, “Identity Fusion, Outgroup Relations, and Sacrifice,” 1.

²⁸⁵ Whitehouse, “Dying for the Group,” 2.

²⁸⁶ Whitehouse, 5–6.

²⁸⁷ William B. Swann et al., “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (May 2009): 996, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013668>.

²⁸⁸ Swann et al., 996.

²⁸⁹ Swann et al., 1009.

²⁹⁰ Swann et al., 1009.

²⁹¹ Swann et al., 1008, 1009.

Research about IFT has found that fusion is a reliable predictor of the willingness to die and fight for a terrorist or violent group.²⁹² Citing the work of others, Erica Molinario et al. state that “strongly fused persons are more likely to support fighting and dying for their ingroup.”²⁹³ Molinario et al. support their claim with research from several authors, e.g., Ángel Gómez et al., where the researchers conducted 10 studies with over 4000 participants from 18 countries, and William B. Swann et al., where the researchers conducted five studies and three experiments with 1427 Spanish undergraduate and high school students.²⁹⁴ Two main mechanisms have been found by which individuals fuse and enhance their fusion with a group: through sharing experiences with others in the group, especially distressed experiences,²⁹⁵ and sharing values.²⁹⁶ The pertinence of shared experiences and shared values for fusion or its enhancement have been confirmed by research done over the course of several decades and synthesized by Harvey Whitehouse. The subjects were martial arts clubs, football fans, Islamic fundamentalists, non-state-armed groups in Libya, and conventional forces who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁹⁷ In addition, Whitehouse asserts that identity fusion activates both the group and individual identity at the same time, i.e., threats to the group are recognized as threats to self and the person acts out of self-defense when defending the group.²⁹⁸

IFT states that sharing core characteristics or values with the members of the group and being fused with a group can enhance an individual’s propensity for violence in order to defend the group.²⁹⁹ Two studies with 415 Indonesian Muslims aimed at testing their

²⁹² Ángel Gómez et al., “Why People Enter and Embrace Violent Groups,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (January 7, 2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.614657>.

²⁹³ Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2021, 263–64.

²⁹⁴ Ángel Gómez et al., “On the Nature of Identity Fusion: Insights into the Construct and a New Measure,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 5 (2011): 918–33, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022642>; Swann et al., “Identity Fusion,” May 2009.

²⁹⁵ Whitehouse et al., “The Evolution of Extreme Cooperation via Shared Dysphoric Experiences,” 2.

²⁹⁶ William B. Swann et al., “What Makes a Group Worth Dying for? Identity Fusion Fosters Perception of Familial Ties, Promoting Self-Sacrifice,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, no. 6 (2014): 923, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036089>.

²⁹⁷ Whitehouse, “Dying for the Group,” 41.

²⁹⁸ Whitehouse et al., “The Evolution of Extreme Cooperation via Shared Dysphoric Experiences,” 7.

²⁹⁹ Swann et al., “What Makes a Group Worth Dying For?,” 2014, 912.

support for either peaceful or violent collective action found that “identity fusion was consistently related to support for more violent action.”³⁰⁰ The first study, with 239 participants, determined that identity fusion has a positive correlation with the willingness to commit collective violent acts, as opposed to engaging in peaceful collective action.³⁰¹ The study examined the willingness of university students “to participate in a protest against the Christian former governor of Jakarta who was accused of blasphemy.”³⁰² It was conducted via an online survey, in which the students answered questions on a six-point scale about their religious identification (e.g. “I often think about being a Muslim”³⁰³) and religious identity fusion (e.g. “I feel immersed in Islam”³⁰⁴). Support for peaceful collective action was also measured on a six-point scale, while there were four items the students were evaluating (e.g., “I would participate in a demonstration against the governor”³⁰⁵), while the support for violent collective action had ten items (e.g., “I would support violence against persons who abuse their political power against my religious group”³⁰⁶). Both religious identification and identity fusion were found to relate to peaceful collective action, while it was also identified that religious identification was negatively correlated with violent action, but religious identity fusion had a positive correlation with supporting violent action.³⁰⁷

In the second study the results were partially replicated, as it was found that a lower level of an association with a religious group: religious identification, “is associated with higher support for peaceful collective action, while identity fusion was associated with

³⁰⁰ Susilo Wibisono, Winnifred R. Louis, and Jolanda Jetten, “Willingness to Engage in Religious Collective Action: The Role of Group Identification and Identity Fusion,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, February 24, 2022, 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2034217>.

³⁰¹ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 6.

³⁰² Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 3.

³⁰³ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 5.

³⁰⁴ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 5.

³⁰⁵ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 5.

³⁰⁶ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 5.

³⁰⁷ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 6.

stronger support for violent collective action.”³⁰⁸ As in the first study, this one measured support for peaceful and violent collective action, but through a “series of hypothetical actions aimed at defending fellow in-group members (e.g., collective action to combat against workplace discrimination and political abuse toward Muslims)”³⁰⁹ The study had 176 participants, all Indonesian Muslims, who filled out an online survey, while the religious identification, identity fusion, and support for peaceful and violent collective action was measured on a five-point scale. As in the first study, it was found that religious identity fusion is correlated with more support for violent collective action.³¹⁰ The findings from these two studies support the idea that extremist, radical, or violent groups are particularly susceptible environments for identity fusion as they are based on shared values and create distressing experiences for its members. Additionally, it can be assumed that when an individual is fused with a group identity of a radical or terrorist group, their actions, and the level of violence for the purpose of group’s defense can be extreme.

Two studies about the inner mechanisms of IFT suggest that the willingness to fight for a group depends not just on the level of the identity fusion with the group, but also on the status of the group’s challenger. Tomasz Besta, Maria Kaźmierczak, and Magdalena Błażek conducted studies with 327 Poles, where they compared the reactions of fused and non-fused group members to a high-level (more respected) and low-level (less respected) challenger to the group.³¹¹ Besta, Kaźmierczak, and Błażek measured the level of identity fusion with a pictorial scale (Figure 3), and, among other items, measured the willingness of the group members to engage in self-sacrificial behavior.³¹² The studies found that fused group members are more sensitive and therefore more prone to react to a challenge to a group than non-fused group members, but only when the status of the challenger to the

³⁰⁸ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 9.

³⁰⁹ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 3–4.

³¹⁰ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, 9.

³¹¹ Tomasz Besta, Maria Kaźmierczak, and Magdalena Błażek, “Identity Fusion and Status of the Evaluator as Moderators of Self-Enhancement and Self-Verification at the Group Level of Self-Description,” *Polish Psychological Bulletin* 44, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 371, <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppb-2013-0040>.

³¹² Besta, Kaźmierczak, and Błażek, 373.

group was high, i.e., when the group found the challenger relevant.³¹³ The researchers explain the outcome of the studies with deducing that a low-level and less respected challenger to the group is not able to negatively affect the self-esteem of the group and its members, and therefore the group members are not motivated to defend the group, as they essentially perceive no threat to it.³¹⁴

A. IFT AND SELF-SACRIFICIAL BEHAVIOR

A combination of a strong sense of belonging to a military unit (shared value) and identity fusion is offered as an explanation for the willingness to commit the ultimate sacrifice: risking a life for a cause while defending the group, as shown in a study with 179 Libyan revolutionaries.³¹⁵ The surveyed Libyan fighters formed “highly cohesive fighting units ...[and] reported high levels of ‘identity fusion’—visceral, family-like bonds between fighters and their battalions.”³¹⁶ The frontline fighters reported an exceptionally high a level of fusion with their units, which matched the level of fusion they had with their own families.³¹⁷ In opposition to that, only 1% of the combatants stated that they were fused with Libyans who were not actively participating in the military revolution against Muammar Gaddafi. The powerful connection that was forged between the revolutionaries and their shared experiences: daily fighting and risking lives for each other; fused them with one another and their units. The camaraderie they shared took on an overarching quality, transcending every other connection in their lives, and, according to IFT, provides an explanation for why they were willing to risk their lives for the group, i.e., perform the ultimate sacrifice.³¹⁸

³¹³ Besta, Kaźmierczak, and Błażek, 376.

