In this chapter, we discuss the psychology underlying various approaches toward terrorist rehabilitation. These programs operate worldwide and vary considerably. They operate in vastly different regions. They target different varieties of extremism (e.g., of the white supremacy, nationalist, or religious variety) and different clientele (e.g., former terrorists imprisoned for their crimes, or extremists voluntarily seeking help to leave a radical movement). And they utilize different methods of rehabilitation. The purpose of the present chapter is not to focus on these differences, but to take stock of the similarities—to examine the common underpinnings of these approaches, and discuss the underlying mechanisms through which these seemingly disparate methods can facilitate rehabilitation.

“Rehabilitation” is a loaded term that holds different meanings for different people. When it comes to the rehabilitation of terrorists, there is disagreement as to what can be realistically achieved. The debate typically centers on two possible outcomes. The first potential outcome is deradicalization. That is, rehabilitation can aim to disabuse clients of a violence-promoting narrative used by terrorist organizations to justify, inspire, and reward violence for the cause. It follows that, after renouncing the ideology, the client no longer has a reason to engage in violence, and terrorist behavior should subside. The second potential outcome is disengagement. Disengagement is merely behavioral change. It involves abandoning one’s personal involvement in violence, while still remaining committed to the ideology and maintaining the toxic beliefs that motivate violence (Horgan 2008). Indeed, the reasons that terrorists give for abandoning their violent ways often have little to do with changes in ideological beliefs (Altier, Boyle, Shortland, and Horgan 2017). Moreover, Horgan (2008, Horgan and Altier 2012) noted that many rehabilitation methods—e.g., vocational training, education, community building, or connecting terrorists with individuals who have been successfully rehabilitated—do not directly work toward changing a client’s endorsement of terrorist ideology, and therefore seem more akin to disengagement than deradicalization.
The present chapter sees less distinction between these outcomes when it comes to rehabilitation programs. Specific methods employed by rehabilitation programs can be easily categorized by their surface features into those that should deradicalize (e.g., ideological argumentation/counseling with a religious scholar) and those that should disengage (e.g., vocational training and community building). However, that does not mean that addressing ideological belief is the only route toward deradicalization, or that increasing one’s education or imparting life skills cannot facilitate deradicalization. Instead, we propose that the two types of methods should be categorized as those that directly lead to deradicalization, and those that indirectly facilitate it. Toward this aim, the present chapter integrates the two models of disengagement and deradicalization to provide insight into the mechanisms through which rehabilitation programs can achieve deradicalization.

Theories of disengagement and deradicalization

Push and pull factors

An oft-cited disengagement perspective identifies the “push and pull” factors that increase the likelihood of disengagement (e.g., Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan 2014; Bjørgo 2009; Horgan 2009; Reinares 2011). Push factors represent various forms of disillusionment with the internal workings of a terrorist organization. They include disappointment with the organization’s ability to achieve political goals, frustration with the (lack of) camaraderie, hypocritical behavior of fellow members, or changes in belief about the veracity of the organization’s ideology. In essence, push factors are circumstances within the organization that push one away. Pull factors, on the other hand, represent external influences that may attract an extremist individual, and pull him or her away from the organization. Included in this category are employment or family desires, financial incentives for leaving the organization, amnesty for crimes committed, or positive interactions with either “enemy” forces (e.g., a white supremacist having positive interactions with a foreigner) or members of the mainstream. Recent evidence culled from autobiographies of former terrorists suggests that disengagement is more likely to be driven by push (vs. pull) factors, with the most prevalent push factors being disillusionment with either the strategy or membership of the organization (Altier et al. 2017).