³¹⁴ Besta, Kaźmierczak, and Błażek, 377.

³¹⁵ Harvey Whitehouse et al., “Brothers in Arms: Libyan Revolutionaries Bond like Family,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 50 (December 16, 2014): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1416284111>.

³¹⁶ Whitehouse et al., 1.

³¹⁷ Whitehouse et al., 1.

³¹⁸ Whitehouse et al., 2.

IFT also claims that people are more willing to die and fight for a large, extended group, when the connections that they feel toward a smaller group (e.g., family) are projected onto the larger group, i.e., when the group members are concentrated on sharing common characteristics within the larger group. William B. Swann Jr. et al. conducted six studies involving people from China, India, the United States, and Spain in which it was found that people are even more willing to die for their country if they perceive themselves as having familial ties with their fellow countrymen.³¹⁹ While participants in the studies from all listed countries “endorsed fighting and dying for their country”³²⁰ if they were fused with it, when given a choice for which group they would sacrifice themselves for, they preferred the smaller, tighter-knit groups. However, when the participants were primed to feel either biological or psychological family-like connections with their countries, their willingness to die for their country increased.³²¹ This series of studies also showed that people are willing to fight and die for their group regardless of the type of values the group emanated.³²² This suggests that people who are fused with their group, no matter if that was a terrorist or a legal social group are equally motivated to fight and die for it. For engaging in self-sacrificial behavior, the ties that group members form through sharing perceived biological or psychological traits are more important than the values of the group.

IFT is mainly used as an explanation of group processes, but it has also offered as an explanation for the willingness to become a martyr in the cases of terrorists not affiliated with a group. Justin E. Lane, F. LeRon Shults, and Wesley J. Wildman propose an expansion of the IFT concept by introducing a principle of “conceptual ties” that can radicalize individuals who are not members of a group.³²³ Using the examples of the

³¹⁹ William B. Swann et al., “What Makes a Group Worth Dying for? Identity Fusion Fosters Perception of Familial Ties, Promoting Self-Sacrifice,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, no. 6 (2014): 912, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036089>.

³²⁰ Swann et al., 923.

³²¹ Swann et al., 923.

³²² Swann et al., 924.

³²³ Justin E. Lane, F. LeRon Shults, and Wesley J. Wildman, “A Potential Explanation for Self-Radicalisation,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 41 (2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X18001760>.

Boston Marathon bombers, the Tsarnaev brothers, and the San Bernardino terrorists, Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, the authors explain that even though it is considered that these terrorists self-radicalized, they acted out of a sense of fusion with social values absorbed from a distance and then internalized.³²⁴ Lane, Shults, and Wildman base their explanation of fusion being a cause for action for self-radicalized terrorists on the analysis of the START project (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism 2018), which collects data about radicalization in the United States. The authors list that over half of the radicalized individuals in the database were not associated with a group, as well as that over half of the individuals belonging to a group got radicalized before entering a group.³²⁵ As a conclusion of their START analysis, the authors state that “conceptual ties” are also a way for an individual to fuse with a group they do not belong to: by extended fusion with group values which are internalized in the individual, and can result in self-sacrificial behavior.³²⁶ As the authors themselves state, this analysis is suggestive only, and for it to bear more significance and be tested, empirical studies with self-radicalized individuals need to be conducted.

Similarly like with some elements of SIT, even though Sageman does not base his analysis in IFT, throughout his analysis, he offers some support for the principle of “conceptual ties” as a manner of extended fusion with a group that can lead to self-sacrificial behavior.³²⁷ An important difference between Sageman’s analysis and the analysis done by Lane, Shults, and Wildman is that the mujahedin did belong to a group, the Global Salafi Jihad.³²⁸ Sageman elaborates that most of the mujahedin were already devout Muslims before they joined the global jihad, a worldwide, based in violence, “Islamic revivalist social movement”³²⁹ and “were not ‘brainwashed’ into fanaticism

³²⁴ Lane, Shults, and Wildman, 1.

³²⁵ Lane, Shults, and Wildman, 2.

³²⁶ Lane, Shults, and Wildman, 2.

³²⁷ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 70.

³²⁸ Sageman, 71.

³²⁹ Sageman, 63.

through a madrassa education.”³³⁰ Participants in the global jihad were individuals from multiple countries, of diverse educational backgrounds and socioeconomic status, the uniting feature being their religion (although there were some Christian jihadists, Sageman excluded them from the sample).³³¹ It can be derived that the mujahedin, considering they did not share family ties or common background with other in the global jihad, had to develop “conceptual ties” as a mechanism to fuse with a diverse and worldwide group, i.e., they did so through extended fusion. The willingness to die for a group with which individuals are fused through “conceptual ties” is also partially supported by Sageman’s finding that the mujahedin were willing to sacrifice themselves for the purpose of advancing the global jihad.³³²

The principle of “conceptual ties” or extended fusion is also used to explain extreme activism in support of a group with which the individual does not have any type of a connection, as well as the willingness to become a foreign fighter. Foreign fighters get killed in the battlefield, and extreme activists can get hurt or even killed while acting on the behalf of a group they do not belong to, e.g., while physically trying to protect something or someone else.³³³ As explained by Joseph R. Kunst et al., extended fusion can take place between individuals and groups which have no commonalities whatsoever.³³⁴ In four studies, involving Americans, Norwegians, Kurds, Palestinians, and Europeans, the intent was to test the level of solidarity the participants feel towards an ethnic or religious group they have no connection to. The authors assert that individuals can experience extended identity fusion, and therefore a willingness to act including engaging in violent action, because of the perception that the group is treated discriminatory and in a way that violates the individual’s “own political ideology and

³³⁰ Sageman, 97.

³³¹ Sageman, 70–77.

³³² Sageman, 97.

³³³ Jonas R. Kunst et al., “Engaging in Extreme Activism in Support of Others’ Political Struggles: The Role of Politically Motivated Fusion with out-Groups,” ed. Brock Bastian, *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 1 (January 5, 2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0190639>.

³³⁴ Kunst et al., 1.

morals.”³³⁵ The authors state that such explanation is valid for examples such as when an American joins the fight on behalf of the Kurds, even though he shares no genetic, religious, ethnic, national, or any other characteristic with the Kurds, but feels Kurds are being treated unfairly and this goes against their personal beliefs.³³⁶

B. ADAPTATIONS OF IDENTITY FUSION THEORY

IFT has been utilized as a base for alternative versions of social psychological theories and mechanisms that recognize and employ the concept of identity fusion. Some researchers have expanded on IFT by introducing new elements into it, while others have used identity fusion to build their own explanations of group behavior based. Scott Atran, an anthropologist from the University of Michigan, has incorporated identity fusion into “the devoted actor” framework, which is used to explain why people are willing to engage in harmful sacrifice and radical actions, including the willingness to kill and die.³³⁷ Atran claims that “studies in real-world conflicts show ways that devoted actors, who are unconditionally committed to sacred values and whose personal identities are fused with a unique collective identity, willingly make costly sacrifices.”³³⁸ The “sacred values,” which interact with identity fusion to produce a propensity for violent self-sacrificial action and produce a devoted actor, are described as non-negotiable preferences that are defended regardless of the cost. The usage of the word “sacred” implies that the values are anchored in religion, but Atran explains that the sacred values in question can equally be “preferences regarding objects, beliefs, or practices that people treat as both incompatible or nonfungible with profane issues or economic goods.”³³⁹ For example, a sacred value can be a piece of land (when its holy for someone), human rights, liberalism, devotion to children, and even a sense of fairness.³⁴⁰

³³⁵ Kunst et al., 23.

³³⁶ Kunst et al., 2.

³³⁷ Scott Atran, “The Devoted Actor: Unconditional Commitment and Intractable Conflict across Cultures,” *Current Anthropology* 57, no. S13 (June 1, 2016): S192, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685495>.

³³⁸ Atran, S192.

³³⁹ Atran, S194.

³⁴⁰ Atran, S194.

A group of psychologists and terrorism studies researchers (including Atran) confirmed Atran's "devoted actor" model in a quantitative field study conducted in combat zones in Iraq and several online studies.³⁴¹ The studies were conducted with 56 "combatants fighting against the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL), including members of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), and other frontline fighters in northern Iraq ... as well as captured ISIS fighters."³⁴² The results were then tested with online studies in Spain, which were aimed at revealing what makes people willing to sacrifice themselves for their groups and values, and included 1,641 participants.³⁴³ The fighters who took part in the study were fused with a kin-like group and/or their families and they held some values to be sacred. The study's results reveal that the interviewed fighters were more willing to fight for their cause because of their sacred values, as opposed to fighting for their kin-like group they were fused with, including their families.³⁴⁴ "The devoted actor" model challenges the notion that people display the strongest willingness to fight for the people they feel are closest to them, and offers an alternative: that people are more willing to engage in violence and make costly sacrifices when they hold some values to be sacred to them, while they are fused with their group.

Gomez et al. expand on the concept of identity fusion by introducing an emotional element into it: admiration. The researchers' claim that "admiration increases costly sacrifices for an ideology through greater identity fusion"³⁴⁵ is based on several studies, including a study conducted with returning ISIS foreign fighters and participants in the 2004 and 2007 attacks in Madrid and Barcelona.³⁴⁶ Overall, the studies included 36 jihadists and 35 criminals (convicted for drug trafficking, robbery, etc.) from 27 prisons in

³⁴¹ Ángel Gómez et al., "The Devoted Actor's Will to Fight and the Spiritual Dimension of Human Conflict," *Nature Human Behaviour* 1, no. 9 (September 4, 2017): 673, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0193-3>.

³⁴² Gómez et al., 674.

³⁴³ Gómez et al., 673–74.

³⁴⁴ Gómez et al., 674.

³⁴⁵ Á. Gómez et al., "Admiration for Islamist Groups Encourages Self-Sacrifice through Identity Fusion," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00734-9>.

³⁴⁶ Gómez et al., 4.

Spain, who were all male and Muslim, and 2,024 men and women who participated in online studies.³⁴⁷ The surveyed “jihadists expressed greater admiration for radical Islamist groups than non-jihadist Muslims,”³⁴⁸ while this type of admiration also had a positive relationship with identity fusion and costly sacrifices for Islam. Based on this finding, Gomez et al. claim that admiration can be a pathway for radicalization and challenge the notion that admiration is a purely positive-inducing emotion, as it can inspire malicious acts. Additionally, the researchers assert that admiration for someone in the group induces greater identity fusion and larger willingness to fight and die for the group, and because of it, this type of admiration can be an indicator for radicalization.³⁴⁹ With this proposal, Gomez et al. expand on the notion of identity fusion as a possible precursor for extremist actions, adding an element of admiration as a catalyst for even greater identity fusion and therefore greater willingness to engage in violence on the behalf of the group.

An adaptation of IFT is also used by Julia Ebner, Chris Kavanaugh, and Harvey Whitehouse, who couple the theory with a threat toward a group and use this combination to predict violent extremist behavior, i.e., they claim that identity fusion has an untapped potential in counterterrorism efforts.³⁵⁰ Ebner, Kavanaugh, and Whitehouse explicitly delineate that identity fusion alone is not a predictor for violent behavior, but when paired with a threat, it becomes a predictor for violence.³⁵¹ The authors provide the aforementioned claim on the basis of a linguistic analysis of fifteen terrorist manifestos, in which patterns, key expressions, and language has been identified and categorized so identity fusion of the authors can be detected.³⁵² Ebner, Kavanaugh, and Whitehouse explicate that the number of manifestos was limited to fifteen because of restricted access to such documents and their general limited availability. The selected manifestos are both

³⁴⁷ Gómez et al., 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

³⁴⁸ Gómez et al., 9.

³⁴⁹ Gómez et al., 10.

³⁵⁰ Julia Ebner, Chris Kavanaugh, and Harvey Whitehouse, “Is There a Language of Terrorists? A Comparative Manifesto Analysis,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, August 9, 2022, 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2109244>.

³⁵¹ Ebner, Kavanaugh, and Whitehouse, 12.

³⁵² Ebner, Kavanaugh, and Whitehouse, 2.

violent and nonviolent, and cover a range of topics: “anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, misogynist and jihadist ... feminist, environmental and anti-racist.”³⁵³ The study finds that “indicators of fusion were highly prevalent in violent self-sacrificial manifestos,” e.g., the manifestos of Andreas Breivik, John Timothy Earnest, and Sayyid Qutb.³⁵⁴ Additionally, the authors find that “the idea of a threat against the ingroup was a highly prevalent trait in violent self-sacrificial texts.”³⁵⁵ Several studies have also examined the role of a threat toward the ingroup using SIT, but reported no prediction of self-sacrificial behavior.³⁵⁶ Consequently, Ebner, Kavanaugh, and Whitehouse argue that a linguistic analysis of texts that both groups and individuals publish can be used to detect the intention of conducting violent extremist action and therefore prevent such events.

IFT’s principles have also been expanded into a framework that attempts to explain extreme human behavior when people are experiencing fear of death. Behavioral scientist Edward Orehek and a group of psychologists expanded on IFT to examine how people behave when experiencing death anxiety when they view themselves as separate individuals and when they feel connected to a group.³⁵⁷ The researchers conducted five experiments that included 307 participants, mostly undergraduate students, where four experiments were conducted in person, and one was done via an online poll.³⁵⁸ The experiments confirmed that individuals, who are connected to others, experience less death anxiety and “foster a greater willingness to sacrifice the self for a cause”³⁵⁹ than unattached individuals. While IFT examines an affiliation with a specific group, the framework Orehek et al. tested examines general interdependency with others, and comes to the same

³⁵³ Ebner, Kavanaugh, and Whitehouse, 7.

³⁵⁴ Ebner, Kavanaugh, and Whitehouse, 12.

³⁵⁵ Ebner, Kavanaugh, and Whitehouse, 13.

³⁵⁶ Davies, Steele, and Markus, “A Nation Challenged,” 308; Wright, “A Social Identity and Social Power Perspective on Terrorism,” 78; Mashuri and Zaduqisti, “The Effect of Intergroup Threat and Social Identity Salience on the Belief in Conspiracy Theories over Terrorism in Indonesia,” 29.

³⁵⁷ Edward Orehek et al., “Interdependent Self-Construals Mitigate the Fear of Death and Augment the Willingness to Become a Martyr.,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107, no. 2 (August 2014): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036675>.

³⁵⁸ Orehek et al., 267–70.