3N theory

The 3N perspective identifies a nexus of three factors, referred to as the 3Ns—psychological needs, ideological narratives, and social networks—that facilitate radicalization (Dugas et al. 2016; Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski 2017; Kruglanski, Jasko, Chernikova, Dugas, and Webber 2017; Webber and Kruglanski 2016; Webber et al. 2018b). The model starts with the notion that extremism involves a motivational imbalance, wherein a violent extremist is willing to forgo other important concerns of the human condition (i.e., family obligations, career aspirations, safety, or normative proscriptions of violence) to achieve a highly valued goal (the need). On the surface, that goal may appear to be ideological and conjoined with the goals of the terrorist organization, such as establishing the Caliphate within the Middle East or expelling an occupying force from one’s homeland. Psychologically speaking, however, these ideological goals are attained in the service of fundamental concerns for personal significance; through their attainment one can feel important, earn respect, and believe that he or she matters to others (e.g., Kruglanski, Xiaoyan, Mark, Shira, and Edward 2009; Kruglanski et al. 2014, 2017).
A common way in which radicalization occurs is that an individual experiences some form of personal humiliation, stigma, discrimination, or oppression that occasions a loss of personal significance. These negative circumstances then motivate one to remedy these feelings of insignificance, leading individuals to turn to violent extremism (e.g., Jasko et al. 2017; Kruglanski et al. 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017; Victoroff, Adelman, and Matthews 2012; Webber, Klein, Kruglanski, Brizi, and Merari 2017). Through exposure to ideologies crafted by terrorist organizations that promise honor to those who fight for the cause, and that legitimize violence perpetrated against an enemy (the narrative), insignificant individuals find a potent route toward significance restoration. And lastly, the presence of allies in the cause, or like-minded individuals within one’s social group (the network), serves to validate the terrorist ideology, and increase one’s willingness to transgress normative proscriptions and enlist within the organization.

According to 3N theory, deradicalization (or disengagement) should operate through the same three factors. In other words, deradicalization is the process of restoring motivational balance. If feelings of significance are restored through culturally appropriate mechanisms, the impetus for engaging in violence should be effectively removed (Kruglanski et al. 2017). Likewise, if a terrorist no longer endorses the violence-justifying tenets of a terrorist organization, or has been cut off from the influence of radical others, he or she should be less compelled to remain an extremist.

**Integrating perspectives**

Together, the push/pull and 3N frameworks provide important insight into terrorist rehabilitation programs. The 3N framework highlights the three major mechanisms by which rehabilitation methods should operate: (1) restoring motivational balance; (2) changing one’s endorsement of terrorist ideology; and (3) weakening ties to other extremists. The addition of the push/pull framework highlights the two routes through which each of these mechanisms can be addressed: (1) changing one’s positive perspective of the internal workings of terrorist organizations; and (2) luring one away from the grasp of terrorist organizations via external avenues. We therefore organize the remainder of this chapter according to these three mechanisms, and the two routes through which they can be achieved.

**(Direct) deradicalization via the narrative**

Given that deradicalization is defined as rejection by violent extremists of a terrorism justifying ideology, the most straightforward way to effect that kind of change is to counter the ideological narrative by articulating arguments against it. A key point to remember, however, is that successful deradicalization does not require one to abandon the entire ideology of the extremist organization, but merely those aspects of the ideology that permit and reward the use of violence. Terrorist ideologies, particularly those of a religious nature, cover a vast array of topics that include the goals of the organization and warrants for violence, but also moral prescriptions and general guidelines for everyday behavior. The problem does not lie in those latter beliefs and goals as such, but in the justification of violence as a means toward achieving the goals in question. For instance, we do not perceive the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement as violent extremists, because they aim to achieve their goals through non-violent and socially mandated routes. Likewise, Tamils or Palestinians fighting for self-determination or equal treatment only become extremists when they come to accept violence as a means toward the attainment of their goals.
Indeed, research has consistently shown that terrorists often choose to end their extremist lifestyles because they no longer believe that violence is the appropriate way to redress their grievances. Former members of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain, for instance, came to perceive violence as counterproductive, given the political gains made across the years (Reinares 2011). Likewise, defectors from ISIS often struggled with the organization’s extreme brutality, and questioned the moral warrants advanced by ISIS concerning violence against other Muslims (Neumann 2015). This dynamic is represented in analyses of autobiographies whereby almost 60% of extremists became disillusioned with the strategy or actions of their organization (which often likely centered around issues of violence), but under 30% lost faith in the entire ideology (Altier et al. 2017).