³⁵⁹ Orehek et al., 271.

conclusion: self-sacrificial behavior is more likely to happen when an individual is attached to a group as opposed to when the individual does not view themselves as connected to others.³⁶⁰ In the summary of their research, Orehek et al. make an observation that the human tendency to associate in or form social groups, generally considered as a positive human trait, can thus have a dangerous side that can lead to violence.³⁶¹

Due to the amount of content available online and numerous possibilities for online communication, online radicalization is a serious issue, and IFT provides an insight into the process of online radicalization. Online radicalization has been connected to identity fusion and the effect of moral convergence, i.e., “perception that one’s moral views are shared by others.”³⁶² In two studies done by Mohammad Atari et al., it has been found that the level of identity fusion with an online group has an effect on the level of radicalism, or rather, the more fused group members are with the group, the more willing they are to act on behalf of the group.³⁶³ The studies included 843 adults Americans, who were recruited online, and were of various gender, age, and political ideology, i.e., they represented the U.S. national sample.³⁶⁴ Researchers explain that the level of identity fusion with the group was mediated with moral convergence, i.e., the more members of the group believed their group is morally homogeneous, the more fused they were with the group. Because of this finding, the authors of the study suggest that the way to counter online radicalization would be to establish “diversity in online social networks to avoid affective polarization and creation of moral echo chambers,”³⁶⁵ i.e., to provide a varied and inclusive online environment. Researchers’ suggestion for countering online radicalization goes in line with the suggestions for countering “real-world” radicalization in SIT and UIT, that people have

³⁶⁰ Orehek et al., 272.

³⁶¹ Orehek et al., 272.

³⁶² Mohammad Atari et al., “Morally Homogeneous Networks and Radicalism,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 13, no. 6 (August 2022): 1000, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506211059329>.

³⁶³ Atari et al., 1007.

³⁶⁴ Atari et al., 1003, 1004.

³⁶⁵ Atari et al., 1007.

less chances of radicalizing if they have access to multiple and positive social groups and agendas.³⁶⁶

C. IFT AND GENDER DIFFERENCES

A comparison of two studies done with female and male imprisoned jihadists in Spain seems to point to the differences in between how women and men are undergoing identity fusion and the consequential self-sacrificial behavior. Angel Gomez et al. investigated the effects on identity fusion on 57 jihadists, 79 members of Latino gangs, 94 individual non-jihadists Muslims, and 47 members of delinquent bands (last two groups were local criminals), all males.³⁶⁷ Throughout the study, jihadists have displayed a high level of fusion with their prospective group; religion and family, and a great willingness to die for both, as they represented their “sacred values.” The jihadists’ level of fusion with their values, i.e., their groups, and the willingness to self-sacrifice for them was higher than the gang members displayed when it came to their values and self-sacrificial behavior.³⁶⁸ The authors of the study suggest that the critical aspect of the jihadists’ higher willingness to sacrifice themselves for their group, when compared to the lower willingness found in the gang members, is the “superior importance that shared values have for jihadists in forging attachment to their group.”³⁶⁹

Gomez et al. elaborate that, when it comes to the core tenets of IFT; shared experiences and shared values, considered as enabling factors for fusion with the group, jihadists have displayed that shared values were the “only factor significantly associated with group fusion”³⁷⁰ for both the past and present. A high level of group fusion for the past and the present was another difference noted between jihadists and gang and band

³⁶⁶ Hogg and Adelman, “Uncertainty-Identity Theory,” September 2013, 450; Strindberg, “Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism,” 29–30.

³⁶⁷ Angel Gómez et al., “Willingness to Sacrifice among Convicted Islamist Terrorists versus Violent Gang Members and Other Criminals,” *Scientific Reports* 12, no. 1 (February 16, 2022): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-06590-0>.

³⁶⁸ Gómez et al., 5.

³⁶⁹ Gómez et al., 5–6.

³⁷⁰ Gómez et al., 5–6.

members, which also corresponds to the findings in the study with female jihadists in Spanish prisons.³⁷¹ As a result of the all-male jihadists study, it was found that jihadists maintained the level of fusion with their group and their values, as opposed to gang members and delinquent bands, whose fusion with their group and values decreased over time.³⁷² Overall, the all-male jihadists study showed that jihadists have an unwavering level of fusion as opposed to gang and band members, and that they are more willing to sacrifice themselves for their group, because of the high and constant level of fusion with their group and values.³⁷³

While it is hard to ascertain the exact differences of identity fusion over time for women and men based on the comparison of two studies, there is basis for further investigation in this matter, as the results from two studies point that women's identity fusion weakens over time, while that was not found for men. The same psychologist, Angel Gomez, accompanied by a group of researchers, conducted a study with 23 women imprisoned in Spanish prisons, which tested the women's motives for radicalization.³⁷⁴ The study was focused on two groups, one included 12 female jihadists, and the other 11 women who were imprisoned for crimes not linked to terrorism, all of them Muslim.³⁷⁵ An interesting finding from the study was that the female jihadists have displayed a reduction in identity fusion with their religion and Muslims as their group, while that was not the case with non-jihadist female prisoners.³⁷⁶ This discovery stands in opposition to the finding with an all-male jihadists study, where the level of fusion with Islam and their

³⁷¹ Ángel Gómez et al., "The Mirage of the Jihad. Disenchantment as the Pathway to Disengagement of Female Jihadists. A Case Study about Radicalization in Spanish Prisons (*El Espejismo de La Yihad. El Desencanto Como Camino Para La Desvinculación de Las Mujeres Yihadistas. Un Estudio de Caso Sobre La Radicalización En Las Cárceles Españolas*)," *International Journal of Social Psychology* 37, no. 3 (September 2, 2022): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02134748.2022.2096254>.

³⁷² Gómez et al., "Willingness to Sacrifice among Convicted Islamist Terrorists versus Violent Gang Members and Other Criminals," 7.

³⁷³ Gómez et al., 6.

³⁷⁴ Gómez et al., "The Mirage of the Jihad. Disenchantment as the Pathway to Disengagement of Female Jihadists. A Case Study about Radicalization in Spanish Prisons (*El Espejismo de La Yihad. El Desencanto Como Camino Para La Desvinculación de Las Mujeres Yihadistas. Un Estudio de Caso Sobre La Radicalización En Las Cárceles Españolas*)," 4.

³⁷⁵ Gómez et al., 5.

³⁷⁶ Gómez et al., 12.

group held constant over time, and with that, the high willingness to sacrifice themselves for both.³⁷⁷ Researchers have suggested that this points in the direction that it could be easier to reduce female jihadist recidivism, as opposed to the recidivist behavior of male jihadists.³⁷⁸ The differences in identity fusion for women and men need further exploration with larger samples to produce to a solid conclusion. Aside from this, it would be beneficial to study the relationship between identity fusion and self-sacrificial behavior separately for women and men.

D. IMPLICATIONS OF IDENTITY FUSION GRADATION

The strength of identity fusion can influence a person's willingness to sacrifice themselves for the cause, nation, or object the person is fused to. In three studies with over 1400 undergraduate students, conducted in Spain by Borja Paredes et al., the scholars were able to discover that the level of certainty in identity fusion with Spain influenced the students' willingness to fight and die for Spain.³⁷⁹ Paredes et al. tested a hypothesis that a higher level of identity fusion with Spain will also produce a higher willingness to fight for Spain, which they were able to prove. In all the three studies the researchers conducted, it was revealed that the students' willingness to engage in self-sacrificial behavior for their country rose together with their certainty in identity fusion with Spain.³⁸⁰

The finding that the strength of fusion with a cause or a nation can have an effect on a person's willingness to fight and die for their cause or nation, i.e., for what they understand as their group, serves a purpose in mitigating extreme pro-group behavior. An extremist whose identity fusion level is low does not have the same propensity for engaging in violent or self-sacrificial behavior on behalf of the group, as an extremist who is

³⁷⁷ Gómez et al., "Willingness to Sacrifice among Convicted Islamist Terrorists versus Violent Gang Members and Other Criminals," 5.

³⁷⁸ Gómez et al., "The Mirage of the Jihad. Disenchantment as the Pathway to Disengagement of Female Jihadists. A Case Study about Radicalization in Spanish Prisons (*El Espejismo de La Yihad. El Desencanto Como Camino Para La Desvinculación de Las Mujeres Yihadistas. Un Estudio de Caso Sobre La Radicalización En Las Cárceles Españolas*)," 12.