The major difficulty for rehabilitation programs is identifying successful ways to facilitate this disillusionment. Rehabilitation efforts of Islamic extremists have often included religious counseling or religious re-education programs. This has been a major component of the programs in Yemen (Rabasa, Stacie, Jeremy, and Christopher 2010), Singapore (Gunaratna and Hassan 2015), Saudi Arabia (al-Hadlaq 2011), Indonesia (Idris and Taufigurrohman 2015), Iraq (Rabasa et al. 2010), and China (Zhou 2017), to name a few. Consider the Religious Rehabilitation Group in Singapore: religious clerics and teachers counsel former members of Jemaah Islamiyah to “extricate their negatively imbibed ideology,” for instance, by clarifying the meaning of jihad and discussing the non-violent ways in which (spiritual) jihad could be achieved (Gunaratna and Hassan 2015). In Saudi Arabia, detained terrorism suspects complete ten courses on topics such as relations with non-Muslims, excommunication, and jihad (al-Hadlaq 2011). The Indonesian program utilizes former radicals to counsel detainees to renounce violence, but does not challenge the core of their fundamentalist ideals (Idris and Taufigurrohman 2015).

Unfortunately, the popularity of these programs should not be equated with success. The now defunct Yemeni program presents an interesting case study, as it is one of the only programs to focus solely on explicating terrorist ideology. The program was focused on a dialogue, and operated under the premise that terrorists’ actions were based on “faulty intellectual foundations” that could be disputed to effect disengagement (e.g., Horgan and Braddock 2010). Although there is a question as to whether the tactics used in these dialogues were intended to deradicalize or merely secure acquiescence, the program is generally viewed as a failure (Rabasa et al. 2010). Moreover, rehabilitation programs that merely utilize religious counseling have acknowledged its inadequacy. In Indonesia, for instance, officials have acknowledged that economic aid and building of personal connections have been more important to deradicalization than has been ideological argumentation (Idris and Taufigurrohman 2015). In Iraq, the religious re-education system backfired and may have contributed to the widespread riots in the detention center (Rabasa et al. 2010). Likewise, organizers of the Saudi program learned through experience with early participants that religious argumentation alone may be less effective, and came to emphasize other methods focused on the acquisition of skills to help individuals reintegrate into society upon release (al-Hadlaq 2011). It also seems noteworthy that rehabilitation efforts like those in Sri Lanka (Hettiarachchi 2015) and Eastern Europe (Bjørgo, Van Donselaar, and Grunenberg 2009) do not address ideological beliefs. This decision could simply reflect the fact that the extremists in these programs do not subscribe to religious doctrine to justify their actions, or that the EXIT programs in Europe are geared toward participants who have already chosen to abandon a violent organization. Successes of these programs—the EXIT programs boast very low recidivism rates (Bjørgo et al. 2009), and the Sri Lankan program has been empirically found to reduce the endorsement of violence (Webber et al. 2018b)—suggest that deradicalization can be achieved without confronting the violent narrative head on.
Instead of viewing the purported failure of ideological argumentation as clear evidence that deradicalization cannot be achieved, we propose that deradicalization may be better sought through indirect routes. Disillusionment with terrorist ideology is likely a conclusion that extremists need to come to on their own. Indeed, interviews and analyses of biographies show that extremists often come to this illation (e.g., Kruglanski et al. 2019; Neumann 2015; Reinares 2011). Forcing this conclusion on them through counseling and debate is complicated, likely to be met with resistance, and has the potential to backfire. These debates could spur the targeted individuals to think of arguments of their own to support their belief system, and in so doing, only harden their resolve. In applying the tenets of reactance theory (Brehm 1966) and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957), Dalgaard-Nielsen (2013) reached a similar conclusion, and proposed that ideological change could be better fostered by spurring behavioral change. Dalgaard-Nielsen further advised abstaining from direct attempts at ideological argumentation “unless it is established by an initial screening, that [the targeted individual] is already experiencing doubt with regard to for example the glorification of violence, the demonization of the presumed enemy, or the absolutist claims of the extremist narrative” (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2013, p. 109). As we elaborate in the following sections, rehabilitation methods that operate on the remaining two Ns—networks and needs—should not only facilitate disengagement, but should indirectly weaken the appeal of the ideology so that it can be more easily cast aside.