³⁷⁹ Borja Paredes et al., "The Role of Meta-Cognitive Certainty on the Relationship between Identity Fusion and Endorsement of Extreme pro-Group Behavior," *Self and Identity* 19, no. 7 (October 2, 2020): 804, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2019.1681498>.

³⁸⁰ Paredes et al., 819.

experiencing stronger identity fusion with their group. Paredes et al. suggest that these findings can be useful in predicting people's behaviors and determining who is more likely to perform extreme actions in favor of the group.³⁸¹ Additionally, as a lower level of identity fusion signifies a lower interest in pro-group extreme behavior, researchers suggest "implementing a strategy that distracts highly-fused individuals from their group bond"³⁸² as that can undermine the value of the attachment group members have with their group, and therefore reduce extremists pro-group actions. However, for such principle of lowering identity fusion to be successful, it would be necessary to know what the reasons for identity fusion between a group member and their group are.

The strength of identity fusion, i.e., the possibility of knowing which group members are more prone to engage in extremist pro-group behavior, implies there is a way to measure the intensity of identity fusion. While Angel Gomez et al., acknowledge that the existence of a pictorial way to measure identity fusion already exists, they set out to develop a more nuanced and verbal measure of identity fusion, based on the "feelings of connectedness and reciprocal strength theoretically associated with fusion,"³⁸³ i.e., feelings of agency and invulnerability. Over the course of 10 studies conducted online and in person and involving over 5,000 Spaniards, 357 Americans, and 37 immigrants from 16 countries, the scholars were able to confirm that the verbal measure of identity fusion equaled and exceeded in quality the previously established, pictorial measure.³⁸⁴ Furthermore, it was found that the verbal measure of identity fusion was able to predict the support for extreme pro-group activities with greater accuracy than the pictorial one.³⁸⁵ Even though more studies might be necessary to validate the accuracy of the verbal measurement for identity fusion, the usage of such scale can be helpful in predicting which individuals are more likely to engage in pro-group extremist behavior.

³⁸¹ Paredes et al., 819.

³⁸² Paredes et al., 820.

³⁸³ Gómez et al., "On the Nature of Identity Fusion," 919.

³⁸⁴ Gómez et al., 921–27, 930.

³⁸⁵ Gómez et al., 930.

V. COMMONALITIES ACROSS THEORIES

This chapter presents the similarities between UIT, SIT, and IFT and their explanations of radicalization and the ways personal identity changes under the influence of the social identity of the group. Furthermore, this chapter lists the mechanisms the three theories have in common, and the differences in their usage with the theory's framework. An important commonality between the three theories is threat perception and its role in a pathway to violence, and this chapter explains both the overlapping points between the three theories and threat perception and the differences in the interpretations of threat perception. The chapter concludes with explaining another commonality between the theories: the fact that all of them rest on an implicit antagonism between different social groups.

A. PERSONAL AND SOCIAL IDENTITY CHANGES

All three theories find that a person's own identity changes when a person joins a group, i.e., in an interaction with a social or group identity. Furthermore, the theories assert that it is the social identity of the group that will further radicalize the personal identity of the individual. Consequently, the theories have one common conclusion: a person is more willing to commit violence when he or she is a member of an extremist or radical group rather than as an individual unaffiliated with a group. SIT³⁸⁶ and UIT³⁸⁷ explain it with depersonalization, while IFT³⁸⁸ rejects depersonalization. "Depersonalization means viewing yourself as a category representative rather than a unique individual and is associated with a change in identity."³⁸⁹ IFT asserts that depersonalized individuals are obedient group members, but are not proactive enough to initiate and operationalize pro-

³⁸⁶ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 13.

³⁸⁷ Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," September 2013, 439., Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2021, 101.

³⁸⁸ Swann et al., "Identity Fusion," May 2009, 996.

³⁸⁹ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 13.

group actions on the behalf of the group, while the opposite stands for individuals who are fused with their group.³⁹⁰ In opposition to UIT and SIT, IFT maintains that “fused persons retain a strong sense of personal identity. When this strong autonomous self becomes merged with the group, it can provide the motivational machinery needed for taking radical action on behalf of the group.”³⁹¹ The retention of a personal identity, as explained by IFT, challenges the notion that an individual takes on the group’s social identity when they join, which is the principle propagated by UIT and SIT. Regardless of the explanation, the theories agree that a single radicalized individual is less of a threat than a radical group.

SIT, UIT, and IFT confirm that identity plays a role in a decisional process that leads to violence. Personal identity is considered to be a self-categorizing tool through which a being becomes a distinct individual, while social identity is described as both self-assigned and ascribed by the group, but also by others who do not belong to the group.³⁹² All group members experience that there is a significant level of interaction between their personal and social identity. This interaction, according to all three theories and in the case of extremist, radical, or terrorist groups, leads to a higher willingness to commit violence to defend the group and promote its values. It does not matter which values and interests bind the group: nation,³⁹³ religion,³⁹⁴ ethnicity,³⁹⁵ military,³⁹⁶ football,³⁹⁷ or which of the three theories is applied to study the interaction between personal and social identity, the key catalyst for an individual to be more willing to commit violence is group membership.

UIT, SIT, and IFT hold different views as to how a group member’s personal identity changes. As seen in Figure 3, IFT holds that the personal identity becomes identical

³⁹⁰ Swann et al., “Identity Fusion,” May 2009, 996.

³⁹¹ Swann et al., 996.

³⁹² Michael P. Arena and Bruce A. Arrigo, “Identity and The Terrorist Threat,” *International Criminal Justice Review* 14, no. 1 (May 2004): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1177/105756770401400106>.

³⁹³ Whitehouse, “Dying for the Group,” 38.

³⁹⁴ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, “Willingness to Engage in Religious Collective Action,” 9.

³⁹⁵ Gómez et al., “Why People Enter and Embrace Violent Groups,” 2.

³⁹⁶ Gómez et al., 2.

³⁹⁷ Whitehouse, “Dying for the Group,” 1.

to the group identity over time, but that does not mean that the personal identity is erased, but rather, it is enhanced by the group identity.³⁹⁸ As opposed to IFT, SIT and UIT claim that personal identity is weakened by the group's social identity, and that the members of groups primarily see themselves as group members, and not individuals.³⁹⁹ As presented in Figure 2, SIT also states that, as a result of seeing themselves principally as group representatives, in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination give rise to the willingness to defend the group.⁴⁰⁰ UIT places an emphasis on the correlation between uncertainty and the level of extremism that the group members are willing to engage in to defend the group. As seen in Figure 1, UIT claims that the higher the level of uncertainty an individual feels, the more likely is that they will identify with an extremist group, rather than a moderate one. The three theories maintain that group members are dedicated to defending their group, as defense of the group also signifies self-defense, but explain the reasoning behind this process variedly.

B. THREAT PERCEPTION

UIT, SIT, and IFT share the commonality of threat perception as a motivational pathway toward violence, i.e., engaging in violent behavior on behalf of the group. Within UIT, there is a specificity that threat can be both internal and external: self-uncertainty can be a threat, and there can be an external threat toward the group.⁴⁰¹ In both cases, the perception of the threat triggers engaging in violent behavior on behalf of the group.⁴⁰² SIT asserts that the severity of the threat depends on the salience of the social identity of the group. "When a social identity is salient, perceptions that an action is threatening will be enhanced."⁴⁰³ Within SIT, the group members are motivated to maintain or enhance

³⁹⁸ Swann et al., "Identity Fusion," May 2009, 996.

³⁹⁹ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 13; Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," September 2013, 101.

⁴⁰⁰ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 20.

⁴⁰¹ Hogg, "Uncertain Self in a Changing World," 248.

⁴⁰² Hogg, 237; Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," September 2013, 441.