(Indirect) deradicalization via the network

Research has consistently found that individuals are often pushed away from extremism when they become disillusioned by actions of their brothers-in-arms. This was found when analyses examined terrorists of multiple nationalities and across ideological spectrums (e.g., Altier et al. 2017; Barrelle 2015), and specifically when examining individuals who had defected from ISIS (e.g., Neumann 2015; Speckhard and Yayla 2016) and the right-wing movement in Germany (Kruglanski et al. 2019). Also, interviews revealed that a common reason for defecting from ISIS was the realization that ISIS soldiers and leaders engaged in “un-Islamic” behaviors forbidden by Shariah law, like smoking and rape (Speckhard and Yayla 2016).

Use of this information in the deradicalization process may be difficult, however, in that enthusiastic ISIS supporters may dismiss it as biased propaganda.

Reducing the impact of the radical network may be accomplished by limiting individuals’ contact with their erstwhile comrades and leaders. In residential facilities (like prisons or detention centers) that house many extremists, this is accomplished through housing arrangements that separate the committed ideologues or influencers from the underlings within the organization. One example of this is Major General Stone’s method of identifying the hard-core insurgents—the irreconcilables—in Iraqi rehabilitation centers, and separating them from the rest of the prisoners believed to be potentially malleable in their attitudes and beliefs (Rabasa et al. 2010). Although this is likely an insufficient method when used alone, lower-level members should become more receptive to other forms of rehabilitation when freed from the influence of their leaders. This approach also requires a bit of calculation on the part of the rehabilitators. Isolating the influencers poses the risk of further radicalizing them, as experiences of social isolation, restriction of freedom, and what is likely to be viewed as discrimination may serve to only increase feelings of insignificance and worsen the motivational imbalance. The decision therefore becomes: should a program focus on rehabilitating a greater number of low-risk detainees (who are likely to be released
into society sooner), or expend most of their efforts on attempting to rehabilitate fewer high-risk militants?

Rather than selecting either of the paths described above, rehabilitation efforts may be geared toward strengthening former extremists’ social connections to non-radical networks. For instance, the Sri Lankan program, that focused on rehabilitating former members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), brought in successful Tamils (i.e., business owners, film stars, athletes) from within local communities, and sent former militants on field trips in order to build their ties to those communities (Hettiarachchi 2015). Similarly, a mainstay of disengagement programs for right-wing extremists in Europe is connecting the detainees to former comrades who have been successfully deradicalized, and explicitly working to build up the detainees’ non-extreme social networks (Bjørgo et al. 2009). These programs, such as the EXIT programs in Germany and Sweden, work outside of the prison context, and aid individuals who have voluntarily made the decision to leave extremist organizations. These persons often find themselves isolated, having previously abandoned all social relationships outside the extreme movement. The EXIT programs help them develop their social skills and introduce them to contacts who can provide much-needed support as former extremists navigate their return to the mainstream.

Rehabilitation efforts that work with detainees and prisoners can expand the non-radical social network, but are often limited in the extent to which they can foster new, meaningful relationships. Thus, many programs work to help them reconnect with existing family members and friends. Assuming the extremists had non-radical friends and family outside the movement (before they fully radicalized), rehabilitation programs attempt to reconnect these individuals by providing family visitations, facilitating communication (letters, emails, phone calls), or offering leave to allow the detainees to attend important family events (funerals, weddings, etc.). These tactics were implemented in the Sri Lankan program (Webber et al. 2018b), the Iraqi program (Rabasa et al. 2010), the Indonesian program (Horgan and Braddock 2010), and others. Any effort that seeks to build new relational ties to non-radical entities will serve to weaken ties to radical entities (cf. Klein and Kruglanski 2013; Zhang, Fishbach, and Kruglanski 2007), and should thus facilitate the exit from violent extremism.