⁴⁰³ Wright, "A Social Identity and Social Power Perspective on Terrorism," 76.

the salience of the group, while the salience of the group is derived from its superiority in comparison with other groups.⁴⁰⁴ In other words, the maintenance of the group's identity salience is an issue on which the survival of the group depends, therefore, anything that threatens the group's identity salience is perceived as being dangerous to the group.⁴⁰⁵

IFT states that threats to the group are recognized as threats to self, and the person acts out of self-defense when defending the group, which is similar to how UIT and SIT perceive threats towards the ingroup.⁴⁰⁶ IFT, however, takes the idea of a perceived threat a step further and claims that self-sacrificial behavior can be explained by the combination of identity fusion with a ingroup and a threat from the outgroup.⁴⁰⁷ IFT bases this claim on research that indicates that the need to protect the group, when the group is under threat, outweighs the self-preservation instinct for individuals fused with their group.⁴⁰⁸ By offering an explanation about suicide terrorism, IFT stands out from UIT and SIT, as they do not explicate the dynamics between a member of a group and the group for which the member is willing to engage in self-sacrificial behavior.

C. US VS. THEM THINKING

While SIT is the theory principally anchored in us vs. them type of thinking, UIT and IFT also rest on the notion of discrimination against the group to which the individual does not belong.⁴⁰⁹ UIT, SIT, and IFT offer a different motivational force behind joining a group (reducing uncertainty,⁴¹⁰ boosting self-esteem,⁴¹¹ and sharing negative

⁴⁰⁴ Hatch and Schultz, *Organizational Identity*, 60.

⁴⁰⁵ Strindberg, "Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism," 27 (78).

⁴⁰⁶ Whitehouse et al., "The Evolution of Extreme Cooperation via Shared Dysphoric Experiences," 7.

⁴⁰⁷ Whitehouse, "Dying for the Group," 40.

⁴⁰⁸ Whitehouse et al., "The Evolution of Extreme Cooperation via Shared Dysphoric Experiences," 2.

⁴⁰⁹ Hogg, "Uncertain Self in a Changing World," 243; Whitehouse et al., "The Evolution of Extreme Cooperation via Shared Dysphoric Experiences," 5.

⁴¹⁰ Hogg, "From Uncertainty to Extremism," 340.

⁴¹¹ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 19.

experiences or characteristics⁴¹²), but agree that once the individual joins a group, they derogate the group/s to which they do not belong. The three theories agree that the group becomes an extension of the individual once they become a group member, and therefore everyone not belonging to their group becomes “others”—persons of lesser value and potential threats. Throughout the three theories, members of a group do not perceive their group as a simple collection of like-minded individuals, but tend to assign a greater value to their own group and are influenced by the group’s values. In fact, discrimination against all others, whom the group members do not identify with, rests at the core of all three theories, as all of them offer explanations as to what group members are willing to do to protect their own group and act on behalf of it.

⁴¹² Swann et al., “What Makes a Group Worth Dying For?,” 2014, 923; Whitehouse et al., “The Evolution of Extreme Cooperation via Shared Dysphoric Experiences,” 2.

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VI. CONCLUSION

This chapter lays out the findings about the suitability of UIT, SIT, and IFT for studying radicalization and their individual value for researching extremist behavior. The chapter begins with a general explanation of the merit that social psychology has in efforts to understand radicalization and continues with individual analysis for the three theories.

UIT, SIT, and IFT are not theories about radicalization, and none of them offer an all-embracing causal explanation of an individual's pathway to violence. The theories offer a social psychological view of radicalization when other factors and motivational backgrounds are combined, but are not able to comprehensively explain the phenomenon of engagement in politically motivated violence. As Mark Freestone from the Centre for Psychiatry at the Queen Mary University of London states, identity plays a key role in radicalization, but "radicalization is not a problem that any single discipline can hope to rise to alone."⁴¹³ UIT, SIT, and IFT explicate the radicalization of an individuals' identity under the influence of the social or group identity, but there is a need to study more closely what affects the development of the group identity, and under which circumstances it becomes extremist. The added value of these theories to the research of radicalization are the different clarifications on how individuals perceive the groups they join and what stands behind their decision to become a member of an extremist or a terrorist group.

A common perception about radicalization is an opinion that an individual is drawn to an extremist or terrorist group because of the ideology the group espouses. Social psychology in general, as well as UIT, SIT, and IFT, debunk this notion, and explain the attraction of extremists and terrorist groups through the lens of identity that an individual finds through joining a group. UIT, SIT, and IFT explain the appeal of the group's identity from different perspectives: UIT through personal uncertainty that

⁴¹³ Mark Freestone, "Personality, Identity, Risk and Radicalisation," *International Review of Psychiatry* 29, no. 4 (July 4, 2017): 311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2017.1344395>.

requires diminishing, SIT through the desire to enhance self-esteem, and IFT through sharing experiences and characteristics with the members of the group. However, in sum, the identity of the group the individual joins is what attracts the individual to the group.

A. FINDINGS ABOUT UIT

Throughout this thesis, it has been confirmed that UIT provides a relevant theoretical structure through which radicalization can be studied. Empirical data based on UIT indicates that the theory explains the link between extremist behavior and an uncertain individual who is seeking to reduce their uncertainty, when that individual joins an extremist group. However, when utilizing UIT for radicalization research, it is important to keep in mind that personal uncertainty alone is not a predictor of radical behavior, but one of the motivational factors that can lead to radicalization. Furthermore, UIT studies show that there is a higher chance of radicalization as an outcome of an individual's uncertainty the higher uncertainty the individual experiences.⁴¹⁴ When combined with the influence of a social identity of an extremist group, a high level of uncertainty is more likely to produce extremist behavior, as opposed to low uncertainty, as it can be seen in Figure 1.

⁴¹⁴ Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," September 2013, 444.

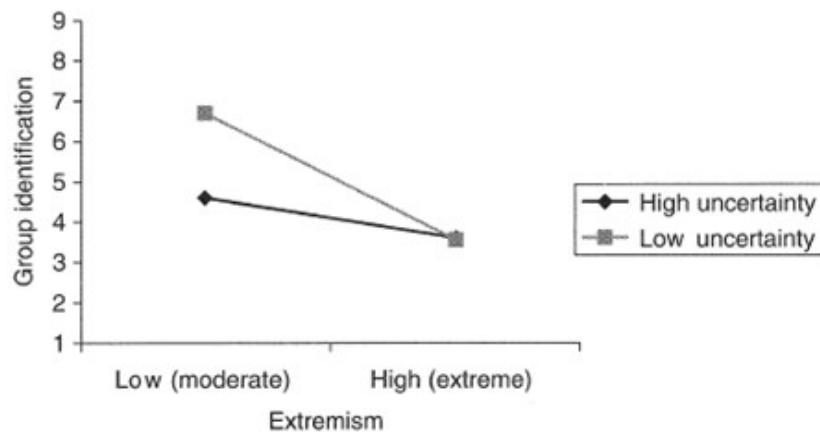


Figure 1. UIT's Extremist Group Identification with Low and High Uncertainty.⁴¹⁵

The hypothesis pertaining to UIT; individuals psychologically assessed as exhibiting signs of self-uncertainty are more prone to join extremist organizations than individuals who do not exhibit such characteristics, has been confirmed in this thesis.⁴¹⁶ The studies reviewed in this thesis show that people who are experiencing personal uncertainty, i.e., feeling insecure about their place in society, or undergoing a personal crisis in life, are more prone to involve themselves with extremist groups and ideas.⁴¹⁷ However, UIT has shown that uncertainty by itself is not a sure predictor of extremist behavior and engaging in violence. Studies have shown that a combination of a threat and uncertainty can result in violent behavior, as opposed to uncertainty alone.⁴¹⁸ Another set of studies resulted in similar findings, where it was ascertained that uncertainty itself is not a sure predictor of violence, but in combination with other factors, e.g., a radical belief system.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁵ Source: Michael A. Hogg, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 39 (Elsevier, 2007), 96, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)39002-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)39002-8).