Psychologically speaking, these tactics should facilitate movement away from the terrorist ideology. As Festinger (1954) proposed, other people form the very basis by which we evaluate the appropriateness of our own actions, and maintaining faith in any form of ideology generally requires that those beliefs are shared and consensually validated by others (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966). It has been further proposed that individuals are likely to search for consensus, or what is referred to as a shared reality (Hardin and Higgins 1996), to fulfill their epistemic motives for knowledge and certainty. The more ambiguous or difficult the informational environment, the greater the individuals’ need to rely on others to validate one’s beliefs (e.g., Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009; Festinger 1954). Endorsing the ideology of a terrorist organization, and especially its warrants for violent behavior, is a particularly difficult task, because it requires ignoring society’s general prescriptions against brutality and violence (cf. Kruglanski et al. 2017). That is why the network support for violent extremism is of particular importance and why re-connecting former militants to mainstream networks that oppose extremism is essential.

In this vein, Sageman (2008) argued that terrorist groups often turn into “echo chambers” that promote a spiral of mutual encouragement and the escalation of commitment. In those contexts, individuals are disproportionately exposed to one-sided arguments, and tend to adopt positions which they believe will make them acceptable to their peers. Most importantly, the increased solidarity found within echo chambers leads individuals to hold
their own extreme beliefs with greater confidence (Sunstein 2007). Indeed, there is evidence that echo chambers can promote radicalization, particularly in online contexts (Saddiq 2010; Stevens and Neumann 2009; Von Behr, Reding, Edwards, and Gribbon 2013; Warner 2010; Wojcieszak 2009, 2010). In short, if rehabilitation programs can successfully weaken individuals’ social ties to radical influences, they would remove a main source of justification for their radical beliefs, thus advancing deradicalization.

(Indirect) deradicalization via the need component

Deradicalization efforts can focus on individuals’ psychological need to feel significant in their own and in others’ eyes. Individuals join terrorist organizations because they view the organizations as potent means through which significance can be earned (Kruglanski et al. 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017). As with all of the 3N factors of radicalization, disengagement is likely to occur when disillusionment pushes an extremist away from the organization—that is, when he or she begins to question whether continued involvement in the movement sufficiently provides him or her with feelings of self-worth. Indeed, this appears to have been true for many ISIS defectors. For instance, one such individual found that his life with ISIS did not meet the standards he was promised, and doubted that his time with the terrorists would help him gain the heroism he so desperately sought (Neumann 2015; see also Tomlinson 2014). Horgan (2009) reported similar sentiments. More broadly speaking, all forms of disillusionment with the organization likely lead individuals to question not only their role in the organization, but their purpose and meaning in life; feelings that contribute to the sense of “burnout” often referenced as a cause of disengagement (e.g., Bjørgo 2011; Della Porta 2009). Disengagement may also occur when one is pulled away from the organization because he or she finds other alluring avenues for earning significance. Interviews conducted with former members of the Basque ETA provide a compelling account of this process, as many extremists wanted to make a life for themselves outside of the movement, and attain significance by getting married and starting a family (Reinares 2011).

The latter of these routes—providing alternative forms of significance—is a task that rehabilitation programs can tackle, assuming they have the necessary resources. When participants of these programs are released, their likelihood of returning to the extremist organization is higher if they have no alternative ways to earn a living and provide for their families. In other words, individuals may return to extreme groups because these offer them a means to earn respect and a sense of mattering.

To be sure, the quest for significance is a universal striving that motivates much of human behavior: it has driven some of the greatest innovators, motivated business leaders to secure their next contract, led students to endure the rigors of medical school, and pushed academics to publish. Although the significance motive can be satisfied via extremism, most people attain it in socially acceptable ways. Rehabilitation programs can therefore offer educational and vocational courses that provide their clients with the necessary skills that would increase their likelihood of landing a job after release. Indeed, vocational education constituted a focus of the deradicalization program operating in Sri Lanka (Hettiarachchi 2015; Webber et al. 2018b), Indonesia (Idris and Taufiqurrohman 2015; Horgan and Braddock 2010), Colombia (Horgan and Braddock 2010), Saudi Arabia (al-Hadlaq 2011), and Iraq under Major General Douglas Stone (Rabasa et al. 2010), and others.

For instance, the Sri Lankan program offered LTTE detainees more than 40 vocational training courses based on detainees’ traditional family vocations and regional job opportunities,
including carpentry, masonry, garment making, mechanics, and cosmetology (Hettiarachchi 2015). Some of the companies involved in these training programs even pledged to hire or provide on-the-job training in their factories after the detainees were released. Colombia offered former guerrillas health care, shelter, clothing, and vocational support (Horgan and Braddock 2010). In the same vein, the Saudi program has helped graduates of their center find suitable jobs, and even offered them assistance in getting married (al-Hadlaq 2011; Lankford and Gillespie 2011). As former members of ETA (and many parents) can attest, marriage and children may provide a sense of significance with which little can compete.

In addition to providing alternative routes to significance, rehabilitation programs should address former militants’ current deficits in significance. Vocational and educational courses described above can address this aim. For captured and incarcerated extremists who likely feel hopeless and have been stripped of personal freedom, learning new skills, getting an education, and proving to themselves that they are capable and competent can be highly empowering. Psychological counseling is also important. Based on this logic, the Saudi program offered detained “beneficiaries” courses on social skills, self-management, positive thinking, and art therapy (al-Hadlaq 2011). The Colombian program similarly adopted a person-centered therapeutic approach, including individualized workshops and therapy sessions (Horgan and Braddock 2010). Likewise, psychosocial courses in Sri Lanka tackled topics like interpersonal relations, managing emotions, mindfulness training, and art/creativity therapy (Hettiarachchi 2015). The same is true for treatment of right-wing extremists who are referred to therapists and professional counselors to deal with issues like depression, anxiety, anger management, or changing their damaging ways of thinking (Bjørgo et al. 2009).

Throughout this section, we have referenced often the Sri Lankan deradicalization program. Notwithstanding its alleged flaws (e.g., claims of human rights abuses; Keenan 2007) and the historical context within which the program was launched (i.e., after the defeat of the terrorist group by the government), the Sri Lankan program utilized multiple methods that addressed the former militants’ significance motive. It is thus a good case study for investigating whether this approach represents an effective deradicalization tool. Our research team (Webber et al. 2018b) gained access to the population of detainees within the Sri Lankan program, and assessed the effectiveness of rehabilitation using self-report surveys. A longitudinal assessment measured endorsement of terrorist ideology among detainees exposed to the full battery of significance-relevant rehabilitation programs (educational, vocational, and psycho-social), and compared them to detainees who did not have access to these specific programs (see Webber et al. 2018b for more details). After a year of rehabilitation, detainees who participated in the full battery of programs expressed significantly lower ideological extremism than those without access to these programs. Follow-up surveys conducted after the detainees had been reintegrated into society further revealed significantly lower endorsement of violent extremism among the former detainees, as compared to community members who never belonged to the terrorist group in the first place. A final set of analyses revealed that decreased feelings of insignificance were driving this reduction in extremism. For instance, research on reintegrated extremists revealed that those who participated in a greater number of rehabilitation programs reported lower feelings of insignificance, which were subsequently related to lower levels of extremism (Webber et al. 2018b).

These findings suggest that restoring motivational balance can be used as an effective deradicalization tool. Indeed, the main dependent variable in these studies was ideological. Although the Sri Lankan rehabilitation curriculum did not include ideological counter-argumentation (Hettiarachchi 2015), extremists who went through the program expressed...
less endorsement of terrorist ideology, an effect that persisted for years after their release. Moreover, self-reported feelings of significance were directly implicated as the mechanism underlying this reduction in ideological extremism. It thus appears that when the motivation driving extremism is gratified, the belief in extremist ideology is correspondingly weakened.