⁴¹⁶ Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2022, 101.

⁴¹⁷ Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," September 2013, 443–44.

⁴¹⁸ Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, "Determinants of Radicalization of Islamic Youth in the Netherlands," 599.

⁴¹⁹ Doosje, Loseman, and van den Bos, 598.

Personal uncertainty serves as a good predictor for joining a structured, homogeneous group, one in which rules and goals are clear, and members are therefore awarded with a sense of direction, which in turn reduces their uncertainty.⁴²⁰ UIT studies analyzed in this thesis indicate that UIT is an appropriate tool in radicalization research. As extremist groups fit the profile of a group that can effectively reduce uncertainty, and group identity radicalizes personal identity of group members, the link between uncertainty and extremism becomes obvious. Furthermore, group members who joined the group to reduce personal uncertainty are more willing to engage in behavior that protects the group, i.e., they are more willing to engage in violent behavior.⁴²¹ Group's characteristics and the willingness to defend the group produce a compound radicalization effect, therefore revealing that uncertain individuals are more prone to becoming hardline extremists as opposed to people who are not experiencing uncertainty.

B. FINDINGS ABOUT SIT

SIT studies used in this thesis show that while SIT mechanisms, like ingroup-outgroup distinction and depersonalization are relevant for radicalization research, the theory itself is not the most fitting tool for ascertaining pathways to engaging in political violence. SIT is an overarching theoretical concept that is mainly used for studying discrimination between groups that does not lead to violent behavior, based on the interaction of a personal and social identity, as depicted in Figure 2. The amount of empirical data, or rather, the lack thereof, also reveals that SIT is not the most suitable theory for studying extremist behavior. While there are several theoretical SIT explanations for extremism and terrorism in societies with considerable distinctions between different groups in society, there are not many SIT empirical studies that delve into radicalization. SIT studies mostly concentrate on explaining the emergence of biases between different

⁴²⁰ Hogg, "Uncertain Self in a Changing World," 243–44.

⁴²¹ Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," September 2013, 449–50.

groups, based on a desire to enhance individual self-esteem, which might not be a strong enough motivation for engaging in extremist behavior.⁴²²

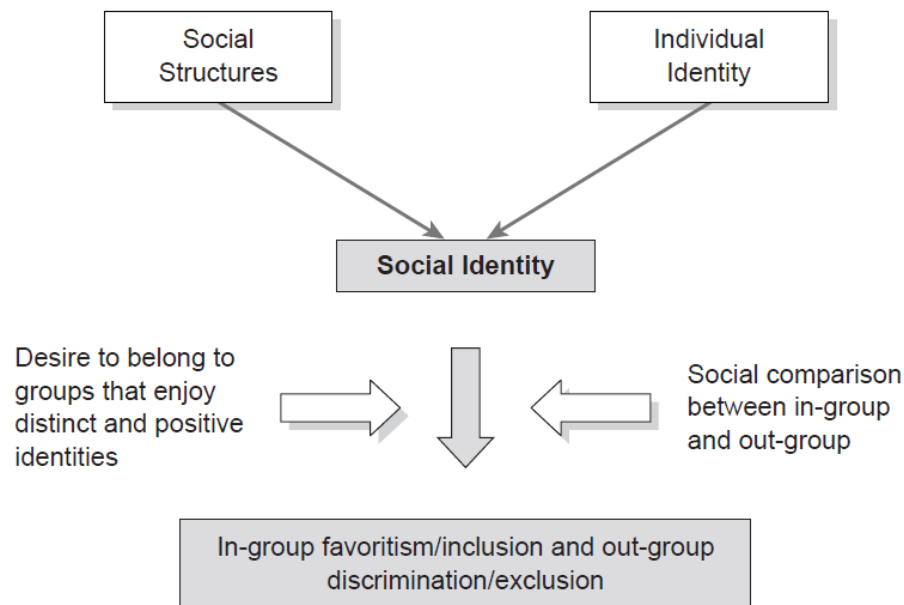


Figure 2. SIT's Basic Principles⁴²³

The hypothesis tested for SIT; individuals exhibiting a strong ingroup identity and outgroup bias are more prone to join extremist groups than individuals that do not exhibit such ingroup-outgroup dichotomies, has been partially supported in this thesis. Members of a group, who display a strong identification with the ingroup and intense discrimination toward the outgroup automatically engage in defending the ingroup.⁴²⁴ At the same time, the studies analyzed in this thesis do not find that having a strong personal identity enhanced the likelihood of joining an extremist group, as opposed to a more socially

⁴²² Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 19.

⁴²³ Source: Michàlle Mor Barak, "Social Psychological Perspectives of Workforce Diversity and Inclusion in National and Global Contexts," in *The Handbook of Human Services Management*, ed. Rino J. Patti, 2nd ed (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 247.

⁴²⁴ McCauley and Moskaleiko, *Friction*, 121.

accepted group; in fact, none of the studies concentrate on this issue. Because SIT is fundamentally used for learning about ingroup-outgroup behavior based on self-esteem enhancement and discriminatory behavior between groups that does not include engaging in violence, SIT is not the most appropriate social psychology theory for studying radicalization.⁴²⁵

Like UIT and IFT, SIT-based explanation of radicalization entails a membership in an extremist group, but unlike IFT and in accordance with UIT, is connected to the concept of depersonalization, i.e., a complete overlap of an individual identity with the identity of a group.⁴²⁶ SIT also explains the ingroup-outgroup hostilities and engaging in extremist behavior when it is combined with a threat towards the group, or a threat toward the social identity of the group.⁴²⁷ Group identity that the member adopts after entering a group is not enough to predict their engagement in violence, and other factors, in combination with the social identity of the group member lead to engagement in violence, e.g., perceived injustices and threat perception.⁴²⁸ Additionally, SIT, when combined with a fundamentalist religious belief, can illuminate why group members engage in extremism, i.e., how the combination of religious zealotry and group membership can lead to violence between groups.⁴²⁹

C. FINDINGS ABOUT IFT

The data provided by IFT researchers reveals that the theory holds significant clout in radicalization research. Numerous empirical studies show that identity fusion with an

⁴²⁵ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*, 19.

⁴²⁶ Ferguson, Haji, and McKeown, 13.

⁴²⁷ Yustisia et al., “An Investigation of an Expanded Encapsulate Model of Social Identity in Collective Action (EMSICA) Including Perception of Threat and Intergroup Contact to Understand Support for Islamist Terrorism in Indonesia,” 37.

⁴²⁸ van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears, “Toward an Integrative Social Identity Model of Collective Action,” 504; Yustisia et al., “An Investigation of an Expanded Encapsulate Model of Social Identity in Collective Action (EMSICA) Including Perception of Threat and Intergroup Contact to Understand Support for Islamist Terrorism in Indonesia,” 29; Wright, “A Social Identity and Social Power Perspective on Terrorism,” 76.

⁴²⁹ Wali, “Functionality of Radicalization,” 102.

idea or a social group is a good predictor for engaging in violent behavior, and even self-sacrificial behavior.⁴³⁰ Furthermore, IFT provides reliable support for the notion that there is a causal connection between the gradation of identity fusion and the level of violent behavior group members are willing to engage in. The more fused group members are with the group or concept in which they believe in, the more willing they are to defend it, and even sacrifice themselves.⁴³¹ As illustrated by the identity fusion scale in Figure 3, as the group member becomes more and more fused with the group, they eventually become one with the group, and willing to die for their group.⁴³² In this respect, IFT is unique among the theories analyzed in this thesis, as it is *the only one that offers an explanation and empirical support for why group members are willing to become martyrs*.