Additional research sheds light on one reason why this may occur (Webber et al. 2018a). Consistent with observations made by Barrett (2014), this work examined the degree to which epistemic motivation for certainty and closure (e.g., Kruglanski 2004; Kruglanski and Webster 1996; Webster and Kruglanski 1994) is involved in the endorsement of extremism. We found a positive relation between self-reported insignificance and the need for closure among detained terrorists in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Arguably, this occurred because significance loss creates an inconsistency between the positive manner in which individuals wish to perceive themselves and the humiliating experience they are having (cf. McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, and Spencer 2001). This induces feelings of uncertainty and anxiety that motivate behavior aimed at restoring certainty (Festinger 1957). More importantly, the increased need for closure was subsequently related to terrorists’ endorsement of violent extremism (Webber et al. 2018a). We suggest that this occurred because terrorist ideology provides the closure and certainty that some individuals crave (Hogg, Kruglanski, and Van den Bos 2013). Terrorist ideologies tend to portray the world in clear-cut, black-and-white terms: there is typically a “good” group (the terrorists) and a “bad” group (the enemy to be defeated), with no gray area in between. For instance, the Islamic State identifies clear “us versus them” categories (i.e., true believers vs. infidels), and unequivocally applies the tenets of takfir (i.e., excommunication) to determine which is which, enabling the killing of the infidels and thus purifying the world.

In an additional study, we manipulated feelings of insignificance experienced by American participants; some individuals were induced to feel humiliated and insignificant, whereas others were not. Just as occurred in the terrorist samples, participants made to feel insignificant reported a higher need for closure, which was related in turn to the endorsement of an extreme political ideology (Webber et al. 2018a). For instance, liberals became more willing to endorse extreme liberal perspectives like supporting a ban on all firearms, whereas conservatives were more willing to support the notion that firearm sale and use should be completely unrestricted. Importantly, the need for closure was also negatively related to the endorsement of moderate perspectives. So, while participants moved toward the extremes of their ideological beliefs, they likewise became less receptive to moderate policies that allow for some ambiguity (i.e., only restricting the sale of automatic firearms or extended ammunition clips).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that feelings of insignificance increase one’s endorsement of violent extremism by way of inducing a desire for certainty and closure. When individuals experience the motivational imbalance we have discussed, they want to see the world in a clearly delineated manner—and the black-and-white, polarized narratives advanced by terrorist organizations serve this purpose particularly well. Applying these findings to processes of rehabilitation, it becomes apparent that a successful restoration of one’s feelings of significance will decrease the appeal of terrorist ideology. With one’s motivational balance restored, the self-inconsistency would be removed, and the appeal of extremist ideology would decrease. Likewise, evidence suggests that under those conditions moderate perspectives, such as the moderate versions of Islam being promoted by clerics through religious counseling programs (e.g., Rabasa et al. 2010; Gunaratna and Hassan 2015; al-Hadlaq 2011; Idris and Taufiqurrohman 2015; Zhou 2017), would increase in appeal.
Thus, while tactics that address the significance motive may appear to only address an individual’s impetus for becoming a terrorist, in reality, they also reduce the appeal of any closure-affording ideology. This can create a potent cocktail that leads one to cast off his belief in terrorist ideology. Specifically, if one (1) no longer needs the glory promised by the ideology, and (2) no longer finds an unambiguous outlook on the world appealing, one has little reason to retain extremist beliefs. When this approach is combined with tactics that weaken individuals’ ties to the radical social network discussed previously, radical ideologies would (3) lose the much-needed validity provided by consensual validation. None of these tactics directly confronts individuals’ violence-justifying beliefs, yet they indirectly reduce the pull of the corresponding ideologies and lessen the psychological pressure that may keep one committed to a life of terrorism.

A promising application of the present analysis is that the foregoing tactics should be relatively easy to implement within existing prison systems. Many penitentiaries already offer their inmates some form of educational, vocational, or counseling services. They also often include family visitation programs that help connect inmates to their families. Simply extending these existing programs to terrorist inmates should facilitate indirect deradicalization, and increase the former terrorists’ receptivity to ideological change.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we reviewed several deradicalization programs that, for the most part, did not directly work toward changing their participants’ endorsement of terrorist ideology. Nonetheless, we argue that these programs can be as effective—if not more effective—in promoting deradicalization as programs that focus directly on challenging terrorists’ ideological beliefs. This is because the indirect programs can address the psychological mechanisms that lead to radicalization, thus indirectly reducing the appeal of terrorist ideology and spurring effective deradicalization (and not just mere disengagement).

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Psychological approaches


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