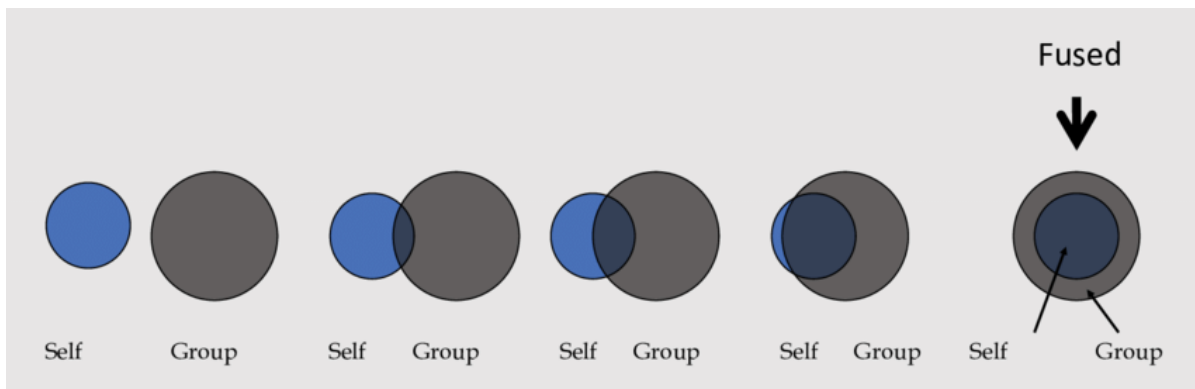


Figure 3. IFT Identity Fusion Scale⁴³³

Throughout the course of this thesis, both hypotheses posed for IFT have been confirmed; individuals who are members of a violent extremist group are more likely to engage in violence, including suicide attacks, than individuals who are on the periphery of violent extremist groups. Within IFT, the level of identity fusion presents the level of

⁴³⁰ Whitehouse et al., “Brothers in Arms,” 1; Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, “Willingness to Engage in Religious Collective Action,” 9; Atari et al., “Morally Homogeneous Networks and Radicalism,” 1007; Gómez et al., “Why People Enter and Embrace Violent Groups,” 2.

⁴³¹ Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2021, 263–64.

⁴³² Whitehouse et al., “Brothers in Arms,” 2.

⁴³³ Source: Harvey Whitehouse and Robin Fitzgerald, “Fusion and Reform,” *Anthropology in Action* 27, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3167/aia.2020.270101>.

involvement and permeance with the group, which can be measured with both verbal and pictorial (Figure 3) means, and the more group members are fused with a group, the more willing they are to become violent on behalf of the group.⁴³⁴ Furthermore, individuals who intensely identify with a violent extremist organization are more likely to behave violently in the name of their organization, than individuals who are sympathetic toward a violent extremist group. Identity fusion is a higher level of connection with a group than identification, and fused individuals are more likely to engage in violence, including self-sacrificial behavior on behalf of the group, than people who simply identify with a group.⁴³⁵

IFT studies have also empirically showed that the level of identity fusion can be manipulated and carried over to a large group, with which an individual does not have an close connection, but one an individual is still willing to die for when they perceive being fused with it.⁴³⁶ This is a distinctive characteristic of IFT among the three theories from this thesis, and shows its applicability for studying radicalization on a broader scale than only in connection to the group the individual belongs to. The number of empirical studies with which different aspects and versions of IFT have been tested is substantial, and all of them support the notion that fusion with an extremist group is a reliable way of foretelling if a person will engage in violent behavior on behalf of the group. Given the level and spectrum of analysis within which IFT has been tested, it can be concluded that the theory is a dependable method of measuring someone's propensity for violent behavior connected to a group or idea with which they are fused.

D. IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND COUNTER-RADICALIZATION STRATEGY

UIT, SIT, and IFT illustrate that identity issues, not just mental health deficiencies, are central to countering violent extremism. The large volume of empirical studies

⁴³⁴ Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten, "Willingness to Engage in Religious Collective Action," 9–10; Kruglanski, Kopetz, and Szumowska, *The Psychology of Extremism*, 2021, 263–64.

⁴³⁵ Elaine Reese and Harvey Whitehouse, "The Development of Identity Fusion," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (2021): 1398, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620968761>.

⁴³⁶ Swann et al., "What Makes a Group Worth Dying For?," 2014, 923.

substantiates that personal and social identity interact and can cause individuals to migrate in the direction of greater radicalization, militancy, and violence. Because social psychological processes play a crucial role in an individual's radicalization, and more so than the ideology of the group the individual joins, psychologists should be one of the key creators of counter-radicalization strategies and policies. Additionally, and in agreement with the most recent research about terrorists and extremists, there should be a recognition that most terrorists are not "deranged and maniacal," but relatively stable individuals, who have become extremists due a set of circumstances and personal affinities.⁴³⁷ The theories from this meta-analysis display that it is not the individual characteristics that are the pivotal factor that make an individual into an extremist, but the surroundings by which they are influenced by.

Given the catalytic effect the group, i.e., social environment, has on an individual's radicalization, it would be beneficial to discover the conditions under which people could be more willing to join a positive social group, rather than an extremist or terrorist one. A conclusion from UIT and presented by Hogg and Adelman states that a strong personal safeguard against extremism is a thriving and multifaceted social identity.⁴³⁸ This approach is also supported by psychiatry, as psychiatrist Mark Freestone states that offering "meaningful, stable alternative identities that eschew violence"⁴³⁹ is a sound counter-radicalization strategy. Likewise, on an individual level, IFT could help to determine what type of an emotional connection and engagement with the group overrode a person's "desire for self-preservation and compelled them to translate their moral beliefs into self-sacrificial behavior."⁴⁴⁰ On a group level, SIT examines "why and how a group develops, where its worldview comes from, and how its narratives emerge and evolve,"⁴⁴¹ therefore, SIT could serve as a springboard for determining how a group's preferences can be directed

⁴³⁷ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, 83.

⁴³⁸ Hogg and Adelman, "Uncertainty-Identity Theory," September 2013, 450.

⁴³⁹ Freestone, "Personality, Identity, Risk and Radicalisation," 311.

⁴⁴⁰ The University of Texas at Austin College of Liberal Arts, "Dr. William B. Swann," Department of Psychology, College of Liberal Arts, Dr. William B. Swann, October 22, 2022, <https://labs.la.utexas.edu/swann/>.

⁴⁴¹ Strindberg, "Social Identity Theory and the Study of Terrorism and Violent Extremism," 17.

towards positive social values. The aforementioned findings should be included into counter-radicalization strategies by policy makers.

UIT, SIT, and IFT depict that radicalization begins with social conditioning, and that the overall “health” and cultural and ideological variety of a society is a way of assuring that individuals who are searching for a group to belong to have numerous and positive options to choose from. UIT shows that personal uncertainty, a state within which an individual is unsure about their place in society, or is fearing for their or their family’s future or safety, is a trigger for joining a more rigid, behavior-prescriptive, group. In fact, the higher the level of uncertainty the individual is experiencing, the more they are willing to “become extreme” to defend themselves and the group. SIT elaborates that ingroup-outgroup processes sit at the core of discrimination toward anybody who is perceived as different. The more public policies direct societies to notice differences between societal groups, the more likely it is for the discrimination between groups to develop into a conflict. Given this finding, public policies should be aimed at fostering inclusive societies that perceive differences as positive dynamisms. Additionally, this meta-analysis reveals that counter-radicalization strategies should aim to reduce the level of cohesiveness within extremist groups, as a loosely structured group is less effective at providing a strong social identity for its group member, and therefore it is less likely for the social identity to completely overtake the members’ personal identity.

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